

Caribbean Routes: Ethnographic Experiences,
Theoretical Challenges, and the Production of Knowledge

Tracing routes, mapping destinies: presenting the dossier

Traçando rotas, mapeando destinos: apresentando o dossiê

*Júlia Vilaça Goyatá*¹

*Rodrigo Charafeddine Bulamah*²

*Rodrigo Ramassote*³

¹Departamento de Sociologia e Antropologia, Universidade Federal do Maranhão (UFMA),
São Luís/MA, Brasil

²Universidade Federal de São Paulo (Unifesp), São Paulo/SP, Brasil

³Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN), Brasília/DF, Brasil

Paving the way¹

The Dossier “Caribbean Routes: Ethnographic Experiences, Theoretical Challenges, and the Production of Knowledge “ gathers 11 articles about different regions of the Caribbean, signed by Brazilian and foreign researchers, most of whom are associated to graduate programs or academic centers in Brazil. The publication is the outcome of a wider effort to disseminate the results of ethnographic research about a region that, until the 1990s, had not emerged as a privileged destination for Brazilian anthropologists. The studies presented here reveal a diversity of themes, lines of inquiry and theoretical dialogues mobilized in this transnational endeavor.

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With the exception of Ruy Coelho's (1920-1990) pioneering research on Afro-Caribbean populations in Honduras in the second half of the 1940s, aligned with Melville J. Herskovits' scholarly project (1895-1963),² the Caribbean remained an unexplored region for Brazilian anthropology—although, since the 1970s, classical texts on the region have guided discussions and research on peasantry in Brazil.³ This was the case, for example, of work by the important research group the *Comparative Regional Development Project*, a cooperative effort between the Museu Nacional (UFRJ) and Harvard University in the 1970s. Young anthropologists such as Lygia Sigaud, Moacir Palmeira, Afrânio Garcia, Beatriz Heredia, and others took on a markedly collective ethnographic initiative (Palmeira et alii, 1977; Sigaud, 2008; Lopes, 2013). Examining the Northeast of Brazil, they were inspired by studies of complex societies, particularly the theoretical advances on plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas, developed by authors linked to the *Puerto Rico Project* (1948-1949), coordinated by Julian Steward at Columbia University, and led by Sidney Mintz, Eric Wolf, and others (Wolf and Mintz, 1957; Giusti-Cordero, 2011; Edelman, 2018).⁴

Due to its commitment and obsession with the ideology of nation-building, until a few decades ago Brazilian anthropology was marked by the almost absolute predominance of national themes (Peirano, 1992; Sigaud; Neiburg; L'Estoile, 2005). Few anthropologists risked doing field research outside of the country. In 1995, Gilberto Velho identified 25 Brazilian researchers who did field research, with greater or lesser ambition, in foreign countries (Velho, 1995). In the Caribbean region, only Coelho was cited. In 2004, Wilson Trajano Filho and Carlos Benedito Martins noticed a slight increase, having found 40 researchers working abroad (Trajano Filho & Martins, 2004). In an article in the same volume, Peter Fry presented a list of “dissertations defended in Brazil that focus on social situations outside Brazil” (Fry, 2004, p. 245). Their titles indicated that some of these studies were dedicated to Caribbean themes or populations.

It is also true that the marginal position of the Caribbean is not exclusive to Brazilian anthropology. This ethnographic field has always occupied a marginal place in the history of the discipline in general, as it seemed to be halfway between so-called primitive societies and post-industrial contexts. However, it was precisely this hybrid nature that guaranteed the region what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1992) defined as an “undisciplined” character. This would be expressed both by the Caribbean's unsuitability to a classical research agenda and by the opportunity to develop a critical perspective that the region offers the anthropological imagination.

That said, in the last twenty years there has been a significant change in the relation of Brazilian anthropology with the Caribbean. We have witnessed a growing wave of academic research, especially theses and dissertations, but also several publications in Brazil and abroad, focused on the Caribbean in its multiple dimensions. Ethnographies have examined specificities by country, regional borders and articulations, as well as global movements, revealing a broader panorama of the region. It is beyond doubt that Coelho's isolated experience is now a distant reality (Ramassote 2018), and the Caribbean has become an increasingly popular destination for Brazilian anthropologists since the early 2000s.

² The influence of Herskovits in consolidating anthropological research on African American populations in the Caribbean cannot be overlooked (Yelvington, 2001; Ramassote, 2016). In parallel, in the wake of anthropological concerns about “Black Americas” (Bastide, 1967) authors such as Roger Bastide (1898-1974), Alfred Métraux (1902-1962) and Pierre Verger (1902-1996) should also be remembered. Besides, it is important to stress the significance of Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) for the constitution of Antillean thought, drawing especially from the *négritude* movement that was born in Paris in the 1940s, marked by the impact of the work of the Haitian ethnologist and diplomat Jean-Price Mars (1928). For more details see, among others, Price & Price (2003); Magloire & Yelvington (2005); Yelvington (2006); Frioux-Salgas (2009); Luhning (2002); Capone (2005); Peixoto (2010); Toledo (2014); Bulamah (2017) and Goyatá (2019).

³ In the field of the historiography of slavery in Brazil, debates on Caribbean peasantries also had an important impact on the formulations of slave agency. On this subject, see, for example, Lepkowski (1970); Cardoso (1987); Slenes (2011) and Gomes (2015).

⁴ We have only recently observed an investment in the translation into Portuguese of texts that address themes that go beyond the classic studies on peasantry, such as the translations of Price and Mintz (2003), Mintz (2003); James (2000); Williams (2012); Césaire (2012); Glissant (2005); Trouillot (2016; 2018); Scott (2017). Essential books such as *Sweetness and Power* (Mintz, 1985) and Mintz's *Caribbean Transformations* (1989), among many others, are still awaiting Portuguese editions. It is also important to highlight the impact of Frantz Fanon's work in Brazil due to early translations published between the late 1970s and early 1980s. For a reconstruction of this trajectory of influence in different social fields in Brazil, see Guimaraes (2008), Silva (2013), and Faustino (2018).

This is due, among other reasons, to the recognized public policies for investment in education and science in Brazil that, at the federal and state levels, have allowed the expansion of graduate programs and funding sources, boosting and strengthening transnational intellectual networks.

An example is the body of research conducted by Olívia Maria Gomes da Cunha, professor in the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology at the Museu Nacional (UFRJ). In the early 2000s, Cunha began historiographical and ethnographic investigations on African-American populations in different Caribbean regions—with special emphasis on Cuba and Suriname.⁵ In recent years, within the Laboratory of Anthropology and History (LAH), her students have examined important questions through fieldwork in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Panama and Suriname.⁶ At the same time, a number of research projects have emerged in Haiti, thanks to the work of Omar Ribeiro Thomaz, professor at the Department of Anthropology at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), and shortly afterwards studies by Federico Neiburg of the Museu Nacional (UFRJ). Their investigations were conducted through their respective research groups, the Center for International Migration Studies (CEMI-Unicamp)⁷ and the Center for Research on Culture and Economy (NuCEC-UFRJ),⁸ leading an endeavor initially inspired by Moacir Palmeira's and Lygia Sigaud's collective research. These studies were fashioned through the construction of partnerships between Haitian intellectuals and foreigners. For example, in 2007, the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development (INURED) was created, coordinated by Louis Herns Marcelin, anthropologist and professor at the University of Miami, in partnership with Sigaud, Thomaz, Neiburg and other researchers.⁹

Another center of reference in Caribbean studies in Brazil is the Department of Latin American Studies (ELA), linked to the Institute of Social Sciences (ICS) at the University of Brasília (UnB). For two decades, they have been receiving Brazilian and foreign students in their graduate program, part of which is dedicated to the production of interdisciplinary knowledge about the Caribbean. The *Revista Brasileira do Caribe* also stands out in the field and is published by the Graduate Program in History and the Caribbean Studies Research Group of the Federal University at Maranhão (UFMA). The first issue was published in 1998, through the initiative of Olga Cabrera, when she was an associate professor at the Federal University at Goiás (UFG). This journal aggregates contributions from various fields of knowledge focusing mainly on Caribbean studies. Also important in this scenario are the translations and articles published by the *Revista de Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*, based at Cândido Mendes University, and edited by Livio Sansone, an anthropologist with an important trajectory who has also focused partially on the Caribbean and Black diasporas (see, among others, Sansone, 1994).

More recently, new ventures have taken shape, from seminars and round-tables at annual meetings to the creation of research groups. This was the case of the working group organized in 2009 at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Brazilian Social Sciences Association (ANPOCS) named “Between boundaries and disciplines: studies on Africa and the Caribbean” and the joint seminar “African and Caribbean Dialogues”, held by research groups at Museu Nacional (UFRJ) and the Federal University at Minas Gerais (UFMG). To name a few more initiatives: there is the Research Center for the Caribbean and the Guyanas, linked to the Center for Afro-Oriental

5 See Cunha (2007) as well as two important collections organized by the author (Cunha, 2010; 2018). A 2011 issue of the *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* included articles by Cunha (2011) and Christine Rufino Dabat (2011) that engaged directly with the Mintz's contributions to think about the Caribbean and other post-plantation contexts.

6 See: <https://www.lah-ufrj.org/> (access: 19/04/20).

7 See: <https://cemiunicamp.com.br/> (access: 19/04/20).

8 See: <http://www.nucec.net/> (access: 19/04/20).

9 In terms of bibliographic production, see Thomaz (2005), a text that composes the collection of Reis and Moore (2005) about national elites and their perceptions of poverty and inequality, in addition to Neiburg's (2016) text on imaginary coins, presented as a Sidney Mintz Lecture, in 2010, and the collection recently organized by the author (Neiburg, 2019), which resulted from these conversations and collective efforts. Among the projects in Haiti we also highlight a report by Sebastião Nascimento and Omar Ribeiro Thomaz about the impact of the January 2010 earthquake on higher education in Haiti, see Thomaz and Nascimento (2011). In a cooperation between INURED and the NGO Viva Rio, Federico Neiburg and Natacha Nicaise (2009 and 2010) also published two studies based on ethnographies in Port-au-Prince. See also the ethnographic film “Los huesos de la tierra”, which addresses deforestation and charcoal production in Haiti, with research by Thomaz and Nascimento, in 2005, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsoYgwnMV0&t=14s> (access: 14/05/2020).

Studies of the Federal University at Bahia (UFBA) and coordinated by Marcelo Moura Mello; the Graduate Program in Border Studies, at the Federal University at Amapá (UFAP) at which one of the focuses is the interaction between the Caribbean, the Guyanas and Brazil, idealized by Handerson Joseph; and the creation of the Global Caribbean Anthropology Group (CANIBAL),¹⁰ coordinated by João Felipe Gonçalves at the University of São Paulo (USP). In addition to these already consolidated initiatives, a number of independent studies have been conducted at different universities from throughout Brazil.

Crossing routes

This dossier adds to the efforts outlined above. Its eleven articles are characterized by firm ethnographic and historiographic contributions. That is, they are works motivated by rich and diverse empirical materials, which are the starting point and condition of the authors' reflections and analyses. Although the themes, methodological strategies and theoretical contributions are diverse, it is possible to identify "partial connections" between them, to borrow Marilyn Strathern's (1991) fruitful expression. We hope readers will expand upon and contribute to this exercise.

The research topics and "ethnographic theories" (Goldman, 2006) found in this dossier echo each other and their analyses draw from the established literature on socio-cultural heterogeneities of the Caribbean. As in a kind of spiral movement, these works engage with classical authors of Caribbean thought, while offering original reflections, bringing to the forefront authors of contemporary anthropological theory. Covering a wide variety of areas ranging from northern Colombia to the Caribbean diaspora, these articles thus show that, far from being closed and self-centered, this ethnographic region is open to the possibility of comparative dialogues with other worlds, and can contribute to developing new engaged and critical social theories. As Marcelo Mello and Rogério Pires emphasize in their introduction to their translation of Trouillot's article "The Caribbean Region" (1992), one of the author's most instigating suggestions refers precisely to the launching of a "program of possible intra-Caribbean comparisons that are not very obvious, on which we can base ourselves to generate equally instigating extra-Caribbean comparisons" (2018: 195).

With this in mind, we suggest below some lines of force or thematic foci, which allow us to present the articles gathered here by identifying some pairings: **economic exchanges and gender; mobilities and spatialities; material and spiritual transits; history and politics**. Far from imprisoning the works, these foci reveal possible reverberations and help project their insights beyond the region.

The articles by Maíra Samara Freire and Felipe Evangelista and Rosa Vieira highlight a fundamental aspect of social life in the Caribbean: the intense network of economic exchanges established in markets and public squares that are essentially led by black women, who form the base of economic support for families. Freire's article, entitled **Peddling sweets and pioneering territory: black women and work in Colombia's Caribbean region**, seeks to understand the perception and labor experience of women who produce and sell sweets in one of Colombia's most important and studied black communities: San Basilio de Palenque. Articulating categories of race and gender, the author, while considering the precarious conditions of informal workers, shows how these women find in their daily lives a place of agency, dignity, creation and knowledge through their products. The work of Evangelista and Vieira, **You must have people to make business: relations of proximity in small-scale trade in Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo**, offers a comparative exploration of the social dimensions of commerce in two different contexts: Haiti's Central Plateau and Kongo Central province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.antropocanibal.com.br/> (access: 19/04/20).

Also seeking to describe the knowledge and practices of women traders, and contrary to what the imaginary of poverty and deprivation might suppose, the authors' strive to understand how trade exchanges in contexts of scarcity mirror a proliferation of goods, currencies and affective relationships. More than an autonomous and self-contained field, exchanges are constituted by the dynamics between formal and informal, merchandise and gift, morality and danger.

Exchanges, passages and movements are central themes of the articles presented here and also of Caribbean ethnographies in general. It is no coincidence that mobility—of people, objects, spirits and ideas—is present in virtually every text in this volume. Special attention is given to a subject that have been deeply examined in the social sciences, yet which gains new interpretations in this dossier: mobility and migration. They are explicitly addressed in the articles by Mélanie Montinard, ***Pran wout la: expériences et dynamiques de la mobilité haïtienne***, and by Gustavo Dias, João Carlos Jarochinski and Sidney Antonio Silva, ***Travellers of the Caribbean: Positioning Brasília in the Haitian migration routes through Latin America***. Indeed, the issue of transnational mobility and its dynamics also appears, although more tangentially, in the studies of Shelene Gomes—on Rastafari communities in Ethiopia—and Marcelo Moura Mello—who observes Hindu religious practices in Guyana. While Montinard's article focuses on the native concept of *wout* and presents individual and collective strategies of Haitians who migrate, especially from Rio de Janeiro to the United States and vice-versa; Dias', Jarochinski's and Silva's text addresses trajectories of Haitian mobility through the city of Brasília. Both articles stress the importance of seeing mobility as a form of becoming, to go beyond considering departures and arrivals as occurring at fixed cartographic points. They call our attention to the route, its intermediaries and the dynamics that are in constant negotiation. The authors thus put at the center of their research relationships that are created on the routes and that may continue, be destroyed or, above all, reinvented.

The articles already mentioned by Gomes, ***Notes on a yard-space in the everyday life of Rastafari in urban Ethiopia***, and Mello, ***Materiality, affection, personhood: on sacrifice in the worship of the goddess Kali in Guyana***, also reflect on movements by people, but especially highlight the work of material and spiritual agencies that, in the diaspora, mobilize forms of ancestral belongings. Gomes emphasizes the materiality of kinship, present in houses and yards built by Rastafari families in a diasporic context in Ethiopia, showing how identity and culture relate to ways of creating relatives not only through relationships between people, but also between spaces and histories. Mello, in turn, discusses ritual acts and actions involved in animal sacrifice to the Hindu goddess Kali in Guyana, with special emphasis on the ritual manipulation of objects used in the sacrifices. Through a detailed description of dynamics and meanings involved in immolation ceremonies in a temple located in Blairmont, the author reveals the entwinements between non-material elements and affections in the manipulation of ritual artifacts.

Mobility is also considered, but spatialities and collective historicities are the focus of the ethnographies by Claudia Fioretti, ***How to listen to an Afro-Caribbean landscape***, and Jose Arenas Gomez, ***Partiendo de líneas, llegando a lugares: notas sobre territorio entre los indígenas de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta en el Caribe colombiano***. Both works are inspired by a notion of space and environment that goes beyond geographic and biological limits as well as state borders. The formation of Caribbean territorialities of an African matrix is investigated by Fioretti and of an indigenous matrix by Arenas Gomez, with both considering how these territorialities are made and remade through their relationships with time. Fioretti evokes, not by coincidence, the notion of "landscape", developed by Tim Ingold (1993), which inscribes the depth of time in space and draws attention to the relationships, no longer separated, between nature and culture. The author analyzes histories of occupation in the region of Old Bank, a village on the island of Bastimentos in Panama, to simultaneously examine the inhabitants' relationship with the land, their families and God.

Arenas Gomez, meanwhile, questions discrepancies between government and indigenous perspectives of the notion of territorial limits of an indigenous *resguardo* [reserve] in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Evoking the idea of *Línea Negra* employed by the indigenous people of that region, Arenas Gomez points to a territoriality built from the interconnection of spaces, people, practices and temporalities—a multidimensionality that clashes with the government perspective, which defines the region by a fixed temporal and spatial limit.

Ana Elisa Bersani's article, **(Extra)ordinary help: untold stories on disaster and generosity in Grand'Anse, Haiti** also confronts institutional dynamics and native practices. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Haiti's Grand'Anse region, the author analyzes how daily dimensions linked to principles of solidarity and help gained new meanings through the critical event of the earthquake of January 12, 2010. Bersani distances herself from visions that overemphasize aid operations by international humanitarian agents and systems. What seems extraordinary, the author shows, is in fact the expansion of kinship and friendship bonds, giving *help* a truly ordinary meaning that is far from exceptional.

The production of history, which implies considering, as Trouillot (1995) suggested, the mutual entanglements between history as a social process (*history*) and history as narrative (*stories*) is also a paradigmatic feature in this volume. The works of Vincent Joos, **Echoes of past revolutions: architecture, memory, and spectral politics in the historic districts of Port-au-Prince**, and Frantz Rousseau Déus, **The construction of identity in Haitian Indigenism and the Post-colonial debate**, are efforts in this direction. The former uses ethnographic resources and the latter a bibliographic reflection. Joos examines both the house and the memorial and literary narratives of the jurist and writer Ulrick Rosarion, engaging in dialogues with his interlocutor to synthesize the complexity and ambiguities of the political legacy of prominent Haitian leaders such as Jean Jacques Dessalines (1758-1806), Dumarsais Estimé (1900-1953) and François Duvalier (1939-1971). Joos reveals how they are still present in the physical, political and affective landscape of the capital Port-au-Prince. Déus' article, on the other hand, considers the history of Haitian Indigenism, an important intellectual and artistic movement of the first half of the twentieth century, and retraces a political genealogy of discussions about identity. He also proposes an approach that reflects on both Haitian social thought and post-colonial literature, which has often been ignored by anthologies and collections on the subject.

Finally, two considerations should be made about the rich and heterogeneous body of work in this dossier. The first is that, although we have not mentioned kinship as a specific thematic focus, we would like to emphasize its importance. The production of kin as well as "relatedness" (Carsten: 2000), in its material and extra-material dimensions, permeates many of the articles, reaffirming itself as a topic of great relevance to Caribbean studies. Another point that should be highlighted is the preponderance of Haiti as an object of research in the articles: of the eleven, six texts focus on the country and its diaspora, and of these, five are by scholars based at research institutions in Brazil. In addition to the institutional and political dynamics described above, other possible reasons for this prevalence is that Haiti has a strong presence in the Brazilian public sphere. This is due both to the fact that the Brazilian Army had a leading role in the United Nations Mission for Stabilization in Haiti (MINUSTAH), which extended from 2004 to 2017¹¹ and that Brazil became part of the

¹¹ MINUSTAH had ambivalent effects on Brazil's political scene. While it raised Brazil's role in global geopolitics, the mission served to recentralize its Army, which had been relatively fragmented since the re-democratization after the country's dictatorship. It simultaneously intensified politicization of the Brazilian military. This helped push the Armed Forces closer to Brazil's extreme right, made clear by their support for the candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro. Added to this are the outbreak of cholera and scandals linked to abuses of power and sexual violence promoted by UN peacekeepers, a topic that still needs greater coverage by the media as well as systematic investigation from public authorities, the Army and the government itself. On these topics, see, for example, Omar Ribeiro Thomaz (2011) and Ana Elisa Bersani (in this volume). See also Federico Neiburg, "The Brazilian Army in Haiti - Foreign Intervention and Domestic Politics", *OpinioJuris*, May 1, 2010, available at: <http://opiniojuris.org/2020/05/01/the-brazilian-army-in-haiti-foreign-intervention-and-domestic-politics/> (access: 14/05/2020). For a chronicle of the beginning of the occupation, see the fascinating work by Jemima Pierre (2020).

Haitian diasporic landscape, a process that gained momentum after the 2010 earthquake.¹² Moreover, there is also the general centrality of the Haitian historiographic debate, especially regarding the Haitian Revolution (1791-1803), which led to the first successful black independence movement of the Americas and the Caribbean (1804), and became paradigmatic for emancipation processes in the nineteenth and twentieth century and, consequently, for studies on slavery and global history.

Expanding horizons

When we issued the call for papers for this dossier, we were interested in gathering a set of texts that portray the anthropology of the Caribbean made from Brazil in recent years. The final result presents something that we believe goes beyond the horizon we originally envisioned. In addition to addressing a repertoire of classic Caribbean themes—such as colonialism, the plantation model, slave agency, creolization processes, diasporic dynamics, power modulations, and the relations between commodities and capitalist modernity—the texts presented here are embedded in contemporary debates, revealing how the region continues to inspire new contributions and reflections that go far beyond a specific agenda, crossing disciplines and academic traditions.

It is also important to say that the publication of these texts in a foreign language offers the opportunity to insert new voices in the production of knowledge about the Caribbean. As Peter Fry reminds us, “one does not evaluate internationalization just by computing the geographical displacements of students, professors and researchers and their respective publications, but by understanding the capacity of Brazilian anthropology to be heard (and taken into consideration, I suppose!)” (Fry, 2004, p. 229). By presenting authors of various nationalities who work in the Caribbean, this edition of **Vibrant** confirms that Brazilian anthropology and its apparatuses of scientific production and dissemination have attained an important space within international academic production, beyond Lusophone contexts.

Thus, while the Caribbean has always awakened new sensibilities towards human diversity, we hope that these articles can be seen as a sample of the heuristic and critical potential of the region and its multiple diasporic landscapes, inviting readers to face the challenges and possibilities of research that navigates Caribbean horizons. Finally, we are pleased to announce that the dossier also includes, in the *Déjà lu* section of the journal, a transcription of an unpublished text by Ruy Coelho, **The Black Caribs of Central America: a problem in three-way of acculturation**, written in 1948, and the republication and translation into Portuguese of the classical article by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, **The odd and the ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean, and the world**, first printed in 1990.

Translated by Rodrigo C. Bulamah

Revised by Jeffrey Hoff

¹² A violent earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, a tragedy that destroyed much of the city of Port-au-Prince, killing around 250,000 people and injuring many thousands more and leaving more than a million homeless. For more details on the disaster and the Haitian diaspora in Brazil, in addition to the articles by Bersani, Montinard, Joos, and Dias, Jarochinski & Silva present in this volume, see Thomaz (2011) and Joseph (2015).

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Júlia Vilaça Goyatá

Associate Professor – Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Federal University at Maranhão (UFMA), São Luís/MA, Brazil

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3842-1877>

Email: julia.goyata@ufma.br

Rodrigo Charafeddine Bulamah

Graduate Program in Social Sciences

Federal University at São Paulo (Unifesp), São Paulo/SP, Brazil

FAPESP Postdoctoral Fellow - Grant n. 2019/04170-4

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4734-7672>

Email: rodrigobulamah@gmail.com

Rodrigo Ramassote

Anthropologist

Social Sciences Expert at the National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN),

Brasília/DF, Brazil

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5272-2692>

Email: ramassote@hotmail.com