

‘Deadly Rest’: Proximity and the Dead in the Patterns of Burial in Dili, Timor-Leste

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Introduction

Santa Ana is a smaller cemetery in Bidau Lecidere in Dili. While declared full by the municipal authority and formally closed for several years, on visiting in 2019 it was noticeable that a series of graves had been disturbed; the main slab having been removed or small doors that were built into the front of raised graves were left open showing the coffin had been taken. The cemetery’s caretaker explained that in these cases the remains of people who had died during the Indonesian occupation (1975-99) had subsequently been moved as independence allowed for the repatriation of remains to origin villages.

While such movements of bodies might remain relatively uncommon or occur in quite specific sets of circumstances, this example nevertheless brought to the fore the process of internment and the question of how a ‘final resting place’ is determined. An established grave fixes the remains of a person to a particular place, but does so in a way that both retards the decomposition of the body while providing a durable marker of place. This is not unimportant in Timor-Leste where a grave is often described as a ‘home’ for the spirits who might otherwise be left to ‘roam’, as well as creating a tangible space for the still-living to locate their deceased and perform ritual (i.e., prayer). Nevertheless, in the case of the graves in Santa Ana at least, what appeared as a final resting place was in fact more temporary than may have been initially imagined as the remains were repatriated to familial lands.

This article holds to a simple claim that a key determinant in the site of final burial is proximity both to the living and also amongst the dead. A short typology of different locations for internment is made before the article engages with a small selection of interviews from Dili in order to examine the dynamics that inform burial locations, particularly in an urban context, before some concluding comments are made. Proximity, as suggested in the example of Santa Ana here, is a continuous theme, however, it remains informed by a series of other factors, including available land, as well as the needs of both the living and the dead.

Methodology

The research presented here is from the initial stages of a longer-term qualitative project that investigates the social significance of death to the still-living in Timor-Leste. The focus is ‘contemporary death’, meaning that we are examining the ways in which death, and associated practices of mortuary ritual and remembrance, are understood and organised in the post-independence period.

For the initial phase of this study we have focused our research on three sites; Dili as the capital and most urbanised centre in the country; Quelecai, a Makasae-speaking sub-district of Baucau on the northern side of Mount Matebian; and Lolotoe, a Bunak-speaking sub-district of Bobonaro that shares a border with Indonesian West Timor. The choice of sites was based on a combination of wanting to add to contemporary research on both Quelecai and Lolotoe, having personal and professional connections that would help initiate the research in each site, as well as a desire to learn from the practices and experiences of different ethno-linguistic groupings.

Methods-wise, we have undertaken interviews with police (regional centres, as well as forensic police in Dili), a priest and a catachist, veterans, *xefe suku*, civil society leaders, carpenters, funeral home directors, *lia nain*, mortuary workers, funeral car drivers, cemetery workers, members of parliament,

and also everyday people. Moreover we have observed and participated in a wide range of events including attending mass, funeral ceremonies, All Souls Day in Quelecai, Dili and also Lolotoe, as well as in customary rituals, national ceremonies, and we have visited innumerable grave sites in various districts. The focus here on burial draws particularly from research that has been undertaken in Dili as well as being more broadly informed by a longer-term engagement in Timor-Leste (see Timor-research.org).

Sites of burial in Dili, Timor-Leste

East Timorese overwhelmingly follow the practice of inhumation by burying the dead via an excavation of the ground. Other alternatives such as cremation, or even internment in vaults, are virtually unheard of. Graves—from the simplest circle of rocks to elaborate concrete and tiled structures with fences and shelter—appear across the landscape to mark the ‘final disposition’ of human remains and tend to occur in one of three sites; cemeteries, community graveyards, and the immediate vicinity of a home.

As identified in the introduction with regards to Santa Ana, cemeteries feature as a common site for burial, particularly in more urbanised centres. Set on dedicated land and typically walled, some of these cemeteries are so packed that there is often no clear pathway between graves with several—such as Santa Ana discussed above and Santa Cruz—closed to new burials. While these cemeteries are overwhelmingly dominated by a rich variety of Catholic graves, there are also separate cemeteries in Dili for Chinese Timorese and Muslim Timorese (in our pursuit of Protestant graves, it appears at times they are accepted into otherwise Catholic cemeteries), and there also remain Indonesian war cemeteries for soldiers killed during the occupation. Inaugurated in 2009, there has been the addition of the ‘Garden of Heroes’ cemetery in Metinaro where veterans and key resistance figures are buried, with district and sub-district sites modelled on the national cemetery built over the years since (Viegas and Feijo 2018, 101).

In the case of Santa Ana, where remains have been disinterred and returned to origin villages, the reburial is likely to have occurred in some form of community graveyard or in the yard of close family. In terms of the former, graves are grouped together but without the formality of a cemetery; there are no clear boundaries, no general carer, they are located on customary land (not, for instance, church or state property), and regulation of use would typically be determined locally by customary convention rather than through state or church edict (i.e., no signs declaring closure). These sites are referred to here as a graveyard (though they are without a church as one might see in Britain and Europe, for instance) and can comprise from as few as three or four graves to the many hundreds. These are typically situated near homes but are on common land, contain the burial of people from that community (rather than a cemetery which contains people born in different places, or alternatively, homes where it is only direct family). These graveyards may have been sites for collective burial for centuries following the conversion to Catholicism or they may have emerged more recently, for instance, as burial sites during the Indonesian occupation.

A third pattern of burial discussed here, and again an alternative to cemeteries, is burial in the yards of people’s homes. Both in Dili and in rural areas it is very common to see well-constructed graves in front yards, next to a veranda, sometimes with motorcycles parked nearby or in an area where children play. Such burial typically occurs where there is an enduring claim to that land, as in a family that has lived on that site for a relatively continuous period and/or can lay formal legal entitlement to it. Given less space, graves buried in the vicinity of the home tend to be singular or in pairs and typically are of immediate kin; either children, parents or grandparents with the idea of keeping husbands and wives together. The following section considers how decisions are made in Dili with regards to burial in one of these three sites—a cemetery, a graveyard or a home—arguing that the need for ‘closeness’ is a key dynamic.

Proximity and burial site selection in Dili

In cultures where inhumation does not occur, or where religious doctrine does not require a regular return to a grave, then sites of burial might be chosen without distance being a priority. The nature of the relationship between the living and ancestral spirits in Timor-Leste, however, tends to mean that ongoing access to a grave is critical, especially given the almost ubiquitous belief that ancestral spirits (*beiala sira*) continue to have power that informs the well-being of still-living descendants (Viegas 2019; Winch 2017). While spirits can be a source of protection, equally a lack of a proper burial or ritual, or a poorly-constructed or unclean grave, or a lack of visitation, can see spirits seeking retribution against the still-living by causing crop failure, ill-fortune, accidents, illness or even death (Winch 2017; Feijo and Kent 2020). As such, access to graves becomes important because of the need for the still-living to perform their relationship with ancestors; the act of prayer, or ritual, or the provision of sustenance (flowers, clothes, foods, cigarettes). In turn, the cleaning of graves demonstrates care and remembrance.

As outlined above, burials in contemporary Timor-Leste tend to occur in one of three forms; cemeteries, graveyards and in the yards of homes. The last of these options is understood as giving the most immediate access for the living as the grave can in effect be cared for and visited at more or less any time. As the following example demonstrates, a husband whose wife had died of cancer spoke of how a burial at home was preferred over a nearby cemetery as this enabled constant care for her spirit.

As with the case with my wife who is buried here, that decision was my wife's decision, because before she died she said once I am dead bury me in the front of the house, I don't want to be buried in Santa Cruz, because you are a long way which means that you will not go and clean my grave and so it will be unkept. I must be buried nearby [to the family] so that on important days you can come to visit me, you can keep my grave clean, you can connect electricity to my grave to give me light, you can clean it constantly, you can place flowers constantly. We followed this as we are her children and her husband, and if she has said this but then we bury her in Marinir [a nearby cemetery] then perhaps her spirit will harm us. So, we decided that as the dead [his wife] wanted to be buried here that we were ready and wanted to bury her in this place (Interview with male research participant, Dili, November 2018).

This quote also reveals how the decision-making process is not only located with the still-living, as in this instance (and others in our research) the location of the grave had been determined by a person who knew of their own impending death. This form of decision-making marks a deep reflexivity expressed through the need to secure a person's own transition to the spiritual domain and also to protect their families from their own spirit by in effect remaining in the 'home' of the still-living. In this interview it was also discussed how a recent ban on burials (which was known by the interviewees via a *noticia* on the nightly news) in the yards of homes in Dili would affect the future burial of the husband (now re-married) or if intended infrastructural development meant their land would be acquired by the state. In this instance it was considered likely that the mother's remains would be disinterred and the two would be re-buried elsewhere together.

In an urban centre such as Dili, however, the ability to achieve proximity is conditioned by access to land which can be difficult and expensive to purchase, by the fact that land plots can be very small, and where renting is far more prevalent (and therefore provides a less permanent settlement). These dynamics, typical to urban life, mean that graves tend to be built in the yards of homes where the property has been secured and lived on over an extended period of time. Here a close friend of a young male who was killed in a motorcycle accident in 2017 explained how access to land meant proximity was a key concern.

In some situations it depends on the amount of land available, for example, like a close friend who has just died, he was in the military and so the commanders said he had to be buried in Metinaro. However, as the family has a large enough piece of land, and because he was the eldest

male, the father and the mother decided that it was better to bury him in front of the house. By being close they could better care and look after the grave (Interview with male research participant, Dili, November 2018).

In this situation, given the status of deceased (the eldest male) and the nature of his death (a traffic accident) the need to create the grave at the home of the man's parents usurped other options including burial in military or other cemeteries. However, this need could only be fulfilled given that the parents had established ownership of a house with available land.

In cases where there is not space to bury on private land in Dili, the dynamics around proximity may shift towards accommodating a burial in a cemetery or, if the deceased or their family was born outside of the capital, the repatriation of the body to places of origin. There are of course no absolutes, but rather a myriad of possibilities where a demand for proximity is a reoccurring dynamic that needs to be negotiated both in itself and against other considerations. In one instance, the initial intention of the burial of a young woman in a cemetery in Dili who had died from pneumonia was changed as her spirit—using her corpse as a vessel of communication—demonstrated her desire to be buried near her still-living parents. The inability to close her eyes, as well the stiffness of her body, was taken as a sign of spiritual displeasure at being buried in Dili and resulted in her repatriation to Bobonaro (and with that decision made her eyes could be closed and her body dressed). In other instances, burial in Dili may be chosen as a site close to living family that have migrated to the capital, or alternatively, as providing a kind of neutral ground when there is a death of a person where families are from different communities. For instance, in the following example a husband from Lautein had suddenly died, while the wife was from Liquiçá, and they lived in Dili. Couples from different birth places marry, making questions of proximity a point of potential tension:

And so they (the elders) said he needs to be buried (in Bobonaro) because my husband's mother has already been buried, and so the husband must also be buried there. However, I said to myself if my husband is buried in Bobonaro, what does that say about my value and that of my son, it would like our life would be over, that it would be the end, and I would not be able to visit if I wanted to light candles (at the grave) because he would be buried too far away. I was quiet and I prayed to my husband and said 'please tell your family to make the right decision....' (Interview female research participant, Dili, June 2019).

In this case, the mother of the deceased husband had already passed and so it was argued that it was important that the husband be buried with her in Bobonaro. However, the father of the deceased (still-living) was from Lautein and it was felt it was equally important to have the husband buried there. However, both families finally agreed that the husband should be buried in a cemetery very close to the woman's house in Dili (in effect answering her prayers). This decision was significantly informed by the fact that she was a young mother with a young child, herself from a different district again, and a proximate burial would allow her to regularly visit the grave with her husband's spirit providing her and her son with protection.

While thus far the focus has been on the relationship between the still-living and the dead, it is worth as a final point to consider proximity in terms of the spirits of the dead. In the example above of the husband being buried in Dili, both sides of the family had initially argued for his body to be repatriated and buried alongside other deceased relatives. Part of the consideration may have been to keep the spirit close to the living, but that the husband's spirit could be with the spirits of his own ancestors (for instance, his mother) was also an important consideration. Burials of family members are often grouped close together because of the belief that related spirits look out for one another—an aunt alongside a young nephew or niece, for instance—and can be seen in the way the still-living *hamulak* (undertake ritual prayer) to ensure that the new spirits find those who have already transitioned to the after-life. This can result in a demand for burials in graveyards, for instance, the newly dead are buried alongside those who have passed long before to ensure their spirits are not alone. In instances where someone is buried in a cemetery without other family members in nearby

graves, then the dynamic may be recreated of subsequent deaths leading to burials taking place in vicinity of the first grave. To return again to the example above of the husband in Dili who died prematurely, the father of the husband died the following year. However, rather than being repatriated to Lautein, the father was buried close to his son in the same cemetery in Dili.

Concluding comments

This article has claimed that proximity is a key factor in determining the location of a final resting place for the dead in Timor-Leste, a dynamic that is reflected in a deep and abiding belief in the importance of maintaining relationships between the living and the spirits of ancestors, as well as between the spirits themselves. Care and mutuality in effect underpin the shared existence of both the mortal and spirit and in turn make proximity an important dynamic in determining where burials occur. It is by no means an absolute and strategies exist to navigate distance, such as with cemeteries and graveyards typically having a large generic cross (*Cruz Metan*) that is used by people to pray when unable to visit an ancestor's grave. However, having 'nearness' remains an important dynamic. To return again to the example of Santa Ana cemetery that was discussed at the opening of this article, even where an elaborate grave might appear to constitute a final resting place, demands for proximity may see an ongoing repatriation of remains to origin villages and towns well beyond the capital.

Bibliography

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