Skulls without words:

the order of collections from Macao and Timor, 1879-82

By Ricardo Roque*

Introduction

This article explores the emergence of silent museum objects by analysing a segment of the history of one collection of human skulls. In 1882, a set of thirty-five human skulls from the Eastern half of the island of Timor, a remote and isolated colony of the Portuguese empire in Oceania, was received at the Museum of Coimbra University, where the collection continues to be held today. The skulls were sent by the provincial colonial authorities at Macao, then also a colony of Portugal, included in a larger and heterogeneous consignment of objects destined to the Colonial Museum in Lisbon and to Coimbra University. In

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taking this episode of travelling of an object collection, this paper touches upon a topic that has been recently feeding on a lively field of studies in anthropology and the history of science. Historians of science have been calling attention to the inherent biographical historicity of ‘scientific objects’ while, within anthropology, ‘material culture studies’ have flourished around the idea that objects are in a state of becoming as they move through different cultural contexts and are put to different uses.\(^1\) Circulations of objects in space and time, their ‘biographies’, can thus be used either to discuss the formation of scientific knowledge, or to access the cultures and meanings of people.

The methodological focus on the movements of things can be a fruitful point of departure in the historical study of museum objects, but a particular approach to the study of these ‘movements’ is here proposed. In offering a glimpse of the history of this collection, I am interested in bringing out the work and the contingencies that intervened in the

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shaping of the attachments of words and things.\(^2\) The object of analysis, though, is not the travelling of ‘objects’ \textit{per se}. It is the unfolding of ‘attachments’, in Bruno Latour’s phrase, the trajectories of the links between words and things, texts and solid objects. The purpose is not a description of the viewpoints that add different meanings to objects as these pass through different cultural contexts. Instead, it is the exploration of the ‘engagement of things into discourse’ and of how this ‘engagement’ is embedded in practice.\(^3\) The paper then offers a description of the work involved in making and unmaking associations between words and materiality, by this means hypothesizing that the presence, quality, and durability of these associations plays a central role in the constitution of museum collections. A particular attention is paid to these associations as process of circulation located outside the geographical boundaries of museums. ‘Circulation’ expresses here every regime of practices affecting not just the temporal and spatial movement of a material body, but also its constitution as object of knowledge. The argument is that a set of physical ‘things’ comes into being as a ‘museum collection’ through the complexities, practicalities, and contingencies of holding

\(^2\) Heuristically, this focus on words and things also finds inspiration in Foucault’s seminal discussion of the problem of the ‘order of things’ (cf. Foucault, 2002).

together and/or setting apart texts and physical objects in the very process of their circulation.

Because the quality of things as museum objects is approached as a function of their attachments to words and texts, museum things in circulation can emerge with different degrees of visibility and invisibility, with diverse modes of association with words and with silence. This dynamic is in effect a striking and puzzling feature of the story of the collection of skulls sent from Macao in 1882. For it was without words that the collection of skulls reached the museum at Coimbra. In this regard, this paper represents an attempt to make sense of absences, silences, and blank spaces in epistemic orderings as a particular effect of classificatory and discursive arrangements. How and why can things be silenced? Under what conditions, for instance, can discursive practices and classification systems produce ‘things without words’ rather than things associated with signs and inscriptions? And what are the consequences of such absences for science-making?

This paper is concerned with explaining how such silences come into emergence by analysing the skulls’ dynamics of attachments. This means that silence is not a prearranged property of physical things, but an unstable outcome of practices and circumstances. ‘Things-in-them-

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4 The ‘exclusion’ and the rejection of discordant or ‘anomalous’ elements, as Michel Foucault and Mary Douglas respectively argued, are critical to the functioning of discursive orderings and systems of symbolic classification. See Michel Foucault, L’ordre du discours (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger. An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo (London: Routledge, 2002). However, I here suggest that discordant elements might also be ambiguously present in the silent zones of classificatory and discursive arrangements.
selves’, in other words, can be viewed as one possible ontology of things that comes into being in practice. From this perspective, I argue that the attachment of things to silences can be the consequence of the contingent travelling of objects and the work done with a view to meaningfully ordering sets of physical materials. The attempts at arranging a varied array of things as ‘a museum collection’ can produce discursive absences, as much as it can generate things thickly embedded in words. The narrative that follows thus traces the epistemic and material interactions between things and words, as they emerged in practice throughout the travel of that Timorese collection from Macao to Lisbon. Although I will not be able to examine this issue here at length, it should be pointed out that the understanding of this circulatory dynamic of attachments can explain how physical objects might become, or become not, suitable for museum science. How is, for instance, proper scientific knowledge possible when the ‘real world’ comes to the hands of museum anthropology practitioners in the form of collec-

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tions of things devoid of appropriate ‘references’ or ‘inscriptions’? 6

In effect, to trace the knowledge-shaping practices of the collection of Timorese skulls before and outside the museum especially matters because later on and inside the museum the effects of such practices upon anthropological constructs could be considerable. The early configuration of links between skulls and words would turn out crucial for the claims of the Portuguese museum anthropologists who studied the collection of skulls. In the second half of the nineteenth century, human skulls from ‘savage’ populations and remote parts of the world were desirable scientific objects for museum scholars working along the principles of the emergent science of anthropology. They were expected to provide crucial evidence to the construction of a universal table of the ‘races of men’. But the ‘information’ associated with skulls throughout their travels to the museum could bear greatly on the taxonomic endeavours of scientific practitioners. In 1894, an anthropologist at Coimbra University, Barros e Cunha, produced a craniological study about the collection with a view to classifying the races of Timor. 7 Yet, decades later, the validity of this study was to be dramatically questioned by colonial officers, who claimed the collection was not ‘authentic’ because the skulls sent from Macao and Timor in 1882 did not belong to Timorese

6 Scientists, Bruno Latour has stated, ‘master the world only if the world comes to them in the form of two-dimensional, superposable, combinable inscriptions’. Latour, Pandora’s Hope, p. 29.

indigenous people. Instead, they represented a mixed group of Portuguese, Africans, Timorese, and Indians slaughtered by Timorese head-hunters in the course of colonial wars. The skulls had arrived at the Coimbra museum in 1882 without words and texts indicating whereabouts and how they had been collected, or whose bodies they represented. This paper makes no claim to resolve this uncertainty. Rather, it is intended to explain how such ‘uncertainty’ could have arisen from gaps and twists in the trajectory of attachments of skulls and words, as the human remains were put to circulate as ‘a collection’ from Timor to Macao, and from Macao to Portugal.

The paper comprises two sections. The first section deals with the commercial orientation of the collection and the organizational form of the social networks that sustained the circulation of skulls between Macao, Timor, and Portugal. It describes the constitution of different government Committees in Macao and Timor and points to the resulting messiness and heterogeneity of Timorese object collections, regardless of Macao’s attempts to provide clear commercial orientations. Human skulls were still invisible at this stage of the trajectory. For, as we will see in detail, they were not part of the original intentions of the Committee in Macao. From the standpoint of Macao, it was somewhat accidentally that the networks and the scripts in place by 1880 would later be activated to arrange the trajectory of a collection of skulls to

8 For a summary of this controversy see J. G. de Barros e Cunha, A autenticidade dos crânios de Timor do Museu da Universidade de Coimbra, e o estado actual dos nossos conhecimentos sobre o problema da composição étnica da população de Timor (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1937).
Portugal. The second section analyses the classification and description system according to which the Timorese collections were shaped at Macao. It is here shown the ways in which these practices condemned the objects that did not fit into the classification system of the collection to silence.

The commercial script and the heterogeneity of the Timorese collections

In 1877, the governor of the Province of Macao and Timor received instructions from the government in Lisbon to assemble a collection from Macao and Timor. The orders were effectively executed at Macao only three years later, due to the initiative of the newly appointed secretary-general of Macao and Timor (a position ranking right below the governor), José A. H. Côrte-Real. Eventually Côrte-Real persuaded the provincial governor, José da Graça, of the importance of assembling a local collection of products to help invigorating the commerce between Macao and Lisbon. In 1880, a government Committee composed of local officials and merchants, and headed by the secretary-general was put in charge of organizing a collection. Their task was ‘to assemble, classify, coordinate and methodically exhibit the [Ma-

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10 J. A. H. Côrte-Real, “Relatório”, Boletim da Província de Macau e Timor, 1880, 26:172-73; J. José da Graça to Secretary and Minister of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, 16 May 1880, Lisbon, Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (Overseas Historical Archive, hereafter cited as A. H. U.), Museu Colonial de Lisboa, Diversos Documentos, Deposit 1, Case 4, Shelf 6, Folders 744-766.
products to be sent to the colonial museum in Lisbon and to the museum of Coimbra University'. The assembling of object-commodities for the Colonial Museum was a formal obligation to the imperial government. The involvement of Coimbra University, however, had informal origins.

The Coimbra University traditionally attracted a great deal of official collections since the eighteenth century. Yet, in this case the involvement of the university originated in a personal promise of Côrte-Real (a former student at Coimbra) to attend a request for botanical specimens formulated by Júlio A. Henriques, Director of the Botanic Garden and professor at the Faculty of Natural Philosophy of the Coimbra University. Henriques was strongly involved in the reform of the natural sciences commenced at the university in the 1860s, and was then working hard to organise the decadent botanic garden and museum in the image of the Kew Gardens: rich botanic collections from Portugal and the

11 Joaquim José da Graça, “Administração Geral. Portaria n. 51. 15 Maio 1880”, Boletim de Província de Macau e Timor, 1880, 26:172. All passages originally in Portuguese have been translated into English by the author.

12 Until the creation of the Colonial Museum, the imperial government was in the habit of recommending objects collected by special expeditions or colonial authorities to the Coimbra University. For a survey of collections sent to Lisbon and Coimbra in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Manuela Cantinho, O Museu Etnográfico da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa: Modernidade, Colonização e Alteridade (Lisbon: Fund. Calouste Gulbenkian, 2005), pp. 21-81.

13 Côrte-Real graduated in Law at the university, and some members of the Faculty of Natural Philosophy were common friends of Henriques and Côrte-Real. Emotional reasons seem to have been important to Côrte-Real. He understood his dedication to botanic collecting as a gift in exchange for the invaluable education he received at Coimbra. See Côrte-Real, “Relatório” (cit. n. 10); J. A. H. Côrte-Real to Júlio Augusto Henriques, 4 June 1880, Correspondence of Júlio Augusto Henriques. Coimbra, Coimbra University – Archives of the Department of Botany (hereafter cited as ADPUC).
colonies were to be assembled so as to serve study and teaching and to be put on public view.\textsuperscript{14} He held great hopes about Côrte-Real’s collaboration, when, in 1878, he asked for his help: ‘I then thought of resorting to various people’, Henriques revealed in retrospect, ‘who, by various means, could help me, and I lost neither my time, nor my work. Mr. J. A. Côrte-Real was then being appointed to the post of secretary-general of Macao. I addressed him and exposed him the wish of having again vegetable products from the colony in the museum [...]}; soon he proved his promises had not been vain.\textsuperscript{15} With the creation of the Committee headed by Côrte-Real two years later, in 1880, the informal commitments to Coimbra and the formal obligations to Lisbon merged into a same project of collecting ruled by commercial principles. Consequently, botanical collecting became subordinate to economic guidelines.

In effect, the Macao Committee worked under the guidance of a clear strategic vision of the role and purposes of the collection. Following Akrich and Latour, this strategic vision might be termed a ‘script’.\textsuperscript{16} In Macao, the script of the

\textsuperscript{14} Henriques was also developing an interest in the study of the ‘utility’ of African plants, and in the coming years carried pioneer work on ‘colonial agriculture’. See José Silvestre Ribeiro, \textit{Historia dos estabelecimentos científicos litterarios e artisticos de Portugal nos successivos reinados da monarchia} (Lisbon: Academia Real das Ciências, 1889) vol. XVI: 211-212, 230-231; Júlio Augusto Henriques, “O Museu Botânico da Universidade e as collecções de productos de Macau e Timor”, \textit{O Instituto}, 1883, XXX:60-65, esp. p. 60.

\textsuperscript{15} Henriques, “O Museu Botânico...”, pp. 60-61.

collection was chiefly mercantile, a ‘commercial script’ designed to assert the economic value of Macanese objects as profitable commodities in the then weakened trading networks of the Portuguese Eastern empire. A key trading post in Eastern commodities in the seventeenth-century, during the ‘Golden Age’ of the Portuguese maritime empire in Asia, Macao had then dramatically lost its economic importance. Portugal’s imperial energies had turned away from India to Brazil, whist, in Asia, the Dutch and the British had been taking over the maritime trade. By the late 1870s, however, there was hope among the Portuguese community of officials in Macao. Many officials were convinced that the colony could attract capitalist investment and strengthen the ties with the motherland, thereby recovering its former splendour as trading post.¹⁷ Collecting was seen as a way of providing solution to the commercial problem. Indeed, the collections from Macao were made to respond to a principal concern of the colonial administration shared by the secretary-general Côrte-Real and governor Graça: the lasting decadence of Macao’s trading relationships with Portugal.¹⁸

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¹⁸ See J. A. H Côrte-Real, “O commercio e industria do chá em Macau e a Lei de 27 de Dezembro de 1870”, *O Instituto*, 1879, 19:113-29; J. José da Graça to Minister and Secretary of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, 20 Oct. 1881, Lisbon, A.H.U., Macao and Timor, ACL_SEMU_DGU_1R_002_Cx 3, 1882-1883. Attempts of colonial authorities to change the commercial situation of a territory by presenting collections of industrial and natural products to museums in Lisbon and exhibitions abroad finds parallel in other colonial settings, such as Goa and Angola. See Ricardo Roque, *Antropologia e Império*:
This ‘commercial script’ had local foundations, but the capitalist interests of the Macanese officials and businessmen were also in line with official concerns of the imperial administration in Lisbon. A similar preoccupation with imperial trade and economic progress was behind the creation of the Lisbon Colonial Museum. The Colonial Museum had been established by the Portuguese government in 1871 at Lisbon with the intention of restoring the empire as profitable commercial space by the assembling of natural and commercial objects from the colonies. Its official purpose was clear: ‘to collect, preserve, and display for public examination the various products and objects that can help the knowledge, economic study, and profitable use of the varied wealth of our overseas possessions.’\(^{19}\) The concentration of colonial raw materials and manufactured articles at the museum was envisaged as a strategy to restore the Portuguese empire as profitable commercial space. Throughout its twenty-two years of existence (1871-92), the Colonial Museum acted less as a space for permanent display than as an intermediary. In receiving colonial objects, it was responsible for organizing Portugal’s representations to the World Exhibitions then mushrooming throughout Europe.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{19}\) Cited in Ribeiro, *História dos estabelecimentos científicos* (cit. n. 14), p. 304; See also Luís de Andrade Corvo to Governors of Angola, Cap Vert, St. Thomé, and Guinea, 10 April 1891, Lisbon, A.H.U., Museu Colonial de Lisboa, Diversos Documentos, Deposit 1, Case 4, Shelf 6, Folders 744-766.

\(^{20}\) The Colonial Museum also maintained a gallery for exhibitions at the Naval School in Lisbon. See Cantinho, *O Museu Etnográfico*, pp. 81-97.
From the outset, the Colonial Museum tried to take a position at the centre of flows of donation of colonial objects. Patriotism but also commercial profit was to inspire private donations. The museum organizers waved the profit caused by the mere exhibition of products in Europe as reason enough for traders, industrialists, and farmers to give samples of their products to the Colonial Museum, through the mediation of colonial authorities.\textsuperscript{21} The participation of colonial authorities conferred upon the project the formal character of an enterprise internal to the institutional obligations and hierarchies of state administration. Because it was a bureaucratic obligation and a national project, the collecting of object-commodities for the Colonial Museum was to be part of the role-description of colonial officials. The colonial governors, therefore, could from time to time be ordered to send collections to the Colonial Museum, and it was on such an occasion that in 1877, as we saw, the government in Lisbon had instructed the governor of Macao and Timor to organise a collection ‘proving the productive wealth of Macao and Timor’, to be sent to the Colonial Museum and, then, forwarded to the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878.\textsuperscript{22}

The collecting activities of the Côrte-Real Committee in Macao soon produced significant results. In 1880, a collection of Macanese products was shipped to Lisbon and Coimbra with stately pomp. Before departure to Portugal, an exhibition of the collections – more than two thousand arti-

\textsuperscript{21} See Andrade Corvo to Governors of Angola, Cap Vert, St. Thomé, and Guinea, 10 April 1891 (cit. n. 19).

\textsuperscript{22} Silva, “Portaria n.º 66. 25 de Julho de 1877” (cit. n. 9).
icles ‘which the Chinese use daily in ordinary life’ – was held at Macao’s Loyal Senate. The exhibits included papers of different colours, rattan and bamboo ‘in every shape and form’, and many other ‘nick-nacks’ presented by merchants or bought by the colonial government at the local market. Provincial governor Joaquim José da Graça inaugurated the event with pomp and circumstance. It was ‘the first Industrial exhibition ever done in the colony’. The ‘exhibition of articles in the museums’ in Lisbon, governor Graça hoped, will make ‘their qualities, applications and prices’ known and therefore ‘restore the commercial ties between Macao and the Kingdom’. A few months later, the successful arrival of the Macanese collection at Lisbon and at Coimbra provided an occasion for celebration. The various authorities in Macao, Lisbon, and Coimbra presented the collectors with official eulogies on their honourable and patriotic action of giving their time to collect objects for the nation. In Macao, for instance, the governor recommended the Committee for royal medals, and published in the official Bulletin an encomiastic eulogy, most especially on his president, Côrte-Real, given the ‘spontaneity and disinterest’ of his undertaking.

23 Anonymous, The Hong Kong Catholic Register, 15 May 1880, III(27):2; Anonymous, “Exposição de Productos enviados aos Museus de Lisboa e Coimbra”, Boletim da Província de Macau e Timor, Official section, 1880, 26:171; José da Graça to Minister and Secretary of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, 16 May 1880 (cit. n. 10).


25 Graça, “Administração Geral. Portaria n. 51. 15 Maio 1880”. See also Côrte-Real, “Relatório” (cit. n. 10), pp. 172-73; José da Graça to Minister and Secretary of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, 16 May 1880.
and its importance for the ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ of the colony.\textsuperscript{26}

The praise, according to Graça, was an obvious act of ‘justice’, but served also as an ‘encouragement’ to the Committee ‘to continue this work, which I much desire to see finished, at least in relation to Timor, a colony that, trusting on what I am usually told, is still unknown.’\textsuperscript{27} Indeed, another collection was yet to come. Governor Graça and the secretary-general Côrte-Real expected the district governor in Timor (hierarchically subordinate to the governor of Macau), to collaborate in the formation of the commercial collection. The expansion of the commercial script to Timor, involved an increase in the scale and complexity of the work of collecting. As we will see, as a result of this expansion, different Committees in Timor were to emerge, over which Macau had little control from a distance.\textsuperscript{28} From the viewpoint of the commercial orientations, messy Timorese collections were to be later forwarded to Portugal. Let us then shift focus to the contingencies involved in extending the demand

\textsuperscript{26} José da Graça to Minister and Secretary of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, 16 May 1880

\textsuperscript{27} Joaquim José da Graça to Secretary and Minister of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, 2 July 1880, Lisbon, A.H.U., Museu Colonial de Lisboa. Diversos Documentos, Deposit 1, Case 4, Shelf 6, Folders 744. See also Graça, “Administração Geral. Portaria n. 51. 15 Maio 1880” (cit. n. 11).

for commercial and industrial products to the colony of Timor.

The extension of collecting work to Timor

In May 1880, after the Macanese collections were sent to Portugal, governor Graça commissioned the Côrte-Real Committee to carry on collecting for the Colonial Museum and Coimbra University. This time, their principal objective was to assemble a collection of products from the district of Timor ‘whose wealth’, the governor remarked, ‘it is also important to know’.29 Again, the governor’s interest in putting an end to ignorance about Timor had politico-economic motivations. The intention was to extend the commercial script of 1880 to a Timorese collection, seen as a ‘continuation of the consignments sent in 1880’.30 From Timor, Macao expected samples of raw materials and industrial products to support its hopes of profitable trade in Timorese commodities. Finally, the collection was to provide evidence of the prevailing myth of the geological and agricultural treasures hidden in the country. Certainly, from Macao the district of Timor looked too far and too strange, and most provincial governors saw the island as an unwanted burden, a source of political trouble, and a waste of resources. Nonetheless, many expected Timor’s mythic ‘wealthy territo-

30 Joaquim José da Graça to Secretary and Minister of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, 15 Feb. 1882, Lisbon, A.H.U., Museu Colonial de Lisboa. Diversos Documentos, Deposit 1, Case 4, Shelf 6, Folders 744-766.
ry’ would soon pay back Macao with economic profit.31 Fertile virgin soils were available for cultivation while legendary geological riches – such as gold and copper – were just waiting discovery and mining.32 By coming into possession of a collection of Timorese objects, therefore, Macao’s dreams of running a prosperous exploration of its problematic district could finally materialize.

In extending to Timor the requests made by Lisbon, the commercial framework was preserved. Further, the Botanical Garden of Coimbra University should also continue to be granted collections of vegetable products from the island. In fact, at the same time governor Graça promised a further Timorese consignment to the Ministry, Júlio Henriques at Coimbra received a personal letter from Côrte-Real promising more botanical products: ‘if God wishes to keep me [in Macao], Your Excellency will still get a quite developed collection from here and Timor, as well as Flora, which I am on the way to ensure, and everything else I can.’33 The intention of satisfying Coimbra’s demands for Timorese vegetable products reinstated the promise made to Henriques earlier, in February 1879:

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31 See José Maria Lobo d’Ávila to Minister and Secretary of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, [xx] 1876, Lisbon, A.H.U., Macao and Timor, ACL_SEMU_DGU_RM_005_Cx 45, 1879-1880; Joaquim José da Graça to Minister and Secretary of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, 8 March 1880, Lisbon, A. H. U., Macao and Timor, ACL_SEMU_DGU_1R_002_Cx 1, 1879-1880.

32 For the mythic imagery of Timor’s natural wealth see, for example, Alfred Russell Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago* (1869, New York: Dover, 1962); Armando Pinto Correia, *Timor de lés a lés* (Lisbon: Agência Geral das Colónias, 1944).

33 José A. H. Côrte-Real to Júlio Augusto Henriques, 4 June 1880, Coimbra, A.D.B.U.C., Correspondence of Júlio Augusto Henriques.
I have asked the Governor of Timor, and he has already promised me a collection from the three kingdoms, which is of great importance there. Once I receive it, I hope the collection from Macao will be ready, and will send them both to Your Excellency, if the usual human contingencies don’t deprive me of the necessary time.34

Côrte-Real revealed to Henriques that he had already taken action to secure the cooperation of the district governor in Timor. In stating that the district governor was ‘asked’ the favour of establishing Timorese collections, Côrte-Real concealed the fact that he had ordered the district governor to undertake collecting work in Timor, in accordance with Timor’s subordination to the governorship of Macao. Indeed, it was as an administrative instruction from the provincial government that the call was received in Timor. On 18 October 1878, the governor of Timor, Hugo de Lacerda, was asked by Macao what had been done so far to enforce the provincial decree of June 1877, which ordered the district authorities to assemble a collection of products for the Colonial Museum.35 Lacerda expressed unawareness of that decree, apparently never implemented by his predecessor. In reply, he announced prompt measures to correct the failure. He sent pharmacist Costa Duarte on a collecting expedition to the ‘three kingdoms’, i.e., the Eastern indigenous kingdoms of Laleia, Veimasse, and Laga around Dili. But in the governor’s opinion, Duarte’s works proved ‘quite

35 Côrte-Real’s letter to the district governor, Hugo de Lacerda, on behalf of the provincial government cannot be found. Only Lacerda’s response is available. Hugo de Lacerda, “Portaria 21. Governo de Timor. 30 April 1879”, Boletim da Província de Macau e Timor, 1879, XXV(28): 149.
disappointing’, and there were no collections to send to Macao in 1880, to Côrte-Real’s regret.36

Governor Hugo de Lacerda took other measures. He assigned a permanent Committee to the task of ‘executing the work required to constitute collections of products for showing [Timor’s] productive wealth at the colonial museum in Lisbon’.37 The purpose was ‘to collect and classify the products considered worthy of presentation by the [Timor] Committee’, and then send them to the Colonial Museum, via Macao. Part of these collections was also intended to stay in Timor, laying the foundations of a municipal museum at Dili.38 The Committee members were chosen from the ranks of colonial administration in Timor: Reverend João Gomes Ferreira, missionary and parson of Dili; pharmacist Albino Costa Duarte; second-lieutenant Jayme Henrique de Sá Vianna; and the Superior of the Catholic Mission in Timor, Reverend António Joaquim de Medeiros, president of the Committee. The ‘Medeiros Committee’ was active from April 1879. Yet, nothing was known at Macao about the Committee’s activities until its abrupt dissolution in February 1881, by decree of the new district governor, Cardoso de Carvalho.

37 Lacerda, “Portaria 21...”.
Carvalho extinguished the Committee with short and cold praise, allegedly because it had already ‘presented its work’ and all accounts were closed.\textsuperscript{39} The extinction of the Committee was another episode in the political conflict that virtually since the arrival of the new governor opposed Carvalho to the Catholic missionaries.\textsuperscript{40} Let us continue looking at the events from the perspective of Macao, examining the travels of the Timorese consignments to Portugal. Particular attention will be paid to the contingencies of the collections assembled by the Medeiros Committee, for these were to include the set of human skulls.

The Committees in Timor and the messiness of the three consignments

The extinction of the Medeiros Committee caused perplexity in Macao. In April 1881, governor Carvalho was authoritatively reminded by the provincial governor to send collections to the Colonial Museum, in obedience with the ‘repeated orders from the metropolitan government’. All Timorese ‘products that can be obtained’, he ordered, were expected forthwith in Macao, ‘on time to be sent to Lisbon in the next transportation’.\textsuperscript{41} The urgency of this request was precipitated by information brought by Rev. Medeiros him-

\textsuperscript{39} Cardoso de Carvalho, Portaria n. 20. Governo de Timor, 11 Feb. 1881, Macao, \textit{Arquivo Histórico de Macau} (Macao Historical Archive, hereafter, \textit{A.H.M.}), AC, P-274.

\textsuperscript{40} For an ecclesiastical perspective on this episode see Manuel Teixeira, \textit{Macau e a sua Diocese. Missões de Timor} (Macao, 1974), Vol. X.

\textsuperscript{41} Joaquim José da Graça to A. Cardoso de Carvalho, 13 April 1881, Macao, \textit{A.H.M.}, AC/17/P-27855
self, who had just arrived in Macao and was quick to exert his influence near the provincial governor. Rev. Medeiros told governor Graça about him having been forced to leave behind the collection assembled by the Committee under his charge since 1879. Back in Dili, five boxes with objects, a catalogue, and an appendix report authored by the Rev. Medeiros were just awaiting orders to be shipped to Macao. This circumstance must be emphasised, i.e., the Medeiros Committee prepared packages of objects and produced associated information in the form of catalogues and reports. However, so as to reach Macao the objects and the texts had to be released by governor Carvalho: ‘From the Rev. Superior Head of the Mission’, Graça explained to Carvalho, ‘I know that he has left there [in Dili] some cases with objects already collected; if Your Excellency does not wish to keep them in that district, Your Excellency will send them to Macao, and regard them as satisfaction of part of the request made by the [Macao] Committee.’ 42 In addition, Carvalho received orders to continue with the ‘acquisition of collections’, of ‘all the objects that Your Excellency considers useful to science, commerce, or the development of that district.’ 43

Carvalho observed these instructions. In May 1881, he assigned a new Committee at Dili to the task of ‘collecting and classifying the natural products of the Timor district’ as a means of publicising the ‘productive wealth’ of the colo-

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.; Joaquim José da Graça to A. Cardoso de Carvalho, 9 May 1881, Macao, A.H.M., AC/17/P-27855
The goal was in conformity with Macao and Lisbon’s commercial interests. This time, the Committee comprised state officials of Carvalho’s personal trust, and was presided over by the government secretary, major José dos Santos Vaquinhas. In June 1881, Carvalho attended Macao’s demands, sending a consignment of ‘ten volumes’ with objects. It is unclear whether all, or just part of these volumes corresponded to those ‘five boxes’ left behind by Rev. Medeiros, a few months before; or whether new items assembled by the ‘Vaquinhas Committee’ were included. Nevertheless, it is certain that this consignment included Medeiros’s collections, and probably the catalogues and appendix report.

The collections of the Medeiros Committee had no easy journey to Macao. The contingencies of the trip threatened their integrity, durability, and even physical existence. On 8 August 1881, governor Graça acknowledged their receipt with serious losses. Out of the ten volumes, only nine reached Macao; the tenth remained, unexplainably, at the Dutch port of Makassar. Moreover, ‘many of the objects arrived broken,’ complained Graça, ‘[or] gnawed by the rats,

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44 Cardoso de Carvalho, Portaria n. 39. Governo de Timor, 8 May 1881, Macao, A.H.M., AC/17/P-274.
45 For the constitution of this Committee, see Carvalho, Portaria n. 39; J. A. H. Côrte-Real et al, “Relatório”, Boletim da Província de Macau e Timor, 1882, supplement to n. 9:67.
46 Joaquim José da Graça to Cardoso de Carvalho, 8 Aug. 1881, Macao, A.H.M., AC/17/P-27855
47 The fact that ‘ten volumes’ instead of ‘five boxes’ were sent to Macao might suggest that the Vaquinhas Committee added new collections to this consignment. However, in his report on the Timorese collections, Côrte-Real stated that the first consignment comprised only collections arranged by the Medeiros Committee. See Côrte-Real et al, “Relatório”, p. 67.
or deteriorated, the ants, corn and wheat, for example, are useless, other specimens, like those conserved in alcohol, must be put aside, and some specimens were totally ruined.’ Graça concluded that bad conservation work at Timor had been a major reason for the losses and urged Carvalho to continue sending more and properly packed collections, comprising ‘everything [in Timor] that can be object of trade’. Nevertheless, were it not for the damages, Medeiros’s consignment would have been outstanding. This fact was observed by Côrte-Real in referring to Medeiros’s collections in the final report: ‘because of the number and quality of the products, and because of the value of some [objects] and the information that accompanied them, this consignment would doubtless be the greatest, but many [objects] got to our hands completely lost, some due to deterioration, others due to bad packing.’ Macao received damaged objects. In contrast, the catalogues and reports authored by Medeiros seem to have arrived safely. Côrte-Real might be in possession of a broken collection but he had ‘the information’ that accompanied the materials ‘unbroken’.

The Timorese collections that came together in Macao were thus a jumble of things gathered by different Committees in Timor between 1879 and 1882. In effect, that was the first of three consignments with collections sent from Timor in 1881. The second consignment arrived successfully in November 1881, and had been assembled by another group of agents, the Vaquinhas Committee. Côrte-

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48 Joaquim José da Graça to Cardoso de Carvalho, 8 Aug. 1881.
49 Côrte-Real et al, “Relatório”, p. 67
Real considered it ‘very valuable’ in ‘agriculture, mineralogy, and forests’. Accordingly, major Vaquinhas received official eulogy and was urged to continue sending to Macao ‘everything that can represent Timor’s natural production, small and big industries, flora, history, customs, etc.’ Vaquinhas, then interim governor, complied with Macao’s requests and in December 1881 another consignment was forwarded. This consignment was Vaquinhas’s personal present to the provincial government. For these reasons, the interim governor received all the credit; again, he was praised on the pages of the Provincial Bulletin. Albino Costa Duarte’s ‘valuable’ private collection of birds, reptiles, butterflies, and molluscs, was offered to the Timor government in April 1881, and later sent along with the consignments to Macao; Côrte-Real would present it to Coimbra.

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51 Joaquim José da Graça to A. Cardoso de Carvalho, 11 Nov. 1881, Macao, A.H.M., AC/17/P-27855.
52 Yet, the loss of some objects was considered unproblematic because many of the damaged materials were duplicates of originals already in possession of the Macao Committee (see Joaquim José da Graça to José dos Santos Vaquinhas, 11 Feb. 1881, Macao, A.H.M., AC/17/P-27855).
54 For this gift, the governor Carvalho praised Costa Duarte. See Côrte-Real et al, “Relatório” (cit. n. 45), p. 67; Cardoso de Carvalho, Portaria n. 45. Governo de Timor, 11 April 1881, Macao, A.H.M., AC/17/P-274.
Fig. 1: The heterogeneity of the Timorese collection: spoons, knives, flutes, little baskets, axes, preserved insects, vegetables, wood samples, betel boxes, etc. The objects shown in this picture are part of the Timor collection displayed at the Coimbra Museum of Anthropology. Photo by the author, October 2004.

Although Macao still kept an interest in receiving more Timorese collections, no further consignments would come. In any case, the main purpose seemed to be achieved. After two years of troubles in their dealings with the district authorities in Timor, the Côrte-Real Committee was finally in possession of Timorese products. But for this Committee the work had just started. In Macao, great efforts in ‘restoration, conservation, and packing’ of ‘almost every object’ were necessary to rehabilitate the damaged collections.55

55 Côrte-Real et al, “Relatório” (cit. n. 45), p. 66
Further, the collections had to be ordered and classified. But the Timorese consignments revealed to be messy assemblages of things, which did not straightforwardly agree with the view of the commoditisation of Timor. The next section analyses the epistemic work done by the Côrte-Real Committee in order to cope with this messiness and impose order upon the Timorese collections (Fig. 1).

The order of classification and description

The commercial programme designed in 1880 crucially shaped the career of the Timorese collections as objects of knowledge. In February 1882, the Timorese collections were ready to be shipped to Portugal. Shortly before their departure to Lisbon, the objects were put on public display in Macao, arranged and classified with the purpose of providing visual demonstration of the economic wealth of Timor. Côrte-Real clarified to the audience of the exhibition the underlying principles of the Committee’s work of organizing the collection: ‘to put within view of the country, the trade, its capitalists, its public men and the press, the objects that constitute the natural, industrial, and commercial wealth of Macao as well as Timor’. The objects were exhibited as commodities, evidence of Timor’s economic wealth. The organization of the Timorese consignments by the Macao Committee thus accorded with the original commercial

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57 Ibid.
Ricardo Roque – Skulls without words

vision. Besides, the arrangement of the collection in Macao agreed with the *Instructions for collecting various products in the Overseas Provinces* devised in 1876 by the then director of the Colonial Museum, the agronomist Luís de Andrade Corvo.\(^{58}\) The Côrte-Real Committee followed the *Instructions* in organizing the classification and description of the objects. As a result, the Committee’s ordering of the collection produced commodities with words, and objects, irrelevant for commoditization, without words.

**The classification system of the Côrte-Real Committee**

The *Instructions* were intended to standardize the work of collecting and of informing the objects by the collaborators of the Colonial Museum. They contained clear indication of the categories of things deemed appropriate to the museum, *i.e.*, exclusively objects of a commercial or industrial character; no reference was made to skeletal remains.\(^ {59}\) The *Instructions* also set standards for the classification and description of the objects, and paid particular attention to the organization of the collective work of

\(^{58}\) Similar instructions were used in Portugal since the 1860s for organizing collections to World Exhibitions. They were made in the image of French museum instructions. Luís de Andrade Corvo, *Instruções para serem colligidos nas Províncias Ultramarinas os diversos produtos que devem figurar no Museu Colonial de Lisboa* (Lisbon, 1876). See Cantinho, *O Museu Etnográfico* (cit. n. 12), pp. 84-85.

\(^{59}\) The objects sent to the museum should belong to the following categories: ‘Natural products’; ‘Agriculture’; ‘Industries’; ‘Commerce’; ‘Curiosities and artworks’ (archaeological objects’ were here mentioned); ‘Foreign colonies’. From Corvo, *Instruções*, p. 4.
gathering information about the objects. This was designed as a cumulative and hierarchical chain of information production, partially juxtaposed to administrative hierarchies. At one level, ‘producers or exhibitors’ would describe the products and give such descriptions to the local or district authorities, together with the objects. Afterwards, these authorities would record and synthesize the producers’ data in a partial catalogue and a partial report, ‘short reports in which the greatest number of clarifications on the true importance of each of the products are offered.’ Finally, the governors had the task of synthesizing the partial information given by the district authorities in the form of ‘general catalogues’ and one final report. The general catalogue should ‘incorporate the explanatory notes necessary for clarifying any doubts’, and the reports should show ‘the state of the various industries represented by the products sent to the Lisbon colonial museum, the causes obstructing their increment and means to be employed for their development and improvement.’ The colonial authorities were also entitled to interfere with the data produced at earlier stages. They should ‘correct inaccuracies’, add new details, and, above all, make the synthetic coordination of data. However, the partial documents authored by the subordinate or district authorities were also to be sent to Lisbon, along with the final synthetic documents and the

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60 Ibid.
61 Ibid, p. 2.
62 Ibid.
collections. This, too, was the responsibility of the governor.\textsuperscript{63}

The Côrte-Real Committee occupied the top level of this chain of information. Accordingly, the Committee produced two documents on the Timorese collections: a general catalogue and a final report, both to appear later in the Provincial Bulletin. The production of these documents required difficult coordination of the three consignments. When in 1880 the Committee first organized at Macao a collection of local Macanese products, the members had themselves selected or collected the objects and written the explanatory notes. In 1882, however, this task increased in complexity. Hundreds of different objects in bad condition arrived at different points in time, collected by different Committees over whom Macao had had only indirect control. Unexpected objects collected by other people and ‘partial reports’ authored by other colonial authorities in Timor had to be incorporated into a coherent whole. The Macao Committee could thus be confronted with objects and information inadequate to the commercial script or the Instructions, but which the Committee had nevertheless to coordinate. As a result, the Côrte-Real Committee produced a synthetic collection. In the texts as in the boxes, the three consignments were merged into one single collection subordinated to a single organizing script. The objects were classified and described as if they constituted a homogeneous ensemble, put together from the outset in straightforward agreement with commercial principles. Further,

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, pp. 2, 4-5.
with the exception of Costa Duarte’s collection, the final catalogue synthesized things in such a manner that it was virtually impossible to determine which objects had been sent by which Committee. The Medeiros’s and Vaquinhas’s collections, for instance, were haphazardly put together.

In Macao, the homogenizing classification system of the collections followed closely the recommendations of the *Instructions* and the mercantile script. In 1882, regardless of greater heterogeneity in the Timorese consignments, the Côrte-Real Committee applied to the Timorese collections a strategy of classification and description previously followed with regard to the Macanese collections of 1880. The purpose was to produce information that enhanced the commercial or industrial value of the objects. The Macao Committee, Côrte-Real remarked, did not make ‘a regular classification, nor a scientific description of the products’; it tried to act in conformity with the government instructions, offering ‘the greatest number of news and explanations that were possible to gather and verify, giving about many objects the information most convenient to their understanding and the clarification of the commerce, as much as possible’.\(^{64}\) The classification system was prepared with a view to shaping the objects as commodities, and it was but a variant of standard entries suggested by the Colonial Museu.\(^{65}\) The catalogue categories thus contained ‘information about the prove-
nance, uses, prices and quantities in the markets’. Accordingly, each object was attributed a number, a name, a geographic origin, and then economic information, such as the price, exporting, etc., was given. The generalist entry, ‘observations’, completed the catalogue table. The constitution of objects as commodities was, therefore, the main goal of the knowledge practices of classification. The consequence, though, as we will see, was that this knowledge system produced well-informed object-commodities as much as it generated things dispossessed of words and information.

The unequal distribution of words in the collection

The final report authored by the Committee went along the lines of the classification system. Only items in accordance with perspectives of capitalist exploration of Timor, things from which economic profits could be foreseen (e.g., coffee, sandalwood, or gold), were objects of descrip-

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66 Joaquim José da Graça to Secretary and Minister of the Navy and Overseas Affairs, 15 Feb. 1882, Lisbon, A.H.U., Museu Colonial de Lisboa. Diversos Documentos, Deposit 1, Case 4, Shelf 6, Folders 744-766.

The collections, however, included many Timorese things not adapted to profitable commoditization or Industrial exploration, such as handcrafted cartridge-boxes used by the Timorese warriors. These other ‘non-commoditizable’ objects were not described; they were virtually unclassifiable, and were left with all economic entries empty. Perhaps these omissions were due to a lack of information; or perhaps, and more likely, they were due to the rigidity revealed by the classification and description system. In any case, it is striking the extent to which the catalogue list was cut across by what Lorraine Daston called the ‘fault line of language’ in nineteenth century conceptions of objectivity. ‘Things with words’ coexisted with ‘things without words’; in the catalogue, objectivity was simultaneously performed as a twofold principle. The objectivity of some objects depended on them being profusely described and worded. In contrast, the objectivity of other objects was a function of them being left wordless, as if they could speak for themselves. This type of wordless objectivity seemed to be implicit in the Committee’s explanation for the absolute dissipation of language from certain material things in the collection: ‘With regard to these [Timorese] products’, Côrte-Real observed, ‘the Committee has almost nothing to say. Their mere observation suffices as a recommendation.’

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68 Côrte-Real et al, “Relatório” (cit. n. 45), pp. 67-68
In producing a collection with wordless things, the Côrte-Real Committee did not follow the principle of holding words and things closely together, as recommended by the Instructions. In yet another aspect the Instructions would be broken. The texts produced by the authorities in Timor did not travel together with the objects. In March 1881, receipts, lists, the general catalogue, and the final report were sent to the Minister, accompanied by a letter from the governor.\textsuperscript{71} Yet, the partial reports and catalogues authored by the Timor Committees were not included in these consignments. Only the final synthetic documents published in the Provincial Bulletin were to become accessible to the museums in Lisbon and Coimbra. Connection with information eventually produced in Timor was lost.

The exception was a quotation from a certain ‘Rev. Priest Medeiros’s report’ in the final report of 1882. The passage from the ‘Medeiros’s report’ referred to samples of copper and gold ores collected by the Medeiros Committee, and to difficulties in obtaining information from indigenous people about the exact location of trees and precious metals.\textsuperscript{72} The citation had been selected with a view to agreeing with the mercantile script from a longer and more detailed account. For the ‘Rev. Medeiros’s report’ itself would never travel together with the collections to Portugal, and thus the information that it may have contained about the objects (and indeed the very existence of the document)


\textsuperscript{72} A. J. Medeiros cit. in Côrte-Real et al, “Relatório” (cit. n. 45), p. 67.
was to become unknown to metropolitan scholars. The Medeiros’s collection, therefore, might have arrived physically damaged in Macao. But once the Côrte-Real Committee subtracted the associated reports and catalogues, it arrived in Portugal adding to its physical damage an important epistemic fracture. The Côrte-Real Committee justified the absence of descriptions about a number of material things by subtly evoking a concept of scientific objectivity that exempted things from information.

Thirty-five human skulls

The dominance of the mercantile script, the rigidity of the economic orientation of the classification system, and finally the separation of objects from their Timorese texts had a great impact on the epistemic configuration of the set of human skulls included in the consignment sent from Macao to Portugal in 1882. The final report makes no mention whatsoever of the presence of human skulls in the collection. Their existence is signalled in the catalogue list with the following minimalist information: ‘Number: 197. Name: Human skulls. Origin [Naturalidade]: Timor.’

The other catalogue entries, which concerned the economic value of objects, were blank, as were also blank the entry ‘observations’. The geographic origin was the only

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73 Indeed, further evidence suggests that Rev. Medeiros actually produced a report and a catalogue concerning the collections assembled by the Committee under his charge. These were sent to governor Carvalho in Timor, and then to Macao. Cf. Joaquim de Medeiros to Bishop of Macao, 3 June 1881 (cit. n. 38).
informative detail: Timor. Yet, even this ‘detail’ was a rather general indication compared with more detailed information on the origin of other Timorese items. In the catalogue, the geographic origin of things could be specifically attributed to Timorese kingdoms or settlements (e.g., ‘Cová’; ‘Viqueque’), or to the specific locations where they had been collected (e.g., ‘Found on the beaches of Batugadé’; ‘River of Bibiçusso’). Further, the catalogue system hindered the indexation of ‘Number 197’ to one of the three consignments. It was not possible to know whether the human skulls had been collected by Vaquinhas, or Medeiros, or Costa Duarte. Perhaps skulls were not considered the ‘natural, industrial and commercial’ products that Macao desired; perhaps no more information about the skulls was sent from Timor; or perhaps that information was filtered, considered irrelevant in the light of the commercial script and the Instructions; one effect, therefore, of the ‘synthesis’ done by the Côrte-Real Committee while having to cope with the heterogeneity of the Timorese consignments.

In any case, the blank spaces in the catalogue expressed a dissonance between the physical objects, the information possibly associated with them at Timor, and Macao’s expectations about the unity and identity of the ‘collection’. Further evidence of this dissonance was the exclusion of the skulls from the exhibition held at the Macao Loyal Senate in 1882, before the Africa’s departure to Lisbon with the Timor collections on board. Trusting the reporter of O Macaense, human skulls were not put on display (cf. Anonymous,

74 Ibid, p. 71.
In an exhibition oriented to satisfying colonial interests in the capitalist exploration of the island, skulls were things ‘out of place’. Their mere visibility seemed to threaten the foundational order of the collection.

Still, although obviously unsuitable for commercial use, skulls could be given value as ‘scientific things’. The incorporation of skulls in the collection in Macao was possibly structured by their implicit categorization as objects with scientific utility. Soon after the exhibition, the Timorese collections were shipped to Lisbon. Captain Dores, former member of the Vaquinhas Committee, was put in charge of accompanying the collections, presenting them to the Ministry of Overseas Affairs, and guaranteeing that the objects were delivered to their respective destinations. In Portugal, Dores ensured the division of the collections between Coimbra and Lisbon, as previously decided in Macao. In fact, the Côrte-Real Committee determined the exact museum destination of each object and each pack beforehand. In the presence of ‘duplicates’ (for example, two samples of gold) both Coimbra and Lisbon were entitled to receive one exemplar. Yet, the division of objects between Lisbon and Coimbra principally followed a dichotomous categorisation

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77 Dores himself presented his private collection of Timorese birds to the naturalist F. Mattoso Santos, as a gift to the Zoological Museum of the Lisbon Polytechnic School. See Raphael das Dores, Como se adquire a fama ou história d'un caluniado (Lisbon, s.d.), pp. 84-85; F. Mattoso Santos, “Uma colleçao de aves de Timor”, Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa, 4ª série, 1883, 8:453-60.
opposing ‘economic usefulness’ to ‘scientific value’. Accordingly, for example, Côrte-Real explained that because butterflies, birds, reptiles, and insects were primarily things with embodied zoological knowledge, preference was given to Coimbra University in their acquisition.\(^7\) This criteria for separation corresponded to distinct regimes of value and the ‘usefulness’ of things. Objects endowed with economic value were to be sent to the Colonial Museum. Whereas objects perceived as valuable because they embodied pure knowledge constituted scientific things and as such should be sent, as Côrte-Real remarked, to ‘exclusively scientific museums’.\(^9\)

It was eventually in accordance with these criteria that the Côrte-Real Committee allocated the collection of human skulls to Coimbra University, rather than the Colonial Museum. Therefore, in 1882, the Coimbra University received a significant quantity of boxes and packs containing Timorese collections, forwarded by Lisbon from Macao. Along with the packs, Coimbra also received a register signed by José Alberto Côrte-Real. One of the boxes contained thirty-five skulls. About the box and the skulls the register kept a single record: ‘Box number 33 – 35 human skulls’.\(^8\) Thirty-five human skulls, number 197, box 33, origin Timor. This was all scholars at Coimbra could know about the

\(7\) Côrte-Real et al, “Relatório”(cit. n. 45), p. 6.
\(9\) Ibid, p. 66.
‘history’ of the collection, a very small world of references to rely on if they were to use the human skulls as a testimony to the ancient races of Timor.

Conclusion

Students of museum collections have pointed out that for an object grouping to count as a collection some meaningful purposes or ‘principles of organization’ have to be present. The concept of ‘collection script’ proposed here made these principles visible as general strategic designs, verbalized calculations that people inscribed into objects so as to distinguish them as collections and define what role they should play in the human world. In the light of this design, the presence of human skulls in Macao was neither expected nor calculated, and the rigidity of Macao’s collection script seemed to leave little meaningful space for human skulls. But scripts do not exhaust the activities that create a collection. This article has suggested that museum collections should be approached as unstable compositions of objects and a multitude of inscriptions and narrations crafted by the work of people across time and space. Therefore, the analysis of collections in circulation requires careful attention to how attachments between things and words, objects and their textual artifacts are contingently reconfigured. In effect, in the case of the Timor collection, the intertwinement of the skulls’ museum trajectory with the

story of one commercial collection was a contingent and equivocal event. Further contingencies, in addition, prevented the objects sent to the Lisbon Colonial Museum from producing the ambitious commercial results expected by their collectors in Macao. In 1883-4, the Portuguese government decided not to send a representation to the World Exhibition of Amsterdam, as it had been planned in 1877. The objects given to the Colonial Museum were then transferred to the museum stores of the Geographical Society of Lisbon. Although an assessment of the impact of this collection after 1882 would require further research, it is unlikely that the objects caused any national or international upsurge of commercial interest in Macanese and Timorese products.

In mapping the contingencies through which objects come about as collections, the analysis also brought to light the different types of work necessary to shape things as object collections in this segment of the collection’s trajectory: conservation, classification, and description. These notions have already been mobilized in the course of the

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82 According to Cantinho, part of the collections at the Colonial Museum travelled to the Geographical Society by 1883-4. In 1892, when the Colonial Museum merged with the Ethnographic Museum of the Lisbon Geographical Society, the remainder of the collections came into possession of the Geographical Society. Cantinho seems to suggest, however, that the Geographical Society eventually sent some of these collections to an agriculture exhibition in the early 1880s. See Cantinho, *Museu Etnográfico* (cit. n. 12), pp 274-75. In Coimbra, the first systematic catalogue of the ethnographic collections from Macao and Timor was produced as late as 1955. See F. B. Pacheco de Amorim and M. H. X. Morais, “Catálogo-inventário do Museu de Etnografia do Ultramar do Instituto de Antropologia da Universidade de Coimbra”, *Anais da Junta de Investigações de do Ultramar*, 1955, X(I); Maria do Rosário Martins, “Timor na coleção do Museu Antropológico da Universidade de Coimbra”, in *Os Espaços de um Império. Exhibition Catalog*, coord. A. M. Hespanha (Lisbon: CNCDP, 1999), pp. 247-250.
above analysis, and now require brief explanation. Conservation expresses the ‘enormous care’ that distinctly surrounds object collections.\(^83\) It refers to the actions of keeping object-bodies from harm, decay, loss, or waste (e.g., packing, storing, shipping, etc.), and which are directed to preserve and shape the bodies’ physical trajectory, the physicality and durability of an object-body, throughout space and time. Classification and description, on their turn, express the practices oriented to shape the objects’ epistemic trajectory, the process of shaping a physical object as an object of knowledge. If classification can refer to the actions of arranging and ordering physical objects according to a system of categories, description refers to the practices of verbalizing objects in speeches, correspondence, labels, catalogues, index cards, reports, sometimes on the object itself, etc. Conservation, classification, and description can draw more or less connected, even contradictory, trajectories. The relative autonomy of their respective careers makes the history of one collection a complex interaction between multiple activities. Perceived thus, furthermore, a collection must be defined as an unstable composition of words and things. In effect, the Macanese and Timorese collections were worked out not as simple compositions of things, but as complex combinations of physical objects and textual artefacts, object-bodies and bodies of texts. The epistemic trajectory of museum collections was crucially dependent on the trajectories of the texts that were expected

to remain associated with the objects (e.g., catalogues, labels, reports).

In order to understand the processes of constitution of museum objects as scientific things, then, careful attention must be paid to the ways in which the associations between things and words, objects and their textual artifacts are historically reconfigured and shaped. In this regard, the paper suggested that the wordless condition of some objects can result from the attempts to manage the inclusion of discordant elements within systems of classification and description. The analysis above also revealed how interactions between classification systems, descriptions, collection scripts, and physical objects twisted the life of human skulls as objects of knowledge. Sociologists Star and Bowker have argued that classifications can ‘break, twist, or torque’ the biographies and bodies of persons (Star and Bowker, 2000: 26, 190-94). Analogously, classification and description systems can also twist the lives of bodies of objects. The Timorese collections arrived physically damaged in Macao. They got broken on the trip. Yet, the collections also suffered epistemic twists while physically immobile in Macao. In effect, the epistemic condition of the skulls sent from Timor was drastically twisted as it encountered the systems of classification and description of collections.

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proposed by the Macao Committee. Drastic twists in the skulls’ links to words and texts took place in Macao. There, skulls emerged as things without words. The skulls were in dissonance with Macao’s principles of organization and classification of the collection and accordingly the physical objects were emptied of description. There, too, skulls emerged as things without Timor’s texts. In the consignment sent to Portugal, the Macao Committee dissociated the skulls from actual documentation produced at Timor by the other Committees. The movement of skulls to Portugal was nonetheless made possible by the implicit understanding of their scientific utility. They were eventually expected to re-surface as wordy things the moment they were made to speak somewhere else, in the Coimbra museum, perhaps, through the voice of anthropologists. Yet, henceforth the Coimbra scholars had to cope with an inescapable fact. They had in their possession a collection of thirty-five human skulls virtually without words. Further events would reveal that indeed such an apparently minor fracture was to imply major consequences. In the 1930s, the absence of ‘information’ about the skulls was to be effectively used to contest the identity of the crania as authentic representatives of ‘Timorese natives’. For, if not previously attached to words, the crania in the museum were likely to become problematic anthropological objects.