

Clara Saraiva

From New York to Guinea: Death and Grief in a Cross-cultural Perspective

What do the funerary rituals in New York and in Guinea-Bissau, in the West coast of Africa, have in the common? How is grieving perceived and how do people cope with grief in these two contexts? Furthermore, In spite of the profusion of studies on migration, some important issues dealing with immigrant´s states of suffering and death have hardly been dealt with. How do immigrants perceive death and dying and incorporate them in their conceptualization of the diaspora? Which is the role of ritual in such situations?

Drawing on my field work in New York and Guinea-Bissau and with Guinean immigrants in Portugal, I will look at death as a process, which involves specific emotional states and triggers the use of rituals in order to cope with the unavoidable distress. The estrangement towards life´s last rite of passage often moves on to the realm of the invisibility of death. How invisible is it in fact? For immigrants it is a reality that often conditions the relation with the home country.

This presentation will deal with the multiple levels that death touches upon, from the symbolic to the more practical ones. Death is one realm in which a transnational approach is mandatory; it entails an intense circulation of material goods and wealth, but also of highly symbolic significant universes which circulate along with the goods and the people: the corpse, but also the spirits and the relations with the other world that people brought along into the diaspora situation. The aim is to deconstruct prejudiced notions of what happens with the immigrants´ dead bodies, including symbolic representations as well as practical issues, analyzing what a New York citizen and a West African one have (or do not have...) in common.



Clara Saraiva is a senior researcher at Center for Comparative Studies in Lisbon, University of Lisbon, a researcher of the Center for Research in Anthropology (CRIA) and a Professor at the Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Universidade Nova de Lisboa. She was a Visiting Professor at University of California Berkeley (2013), Brown University and a Research Fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown (2001-2002 and 2008) and at the Université d´Aix-en-Provence (France-2005).

Her main fields of research deal with religion and ritual, drawing especially on the conceptions and practices of death from a cross-cultural perspective (USA, Portugal, Guinea-Bissau, immigrants in Portugal). Her PhD thesis (1999) analysed the funerary ceremonies of the Pepel of Guinea-Bissau, where she has been carrying out research since 1997. She also researches transnational religions and transnational therapeutic practices, namely Afro-Brazilian religions in Portugal. She conducted extensive fieldwork in Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Bostswana, on several EU sponsored projects. She is an active collaborator of Codesria (Council for the Development of the Social Sciences Research in Africa).

She directed the FCT project "The invisibility of death among migrants in Portugal" and is the organiser of books and author of several articles in journals dealing with this issue.

She is the vice-president of the Society for International Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF), President of the Association of Portuguese Anthropology (APA), and a board member of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA), as well as of the WCAA Ethics Task Force.