Epilogue

In February 1619, the last act in the controversy between Nobili and Fernandes was concluded. The dispute, in fact, was no longer between the two Jesuits, but involved the entire Portuguese ecclesiastical hierarchy in India. Assembled in the Archbishop's palace were four Jesuit theologians, three of whom were Portuguese—André Palmeyro, the Visitor of the Province and a former student of one of the greatest Jesuit theologians, Francisco Suarez; Balthasar Garcia; Jerónimo Costa; and Antonio Albertino, an Italian Jesuit reputedly well-versed in Probabilism. The Archbishop of Goa, Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa also invited five Goan and three Portuguese secular priests as well as two members from each of the major monastic communities in Goa—Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians. Inevitably, the two Inquisitors, and Roberto Nobili and Francisco Ros, the Archbishop of Cranganore, both of whom arrived from Cochin and were 'the accused' in the 'process', completed the picture. Conspicuously absent was Gonçalo Fernandes, whose very wounded missionary and Portuguese pride kindled the ardent dispute about to be decided for good, as both parties hoped, with the total destruction (theological, epistemological, political) of the other.[1] All Nobili's biographers, Cronin, Rajamanickam, Saulière and others, reenacted the scene as a typical inquisitorial interrogation with direct and indirect dialogues exchanged between the antagonists embedded within a continuous narrative development, from the 'false' accusation to its triumphant resolution in behalf of Nobili's method. Moreover, while Fernandes's absence was not even acknowledged,

[1] Gonçalo Fernandes was almost octogenarian, but, from what we know, still travelled long distances on foot. Therefore, had he been invited or allowed to come to Goa, Fernandes would have probably testified against Nobili. Such embarrassment was avoided by simply removing him from the final act. Born in 1541 in Lisbon, he died on 6 April, 1621 in Tuticorin. See the necrology written by Jacinto Perreira in 1621, ARSI, Goa 33 II, f. 663.

they all quoted Nobili's demand addressed to the solemn assembly, and promptly refused by the Archbishop, to hear learned Brahmans' opinion concerning the disputed significations of the controversial indigenous materials and signs.

If Brahman voices were not allowed into the formal hearing, they were present through the Jesuits themselves, as not only Nobili openly reported to the Pope that he 'professed to be an Italian Brahman, for Brahman means a learned man, and one who had renounced the world'[2], but, in fact, all the Jesuit theologians present sided with Nobili, espousing thus Nobili's Brahmanical (or what he thought was Brahmanical) conceptualization of the Indian cultural idiom. The juxtaposition of Brahmans and Jesuit theologians is worked out in a series of analogies which are mostly reiterations of Nobili's stock arguments. The linguistic analogy reposes on the fact that they both use a special, difficult to learn, technical and divinely inspired language—Latin and Sanskrit, 'the Latin of the country'. The social analogy is easily deduced since the expensive education needed for acquiring proficiency in these languages, as can be attested in European tradition at least, ennobled their 'owners', if they were not already 'noble'.[3] The next analogy in line is based on the insistent reliance of Brahmans on written texts, or their literacy, since they constantly read 'books and codices... which are deeply ingrained in their souls and stamped in their minds'. European and Indian elite institutions, whether royal courts of the Nāyakas or religious schools/retreats (*maṭam*), encouraged literary production, the styles and forms of which varied with time, and other aesthetic projects (art, architecture, etc.), because these were the pillars of their own status evaluation and the constitutive elements of their political legitimacy.[4]

[2] Nobili, R. to Pope Paul V, (Lat.), Goa, 15 February, 1619, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 286–90. S. Rajamanickam published Saulière's English translation in 'The Goa Conference of 1619', *Indian Church History Review*, vol. II, no. 2, 1968.

[3] In Europe, most of the learned Latinists were able to choose either an ecclesiastical career or a courtly employment. In both cases, their modest social background was relatively easily eclipsed.

[4] On the topic of the aesthetic production of power and legitimation in early modern Europe, the bibliography is impressive. For general semiotic theory see, for example, Marin, L., *Le portrait du roi*, Paris, 1983 and Marin, *Des pouvoirs de l'image*; For studies on Jesuit political imaginary and spiritual iconography, see Wittkower, R. and Jaffe, I., eds, *Baroque Art: The Jesuit Contribution*, New York, 1972; Lucas, T., ed., *Saint, Site, and Sacred Strategy: Ignatius, Rome, and Jesuit Urbanism*, Vatican City, 1990; Levy, E.,

However, while European and Indian 'high' culture most usefully converge in Nobili's presentation, European and Indian vernacular cultures provide the mirror of difference. Cultural and social agencies fuelling the daily existence of the common people are constructed as segmented, genetically predetermined, empirically diversified and fluid. Tinkering with the difference was seen by Nobili as a dangerous initiative. Thus, he reported to Paul V, 'the Indians who live in Portuguese territory dress and live in Portuguese style and run no risk of losing their status as is the case with the neophytes who are subject to Hindu Princes'.[5] The social insignia and customs divide and distinguish local lineage groupings (*stirps*) and order them on a hierarchical scale according to their intrinsic nobility. A neophyte who did not display his ancestral honourific markers would immediately fall into social ignominy. The colourful 'ethnographic' world of indigenous cultural or, in Nobili's vocabulary, 'political' differences was communicated to the solemn assembly in Goa through a treatise, written by Nobili, but signed by Ros, *'Narratio Fundamentorum, quibus Madurensis Missionibus institutum caeptum est'*.

And a very special text it was, according to Nobili, since it succeeded in reversing the opinions of the most learned among the theological investigators. André Palmeyro thus conceded that

> while I was in Coimbra, I publicly taught the contrary opinion; I hated the thread with a more than Vatinian hate....But after weighing the arguments and reasons of Father Roberto, I felt bound to give in and change my opinion....[6]

Nobili's text was, therefore, powerfully persuasive and capable of 'converting' opinions, convincing incredulous sceptics and sweeping away suspicions. Even the Inquisitor, Dom João Fernando de Almeyda, succumbed to its scriptural force:

> I have read and studied the treatise *Narratio fundamentorum* and have come to the conclusion that the emblems (*signa*) under discussion, being stripped

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'Reproduction in the 'Cultic Era' of Art: Pierre Legros's Statue of Stanislas Kostka', *Representations*, no. 58, Spring, 1997. For the South Indian case, see Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *The Symbols of Substance*; Freeman, R. 'Rubies and Coral: The Lapidary Crafting of Language in Kerala', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, no. 1, February, 1998.

[5] Nobili to Pope Paul V (Lat.), Goa, 15 February, 1619, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 286–90.

[6] Ibid.

of all superstitious ceremonies and rites, not only may, but also should be allowed to the neophytes of Madurai.

Nobili's self-serving *verbatim* quotations of other peoples' opinions were a typical epistolary strategy of discursive appropriation and ventriloquy. From the mouth of an Inquisitor, this was not an innocent *aviso*, but a legal pronouncement carrying the weight of the sword of justice.

The only way of resisting or evading the 'enchanting' power of the *Narratio fundamentorum* was to refuse to as much as glance at it. This is precisely what Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa and his non-Jesuit clique (the secular priests and the members of religious orders) did. Unenlightened by his texts, according to Nobili, they were speechless, just as were those 'confused' gentiles of early apostolic times. In this double move of inversion and analogy, he gestures towards Goan secular priests in order to unmask them as true pagans. Thus, 'from their corner they supported that accusation (by the Archbishop) with loud and confused clamors'. Subtly and ambiguously, in fact, the whole Portuguese enclave of Goa is charged with paganism because most of these priests 'had never gone beyond Portuguese territory, nor beyond the darkness of their own ignorance'.

From Nobili's letter to the Pope it becomes clear that the categories designating and distinguishing between *Christianity*, the true religion, and *paganism*, superstition and diabolical invention, constantly undergo a complex ideological positioning. And it is only through the reflexive capacity of language and texts that an order—epistemological, in this case—can be restored and reinscribed in significations and substances. In many ways, Jesuit missionary texts from 'dangerous' fieldwork sites such as Madurai, Agra or Beijing are constructed as 'contact zones' or *buffer texts*, between the indescriptable materiality of a foreign humanity and its landscape and the equally confusing home base.[7] In a fine textual weaving and patterning, these controlled hybrid spaces (of texts) serve to distil, preserve and rewrite missionary experiences in a double turn of the shuttle from local to global, and *vice versa*. In addition, they seek, retrospectively, to authorize and, prospectively, to foster a Jesuit way/mode of proceeding (*noster modus procedendi* or *nuestro modo de proceder*) folding neatly into a Jesuit mode of writing, that ramifies in at least four basic tropological and narrative frameworks as have been examined in the

[7] Pratt, M.L., *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routlege, 1992; Clifford, J., *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., 1997.

preceding chapters. The buffer texts, be they principally ethnographic window-shops, theatrical *mises en scène*, inquisitorial inquiries, polemical arguments, self-reflexive poses or utopian 'machines', required at every point more than factual and empirical upholstery. Because of their ever threatened signification, they required an aura of authenticity, which in the course of time slipped from theological formalism towards aesthetic display and, finally, into 'scientific' conduits of Enlightenment.

Even if the writing modes—in themselves neither more nor less than modes of communication—were prefabricated templates for directing Jesuit missionary action in the world, they were not necessarily and simply repositories of dominant effects of elite social power, of social relations involving conditions of coercion, hegemony, radical inequality and orientalizing, hammered into historical research by post-structuralist, post-colonial critique. For Jesuit missionaries, an act of writing was a thaumaturgical experience, an exorcism and expurgation of unbearable otherness which progressively invaded and possessed their interiors and exteriors. Who possessed, dominated, converted whom is uncertain, as Nobili's case clearly showed. If only interior intention and determination validates the exterior trappings, everything is possible in the best of all worlds. Thus the Jesuit missionaries in Madurai assumed an unapologetically fluid identity which, coincidentally, fits well perhaps in the decentred, post-industrial cultural idiom of the 20th century *fin de siècle*. In the pre-modern Counter-Reformation context, however, Jesuit missionary strategies were at permanent risk of institutional slippages with formidable consequences.

By 1621, the tide of theological and ecclesiastical opinion had turned decisively against Nobili's detractors when the Inquisitor General in Lisbon, Dom Fernão Martins de Mascarenhas, forwarded to the Pope Paul V a positive opinion concerning Nobili's case. Attached to his inquisitorial dossier were the signatures of three bishops and other members of the Inquisition in Portugal and in Spain.[8] Subsequently, the opinion of the Roman theologians appointed by the Cardinals to study the matter was also largely favourable.

[8] PFA, Rome, Miscellanee Varie, vol. VI, ff. 2–7, and 110–81. See also, Metzler, J., O.M.I, 'La situazione della Chiesa missionaria', *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide memoria rerum, 350 anni a servizio delle missioni*, vol. I/1, 1622– 1700, Herder, Rom-Freiburg-Wien, 1972, pp. 28–9.

Peter Lombard (1555–1624), the Archbishop of Armagh was one of the three theologians consulted. In his thirty-page treatise—*De controversia mota in Orientali India, quoad Brachmanes recipiendos ad baptismum Christi Domini, et Christiane religionis professionem, nominatim in civitate et regione Madurensi, quae sita est in Malabarico tractu mediterraneo, regibus ethinicis seu gentilibus subiecto, censura et suffragium*[9]—, he reiterated by way of elegant theological and scholastic argumentation the principal propositions defined and framed by Roberto Nobili. In this text, preserved in the Archives of the Propaganda Fide, the institution which came officially into existence on 6 January, 1622, inaugurated by the Pope Gregory XV (Alessandro Ludovisi), Lombard discussed in detail the question of Brahman 'noble' signs.[10] His authoritative conclusion, accompanied by a pro-Nobili vote, confirmed that the thread (*linea*), the tuft of hair (*curumby*), sandal paste (*sandalum*), and the ablutions (*lavatorias*) were 'from their inception signs and marks of political nobility' and not of superstition or of the cult of idols.[11]

Well informed about the controversy, about its protagonists and theological implications, the learned theologian Lombard passionately defended, surpassing even Nobili, the importance of maintaining, for the purpose of evangelization, the distinction between *nobiles* and *plebeii*. Crystallized in and through ecclesiastical institutions by the end of the 16th and during the early 17th centuries, the elitist missionary bias was built into the very foundations of the Propaganda Fide.[12]

[9] 'A judgement and a vote concerning the controversy set in motion in the East Indies, the extent to which the Brahmans should be receiving baptism of the Lord Jesus and the profession of the Christian religion, especially in the city and the region of Madurai which is located in the interior territory in Malabar, subjected to pagan or indigenous kings', PFA, Rome, *Scritture originali riferite nelle Congregazioni Generali* (abbreviated SOCG), *Indie*, vol. 190 (1636), ff. 231–46. The original Latin text is published by Dahmen, P., S.I. and Gladbach, M., 'Le "votum" de Pierre Lombard, Archevêque d'Armagh et la controverse autour de Robert de Nobili', AHSI, vol. IV, Rome, 1935.

[10] The twofold goal of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith was to achieve union with the Protestant and Orthodox Churches and to promote and organize missions among the non-Christians. Metzler, Josef, 'Foundation of the Congregation "de Propaganda Fide" by Gregory XV', in *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide memoria rerum, 350 anni a servizio delle missioni*, vol. I/1, 1622–1700, Herder, Rom-Freiburg-Wien, 1972, pp. 79–111.

[11] PFA, Rome, SOCG, *Indie*, vol. 190 (1636), f. 245.

[12] The sudden ideological void between the elite and popular culture clearly detectable from the early 16th century is variously defined by historians. Economic, geo-

Nobili's case and his missionary experience and method provided a basic blueprint for the new wave of missionary activity to be launched from Rome. The founders of the Sacra Congregatio 'de Propaganda Fide' saw in Nobili a model of the apostolic worker. In the first circular announcing the creation of the Congregation (15 January, 1622), Monsignor Francesco Ingoli, its famous Secretary emphasized that the intention was 'to seek the conversion of infidels along smooth paths *(per le vie soavi)*', without violence or through ecclesiastical tribunals, through 'preaching, teaching and discussion'. The gentiles were to be 'attracted' without noise, 'in gentle silence'.[13]

It is important to note that because of the geographical and jurisdictional limitations imposed by the Portuguese padroado, the Propaganda missionaries were sent exclusively to the territories controlled by non-European, non-Christian rulers, structurally similar to the Madurai mission. At least in principle, European geo-politics had to be kept away from the project of evangelization. For the same reason, indigenous customs were to be respected and incorporated into Catholicism, stimulating at the same time the creation of the native clergy, recruited almost exclusively from among the 'natural leaders' of the local communities. These ideas sound very familiar to historians of the early Jesuit missionary expansion in Asia, since they were subject to debates and controversies throughout the late 16th century. In an epistemologically and historically significant way, in the transfer of ethnographic knowledge and master conceptions between Jesuit and Propaganda Fide missionaries, the role of Brahmans and Brahmanism was further underscored. As a kind of fetish

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graphical and religious parameters combined with the increasing ability of the state apparatus to centralize and directly control the institutions of social and economic coercion (revenue collection, police, censure, etc.) caused in the long run not only the repression of popular culture, but also the emergence of 'mass' culture in the second half of the 17th century. See Muchembled, R., *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne* (XVe–XVIIIe siècles), Paris, 1978. According to de Certeau, popular culture was not the only loser in the process of absolutist state formation. The old nobility (of the robe) was equally divested of its ancient prerogatives and political power. Many of these redirected their social and psychological energies towards mysticism and religious utopia. Certeau, *La fable mystique*, pp. 36–44; See also Goldmann, L, *Le Dieu caché*, Paris, 1955.

[13] Metzler, 'Foundation of the Congregation "de Propaganda Fide", by Gregory XV', pp. 103–4.

of civility, the Brahmans were taken to stand for and/or represent the whole, and became the Noble Savages of the East Indies.[14]

While Nobili ennobled the Brahmans in his texts, his name 'ennobled' at least some of his Brahman converts. Bonifacio Xastri, one of the rebel converts who testified against Nobili in 1614 and retracted his testimony in 1617, seems to have moved to Goa and bestowed the 'Nobili' family name on his descendants. The tomb inscription in the church of Santa Luzia, the 'indigenous' parish in the southern part of the city of Goa, indicates the date of death, 21 September, 1691, of 'Maria Nobre, the wife of João Gomes and the daughter of the late Bonifacio Xastre, doctor from the kingdom of Madurai, catechist and a learned man in his sect. He preached against it, converted to our Holy Catholic faith and converted many pagans.'[15] The fact that the Italian variant of the name had been 'transliterated' into the Portuguese variant signals that Bonifacio's Christian children attached a particular social value, not to Nobili's family name, since the Italian missionary is not even mentioned as Bonifacio's 'godfather', but to the social status the name seems to have implied. Having lost, perhaps, his 'noble' status in Madurai due to his conversion to Catholicism, Bonifacio or his descendants appropriated its equivalent in Goa.

The tomb inscription also indicates that Bonifacio Xastri was an expert in local religious texts, as well as having been their Christian critic and commentator. From the controversy between Nobili and Fernandes, on the other hand, we know that he gave contradictory answers to the burning question of 'political signs'—the thread, sandal paste, the tuft of hair, etc.—by first confirming Nobili's

[14] See White, H., 'The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish', *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, 1978. Technically, the concept of the Noble Savage was not specifically applied to the Brahmans during the 18th century when it was used to 'undermine the idea of nobility itself' and served, henceforth, as a European social critique of primarily European 'aristocratic' institutions. Nevertheless, the ongoing debate between French Jesuits and the *philosophes* concerning the origin and the nature of religion, morals and social institutions was fuelled by the discovery and interpretation of the Brahmanical classical texts and categories. See Murr, S., 'Les jésuites en Inde au XVIIIe siècle; Praxis, utopie et préanthropologie', *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, vol. 56, no. 1, January–March, 1986; Murr, S., 'Généalogies et analogies entre paganisme ancien et "gentilité des Indes" dans l'apologétique jésuite au siècle des Lumières', *Les religions du paganisme antique dans l'Europe chétienne; XVIe–XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, 1988.

[15] *O Oriente Português*, vol. 3, Nova Goa, 1908, p. 347.

arguments, then Fernandes's, and then again Nobili's. Hence, if Jesuit texts were zones of contact or buffer zones, their Brahman informants were their contact brokers or buffer agents who crucially shaped the initial encounter by helping reconstruct or reinvent the 'classical' Indian past and literature.

By the same token, Jesuit missionaries endeavoured to appropriate, possess and control the indigenous textual and cultural tradition by compiling dictionaries and grammars, by translating and refuting non-Christian concepts, and by projecting it on to a larger European theological and teleological frame. The play of differences, analogies and allegories varied with each and every epistemological move inscribed in the chessboard of time. 'Brahmanical' knowledge, as it came to be generally defined, would thus resemble, oppose or configure European expectations, depending on political and geographical circumstances, and tropological transformations.[16] Under the rubric of the rise of Orientalist discourse and Indological disciplines, this process is well documented if not always well understood.[17]

But there is another synthesis or reconstruction which still eludes students of the Jesuit missionary limelight zones in India. A gigantic effort to transpose the European Christian past into various Indian linguistic and cultural idioms, as well as its local reception and adaptation, is largely uncharted territory. Nobili's texts—catechisms, prayers, sermons, theological treatises, life of Jesus, etc.—in Tamil, Sanskrit and Telugu are, together with Giuseppe Constanzo Beschi's Tamil literary production in the middle of the 18th century, one of the most impressive Jesuit missionary *oeuvres*.[18]

After 1623, when Pope Gregory XV issued his approval of Nobili's method in the bull Romane Sedis Antistes—at least inasmuch as it concerned the use of the thread, sandal paste, the tuft of hair and the ablutions by the new converts in Madurai—, the Italian missionary devoted his literary talents exclusively to his South Indian audience. The Jesuit communication and textual skills which he displayed in his

[16] White, H., 'The Tropics of History', *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, 1978.

[17] See for example, Breckenridge and van der Veer, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*.

[18] Meenakshisundaram, K., *The Contribution of European Scholars to Tamil*, Madras, 1974; Houper, J., S.J., *Constantius Joseph Beschi S.J., Popularly Known as Veeramamunivar*, Tiruchchirappalli, 1980; Rajamanickam, *The First Oriental Scholar*, pp. 119–46.

European letters and treatises prepared him only partially for the composition of his Tamil, Sanskrit and Telugu works. For example, the fact that he wrote principally prose and, wherever possible, substituted Sanskrit 'theological' terms in his Tamil texts might not have been the best idiom of religious expression. Impossible to memorize, recite or sing, Nobili's Tamil Christian texts were never widely known or locally rooted. Beschi, on the other hand, combined Tamil classical metres with Christian stories, images and figures. Citations from *Tēmpāvaṇi*, his lengthy versified Tamil poem recounting the life of St Joseph, are still part of the living Tamil Christian tradition.[19]

The failure of Nobili's Tamil prose was, nevertheless, compensated by his well thought out and exemplary pose. He continued to maintain his Brahman sannyāsi persona through vegetarian diet, appropriate dress code and by following a strict grammar of gestures at all times and on all occasions.[20] His striving for an authentic Indian body Christian was a total project of cultural translation or, in contemporary Jesuit terminology, inculturation.[21]

Even if the dispute sprang up, became turbulent and subsided in the context of a particular configuration of power, which involved European and South Indian political actors and religious specialists in the midst of the torrents of voices from the mission, Jesuit reconstruction of the Brahmanical past and 'system' is not a product of some orientalizing hegemonic discourse such as we have come to expect in early modern European encounters *in partibus infidelium*. Nobili's act of cultural translation was the result of a double move. The first was his 'trust in the other', to borrow George Steiner's idea, that there is a meaning out there to be transferred, mapped and appropriated. The second was his conviction that, once brought into contact with others, human inventions and institutions cannot possess or sustain autonomous semantic fields. The convertability of things and thoughts is postulated as unlimited, hence, the ambiguity of Nobili's own psychological and epistemological choices and his seemingly unstable position on the threshold of cultures.

[19] Gnanapragasam, V.M, *Contribution of Fr. Beschi to Tamil*, PhD dissertation, University of Madras, 1965.

[20] Even in the Jesuit professed house in Goa, Nobili ate the food cooked by his Brahman cook.

[21] Clémentin-Ojha, C., 'Indianisation et enracinement: les enjeux de l'inculturalion de l'Église en Inde', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, tome 80.1, Paris, 1993.

In an endless effort of re-tying (*re-ligio*) the strands of Indian alterity in order to prepare the ground for the grafting of Christian experience, the Jesuits forged—through disputes, discussions and writing—instruments (for better or worse) for understanding Indian social and cultural structures. However, the frontline between fiction and fact was a wide enough no-man's-land for rhetorical, theological, ethnographical and historicist experimentation. The fabulous, or the speculative and descriptive, were not yet absolute alternatives, while the degrees of certainty and comprehension often relied on poetic wisdom.

It was only with the establishment of British colonial institutions that the Jesuit 'nomadic' knowledge of India—circulating in letters and moving from one learned treatise to another—became sedentarized through scientific procedures, legal administration and policing. And even when British 'scientific' theories and methods threatened to undermine early Jesuit social intuitions and cultural conceptions, the learned 'nobles', first the Brahmans than other local literati, were there again to translate, advise and interpret for those who were eager or curious enough to know the 'facts'.

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Photostats and translations into English and French of some of the letters concerning the controversy between Fernandes and Nobili.

Photostat 348a: *'Decisio controversiae in India agitatae circa gestationem seu usum lineae, caṗillamenti et aliorum stemmatum, neophytis permittendum, vel non permittendum, illorum Ethnicorum conversioni non solum perutilis, sed maximo necessaria'*; original in Ajuda, Lisbon, Cod. 49–V-7.

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OXFORD INDIA PAPERBACKS

DISPUTED MISSION

Ines G. Županov

Disputed Mission offers a fresh perspective on the social and cultural laboratories that were Jesuit missions in pre-colonial South India. Without Portuguese military support confined to Goa and other trade enclaves along the east and west coast of India, the missionaries in the heart of Tamil country, found themselves trapped under the jurisdiction of the local kings— such as the Nakaka of Madurai— with very little space for political proselytizing manoeuvring, and at the same time free from the increasingly impoverished and ossified Portuguese ecclesiastical hierarchy in Goa.

Confronted with social and cultural idioms that appeared to them as both strange and familiar, Jesuit missionaries embarked on a titanic, utopian, and somewhat naïve project of cultural translation, social engineering and ethnographic description. Before they could effectively convert and establish spiritual and political authority over souls and bodies, they had to ascertain that they possessed the right knowledge of Indian culture.

By focusing on a dispute between two missionaries in Madurai in the beginning of the seventeenth century, this book chronicles the first efforts at explaining the origin, structure and nature of local religious practices.

This book will be of great interest to historians of colonial India and scholars of religious studies and comparative religion.

Ines G. Županov is a Research Fellow at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. She has taught early modern history at the University of California at Berkeley, at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

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