

**The powerful dead:**  
**The politics of martyrs and other dead bodies in Southeast Asia**

**(Panel proposed to the 9th EuroSEAS Conference, Oxford, UK, August 16-18, 2017)**

In Southeast Asia as elsewhere, dead bodies act as potent political symbols. Their relationship to kinship, burial rites and the sacred gives them an affective power that can be mobilized by political elites during formative periods of nation-building, including in the aftermath of conflict or struggles for national independence (Verdery 1999: 32-33). Private rituals of grief, burial and mourning are appropriated at such times in order to transform the dead into public symbols of sacrifice, martyrdom and nationhood.

Yet, the efforts of political elites to ‘consolidate and contain’ (Tuit 2008: 259) the meanings of the dead are seldom all encompassing. Friction can be evident as national elites and other societal actors negotiate questions such as how the dead should be represented and treated, and by whom, and which bodies are deserving of martyr status. Frictions may also occur between the nationalist meanings ascribed to dead bodies and their cultural, social, spiritual, and local meanings.

This panel invites contributions from scholars whose work touches on these and other issues relating to the politics of martyrs and other dead bodies in South East Asian societies. It also invites scholars to consider what this politics signifies about the tensions of social memory creation and/or nation-building in those societies.

**Conveners:**

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**Discussant (TBC)**

**Professor Anthony Reid**

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## Abstracts

### **Dead Men Tell Many Tales - The contested masculinist politics of martyrdom and the bones of the dead in Timor-Leste.**

**Henri Myrntinen**

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The dominant narrative of the independence struggle in Timor-Leste is one of a heroic and ultimately successful struggle, one which entailed many sacrifices and suffering. Although women are mentioned, it is in particular a story of men. And while the broad lines remain uncontested, great tensions remain over the details, and have pitted those in power against disaffected groups such as various veterans' organisations like Sagrada Familia, CPD-RDTL, and KRM. The narratives of the past define claims in the present and visions for the future, and weave together various strands, including local mythology, Catholic influences, modernist developmentalism, vestiges of socialism, defiant nationalism and neo-liberal vocabulary. The paper focuses on debates over the visual depictions and memorialisations of the independence struggle as well as the contest between the state, veterans organisations and families over the bodies of fallen martyrs to examine some of the gendered underpinnings of these narratives and dynamics, and their political meaning for the future of the state.

### **Jorge Luis Borges in Timor-Leste: Two case studies in the (re)construction of heroes' narratives**

**Rui Graça Feijó**

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At the time of WWII, the Argentine novelist Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) wrote a very short story called "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero", included in his collection of *Ficciones* (1944). A few decades later, the Italian film director Bernardo Bertolucci (b. 1941) adapted that piece for the screen (*The Spider's Stratagem*, 1970). In both cases, a situation of social conflict existed (Ireland in the 1820s or Italy under fascism) that prevented full, independent investigation over the somehow mysterious death of a local political "hero". When a descendant of the "hero" decides to investigate that episode, he finds out that the "hero" had actually betrayed his fellows. When confronted with his treason, the "hero" asked to be killed in such a way that his death might benefit their common cause - not exposing his weakness, but turning him into a supposed victim of the enemy. And so the legends grew of a good fighter who perished in the struggle for people's freedom. The underlying assumption is that "heroes" are constructed through the manipulation of their life-stories.

Timor-Leste experienced a quarter century of social strife in which thousands perished holding weapons in their arms. However, not all deaths could be independently analysed, and conflicting narratives – corresponding to different sets of interests, and often involving moral judgements on the deceased's behaviour – circulated and prevented the emergence of a commonly accepted version of events that would raise these dead to the rank of "heroes". After independence, those who perished honourably are considered "martyrs". To be inscribed in the roll of publicly acknowledged "martyrs" is a complex process that, when successful, creates conditions for their relatives to access a wide range of benefits – from financial compensation to symbolic capital and social status.

## **The treacherous dead: negotiating a balance between remembering and forgetting**

**Lia Kent**

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The consolidation of a heroic narrative of the resistance struggle in independent Timor-Leste has seen the transformation of the bodies of FALINTIL fighters, and key figures in the political resistance, into public symbols of sacrifice, martyrdom and nationhood. Yet, as the state draws its 'deserving dead' into a national imaginary, what of the 'less deserving' dead? This paper explores how the families of Timorese killed by FRETILIN during the Indonesian occupation are attempting to carve out a space to remember, mourn and honour the dead. The paper's case study focuses on those who died in the late 1970s while detained in makeshift FRETILIN-run rehabilitation prisons (Reabilitação Nacional/ RENAL) for 'reactionaries'. Their families now negotiate a delicate balance between the demands of custom and the demands of a nationalist narrative that offers little space for the remembrance of the 'treacherous dead'.

## **Death as Central to Peace: Rethinking reconciliation in the context of mourning and remembrance.**

**Damian Grenfell**

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How do we know what 'peace' actually means in societies where there are deeply uneven patterns of social integration? How would someone working in an international development organisation, justice program or as a government advisor know for sure what a peace might mean in local communities constituted in vastly different ways to their own? In Timor-Leste, the dead remain a central dimension in the social life of the still living, and it can be argued that it is reconciliation between the alive and those who 'no longer breath' that is more important than that between still living victims and perpetrators. To achieve this however—if a genuine and lasting peace is the goal—the practice of reconciliation, and more generally transitional justice, needs to be fundamentally repositioned in terms of both approach and practice, and further towards a reflexive repositioning of the kinds of modernities that typical patterns of reconciliation (typified by TRCs) and more broadly transitional justice occur within. Claims towards adaptation with regards to incorporating 'local practices' and custom remain typically anchored in a form of time and space that either presupposes or recalibrates social relations within a singular dimensions, and one that—in the case of Timor-Leste at least—have done too little to recognise the centrality of the dead in any process of securing a meaningful peace.

## **Relationships with the dead and securing the self in Timor-Leste**

**Bronwyn Winch**

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Many people in Timor-Leste live with a powerful awareness of the presence of the dead. The ability of ancestors to influence the lives of the living in any number of ways—to protect or harm, bring fortune

or misfortune, cause illness or death, natural disasters and accidents—is understood as an everyday reality. The permeable boundaries between the living and the spiritual domain creates mutually reinforcing relationships of reciprocity, obligation and exchange, where the actions and intentions of one actor can reverberate across many different facets of daily life. Drawing from field work conducted in Timor-Leste across 2005-16, this paper argues that maintaining relationships with the dead is a vital and regular aspect of the ways in which many East Timorese experience security in their daily lives.

In making this argument, this paper draws on narratives highlighting a range of different forms of protection and practices of risk mitigation. From items imbued with protective powers from one's ancestors (such as the *biru* used by resistance fighters during the independence struggle against Indonesia); to prayers and rituals conducted in Sacred Houses in order to receive ancestral blessings and protection. Such acts occur in daily life as well as specific instances for example prior to someone embarking on a long journey, travelling overseas, or at times of heightened insecurity and violence such as the 2006 crisis. These stories demonstrate that relationships with the dead continue to have important ramifications for the ways in which many people in Timor-Leste secure themselves, as it is these connections—and encompassing acts of exchange, obligation and reciprocity—which provide vital forms of protection against harm and vulnerability and the sense of feeling 'watched over', ensuring the safety and well-being of the living.

### **Through sight and smell: Reburials of Martyrs among the Fataluku (Timor-Leste)**

**Susana de Matos Viegas**

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Description of the search and discovery of death bodies of those who died during the fight against the Indonesian occupation in Timor-Leste (1976-1999) has been accounted mostly through the ways in which the corpse becomes materially represented. A stone or a piece of dust is very often the material substance that stands for the absent of remains of the death body. Based on descriptions of how the death bodies of Martyrs have been identified by the Fataluku when they search for kinsfolks who were buried in unknown places, I discuss in this paper the role played by senses, namely sight and smell, as expressions of the presence of the death among the Fataluku. The aim of this analysis is to expand our understanding of how the connection between alive and death relatives is rendered present connecting it to ancestor worship among the Fataluku.