

# Lost Frontiers

## Presenting the dossier

*Kelly Silva*

*University of Brasília*

It gives me great pleasure to present this “South-South Anthropology” dossier. It was conceived of with the aim of giving visibility to the analytical investments made by researchers that have ties with Brazilian institutions in extra-national scenarios geopolitically qualified as the *South* in the international order of things. Comprised of a set of eleven articles plus a joint commentary, the dossier expresses the promising contemporary movement towards the expansion of the ethnographic limits of our academic discipline in Brazil to the African and Asian continents. Although it broach diverse empiric realities, systematic reading of the articles reveals that there are important affinities between them. I propose, within the limits of this introduction, to discuss some of them.

Firstly, it is interesting to observe that all the articles in the dossier elect *praxis* as the privileged object of analysis: the practice of translation in religious missions, in Dulley; faces of the *modus operandi* of the Palestine resistance, in Barbosa; intra-family social dynamics in Cape Verde, in Lobo; the academic dialogue, in Cardoso de Oliveira; the political action of the Magermas, in Hernández; the formation of a multicultural agenda in Mozambique, in Magcano; to quote but a few examples. This perspective confronts the authors with a symbolic mosaic that challenges oppositions that are the basis of the modern episteme: tradition/modernity, public/private, masculine/feminine, rural/urban, truth/mistake, local/global, among others. To borrow the term used by Latour (1994), the authors find themselves before hybrids, the composition of which reveals the complexity, ambiguity, creativity and infinite possibilities of human action in the world.

In this context, certain precepts on which Dulley anchors her analysis in order to understand translation practices in the Spiritian missions in Angola are useful in conferring intelligibility on the phenomenology of diverse

events examined in the dossier. It is suggested, based on the legacy of Sahlins and several other authors, that translation, as a process involving the negotiation of meanings, is necessarily indexed by the classificatory systems that precede the interaction between two parties that intend to communicate with each other. It is, therefore, a starting point that facilitates our understanding of how, in certain contexts, local circuits of intelligibility condition the domestication of phenomena associated with modernity.

Passador, for example, demonstrates how access to money and to the market, in southern Mozambique, is crossed by spiritual actions, in which losses and gains are connected to sorcery. The author indicates how the market and the monetarization of relations nurture the reproduction of social institutions held as “traditional”. Far from basing himself on an uncritical view regarding the opposition between “modernity” and “tradition”, Passador uses them because they figure as fundamental categories of intelligibility from the native point of view, in the same way as the term “habits and customs”, in Macagno’s text. These recurrences are not by chance. They reveal at least two important phenomena: 1) the potential internalization of colonial categories of governability in the local classificatory systems and; 2) the relations of affinity between modern epistemes and colonial undertakings. From this point, Castro invites us to go further, presenting interesting hypotheses regarding the affinities between political standpoints of the anthropologists in Africa during the decolonization period and their analytical predilections. In this universe of questions, the precedence that the problematic of descent received in studies on kinship – to the detriment of filiation – is examined by Barbosa as a product of the projection that the public space and the political relations experienced within it occupy in Western societies. Among other things, the author recalls the classic lessons of Engels (2006): the emergence of the public and private spaces as ideally autonomous dimensions of sociability are related to the consolidation of capitalism. It is, therefore, a political invention, as the opposition between “traditional” and “modern” also is.

This denaturalization of the emic and ethic classificatory systems, present in a large part of the articles, also comes from the fact of their authors situating their objects as products of processes of medium and long duration. The dossier is thus marked by an intense dialogue with history. In this context, the alignment of the Brazilian and Indian states with the religions of the majority, Catholicism and Hinduism respectively, is portrayed

by Giumbelli as being the result of long-term nation building projects, comprised of distinct figurations. The author points out that although India is a secular state, it created juridical instruments that recognized denominational distinctions in the treatment of certain social matters, such as the *Muslim Women Code*. In Brazil, on the contrary, we have a civil code that is universally applied. Here, apart from not taking religious filiation as a variable when dealing with social issues, religious associations are not typified in a particular manner different to that of other non-profit institutions. It is also based on a dialogue with history that Castro seeks to recognize the itinerary of the national ideologies in Namibia, which vary between valuing ethnic ties to proposing their death.

Reading the dossier also allows one to observe how certain identitary articulations are formed as a product of the encounter with local, national and international phenomena which, in turn, give origin to new agents and agencies in the world. Thus, Hernández's article shows how the international cooperation policies between the Republic of Mozambique and the Federal Republic of Germany enabled the birth of the Magermas, their mode of political action and the meaning they attribute to money. In another dimension, the tensions existing around the conception and concretization of a multicultural State in Mozambique, as portrayed by Macagno, are structured on categories invented during the period of colonial administration, such as tribalism and the opposition between the indigenous and the assimilated. In this same direction, I suggest that the ideas-values that act as political mobilizers in the contemporary East Timor election disputes – reciprocity, recognition and suffering – are configured as a product of the synthesis between facets of the indigenous classificatory systems and the governability categories of Portuguese colonization, occupation and posterior resistance to the Indonesian State.

This does not mean, however, that history figures in the texts as a binding factor, like a straitjacket. Here history is also reproduction and transformation, at one and the same time (Sahlins, 1989). The authors' ethnographic sensitivity allows them to cultivate an attentive way of seeing things, capable of capturing the transforming agency of the subjects in the world. Borges' discussion on the stories of *Yesterday* and *Tsotsi* is exemplary in this sense. It indicates how their protagonists find solutions to their dilemmas, breaking through spatial and affective frontiers. The authoress reminds us that the social agents with whom we dialogue in the field are crossed by various

positions as subjects. This obliges us to think about the limits, complexity and possibilities involved in the anthropologist's *métier*. Thus, Borges proposes a critical reflection on the disjunctions, mediations and connections between individual biographies and collective histories.

Barbosa, in turn, describes how the intifada also structures itself on the defence of the monopoly, on the part of the Palestinians, of the terms through which the practices arising from the Israeli occupation are assimilated by them. This posture permits the subversion of the victimization of young people attacked by Israeli soldiers. It has been resignified as a sign of heroism and a rite of passage that marks their ascension to the condition of adults.

Lobo presents us with another example of collective creativity by analysing the reconfiguration of the models of family organization in Boa Vista/Cape Verde, contemporaneously. Belonging or the breakdown of family relations is thus presented as a balance between various principles of social filiation, that extrapolate the relationships of descent and affinity. It builds itself through inter-domestic and transgenerational solidarities, mediated by people and things.

Also noteworthy is the analytical creativity present in the texts that comprise the dossier, arising, among other things, from unusual cross-fertilizations. I am referring to the efforts to promote dialogue between concepts devised to deal with phenomena located, relatively, on the limits of the Brazilian frontiers which, when applied to diverse historic realities, permit the expansion of cognitive efforts. Passador, for example, makes use of issues present in the ethnological agenda in Brazil (Viveiros de Castro, 2002) to propose a particular view regarding the place of sorcery in the social dynamics of southern Mozambique. Silva, in turn, makes aspects of the East Timor political disputes more intelligible in the light of the dialogue with the problems of recognition and consideration, as examined by Cardoso de Oliveira (2007). If it is true that we are faced with fortunate examples of this movement, to the extent that they occur through dense dialogues with ethnology, Trajano Filho alerts us of the risk of our making naïve analyses.

We therefore find ourselves faced with the problematic of comparison which, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, imposes itself on our research routine. With regard to this, Cardoso de Oliveira's articles and the commentaries of Thomaz, Trajano Filho and Dias raise precious warnings about the challenges and opportunities present in the construction of

a South-South dialogue agenda. Cardoso de Oliveira indicates how much we can gain from what he calls symmetrical comparisons and dialogic partnerships, in interactions marked by the quest for mutual intelligibility, in which relations are not marked by the colonial exploitation of the past. To different degrees and based on different strategies, we can identify efforts in both directions in this dossier. Giumbelli's text is a good example of symmetrical comparison, as those of Hernández, Castro, Borges, Macagno, Passador, Barbosa, Dullely, Silva and Lobo are good examples of dialogic partnerships.

Nevertheless, despite our knowing that we do not bear the stigma of citizens from former colonial metropolises, other conditions of power interpose themselves in our relationship with our interlocutors. As such, there is no need to waste a lot of ink exploring the diversity that contemporary geopolitics denominates the South. In this context, the quest for dialogy certainly configures itself in a particular manner when undertaken with colleagues where work in countries that have a consolidated academic tradition, such as India and South Africa. In State-nations in which the academic field is incipient and enjoys little autonomy in the face of disputes between their elites, as is the case in East Timor, the quest for dialogical partnerships will structure itself in another manner.

It is also worthwhile remembering that we live in a period in which the Brazilian State seeks to expand its visibility and power. As Dias points out, not by chance, since 2005 six calls for projects have been made by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) for international cooperation with African countries and/or the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries, apart from all the Brazilian State's international public policies in relation to health, education, agriculture, among others, referred to in many cases as South-South cooperation. Albeit involuntarily, our practices are crossed in this way by projects of power over which we have no control. Perhaps the awareness of these phenomena nurtures an attitude of constant reflectiveness, that stimulates symmetrical dialogues and mutual dialogy.

I finalize this introduction by thanking all the *ad hoc* reviewers, whose rigorous work has enabled the composition of this long dossier, and by inviting the reader to undertake enticing journeys through the African and Asian frontiers explored in this issue of VIBRANT.

## References

- CARDOSO DE OLIVEIRA, Luis R. 2007. « Peut-on parler de violence sans agression morale ? » *Vibrant — Virtual Brazilian Anthropology*. Volume 4.1: 5-26. [http://www.vibrant.org.br/portugues/artigosv4n1.htm#v4n1\\_oliveira](http://www.vibrant.org.br/portugues/artigosv4n1.htm#v4n1_oliveira)
- ENGELS, Friedrich. 2006. *A origem da família, da propriedade privada e do Estado*. São Paulo: Editora Centauro.
- LATOUR, Bruno. 1994. *Jamais Fomos Modernos*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora 34.
- SAHLINS, Marshall. 1990 *Ilhas de História*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor.
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo. 2002. *A Inconstância da Alma Selvagem*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify.

## Biographical Note

Kelly Silva is Professor of Anthropology at *Universidade de Brasília/Brasil*. Since 2002 she has been conducting researches about issues related with State formation and nation building in East Timor, international cooperation and elites. She edited, with Daniel Simião, *Timor-Leste por trás do palco: cooperação internacional e a dialética da construção do Estado*. Email: [kellysa@uol.com.br](mailto:kellysa@uol.com.br)