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# DISPUTED MISSION

Jesuit Experiments and  
Brahmanical Knowledge in  
Seventeenth-century India

**INES G. ŽUPANOV**

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## Glossary

### Note on Transliteration and Spelling of Non-English Words

**F**or Latin, Italian and Portuguese words, I have used both contemporary orthography and, when judged necessary, the orthography of the documentary sources.

In principle, Tamil words (names, places, concepts) are transliterated according to the system used in the Madras University Tamil Lexicon.

The exceptions to this rule are: 1) commonly accepted forms in English usage, and 2) transcription into Portuguese, Italian and Latin found in the primary sources.

<i>Aiyer</i> [or <i>Ayer, Aier</i> ]	[Tamil] <i>aiyar</i> : Priest, father, superior, king, a Śaiva Brahman, Nobili's priestly Tamil title.
<i>amman</i>	[Tamil] mother, goddess
<i>Badagà</i> [or <i>Vaduga</i> ]	[Tamil] <i>Vatuku</i> : Telugu country. In missionary texts it is both ethnic and linguistic designation
<i>bezoar</i>	[Port.] a stone with healing properties
<i>cavi</i>	[Tamil] <i>kāvi</i> : red ochre garment worn by the religious mendicants
<i>ceita</i> [or <i>seita</i> ]	[Port.] A religious sect. Applied to non-Christians faiths. Within Hinduism, the Jesuits in Madurai distinguished different sects. Islam is also a sect
<i>christãos da terra</i>	[Port.] Country Christians refers to Syrian Christians in Kerala
<i>curu</i> [or <i>guru</i> ]	[Tamil] <i>kuru</i> : Religious teacher, a priest. Also applied to a Jesuit missionary

<i>ethnicus</i>	[Lat.] Generic Christian name for a non-Christian, pagan
<i>frangui</i> [or <i>fringue</i> , <i>frangue</i> ]	[Port.] A name applied by people in South India to all foreigners, especially Portuguese and Christians. Sometimes Muslims were also included
<i>gentio</i>	[Port.] Generic Christian name for a non-Christian, pagan
<i>Grantham</i> [or <i>guirandão</i> ]	[Tamil] <i>kirantam</i> : A script in which Sanskrit was written in South India. For the Jesuits it meant simply Sanskrit
<i>hijuela</i>	[Spanish] Little daughter; a private annex to the main Jesuit missionary letter
<i>iraivan</i>	[Tamil] King, god
<i>kovil</i>	[Tamil] temple
<i>kudumi</i> [or <i>koromi</i> , <i>corumbi</i> ]	[Tamil] <i>kuṭumi</i> : a lock or tuft of hair on the head of a Brahman
<i>leggi</i>	[It.] Referring to laws, but also more specifically to Christian laws, to the Bible. The Vedas were often referred to as laws by Jesuit missionaries in Madurai
<i>linea</i>	[Latin] A thread, a Brahman thread, [in Port.] <i>linha</i>
<i>lotiones corporis</i>	[Latin] Body ablutions
<i>madam</i>	[Tamil] <i>maṭam</i> : a college or school for religious instruction, a monastery, a mutt
<i>Malavar</i>	[Port.] Commonly used as adjective designating vaguely people living on the Malabar coast, it was also used for Tamil (Malabar Tamil language)
<i>máquina</i>	[Port.] Machine, invention, war machine, system
<i>mariyātai</i>	[Tamil] Ceremonial 'honours'
<i>metempsychosis</i>	[Greek] Transmigration of the soul [Tamil] <i>punarjēṇma ākṣēpam</i>
<i>Mouro</i>	[Port.] A generic term for a Muslim
<i>ñāṇasnāṇam</i>	[Tamil] Spiritual bath, baptism
<i>ole</i>	[Tamil] <i>ōlai</i> : palm leaf used for writing

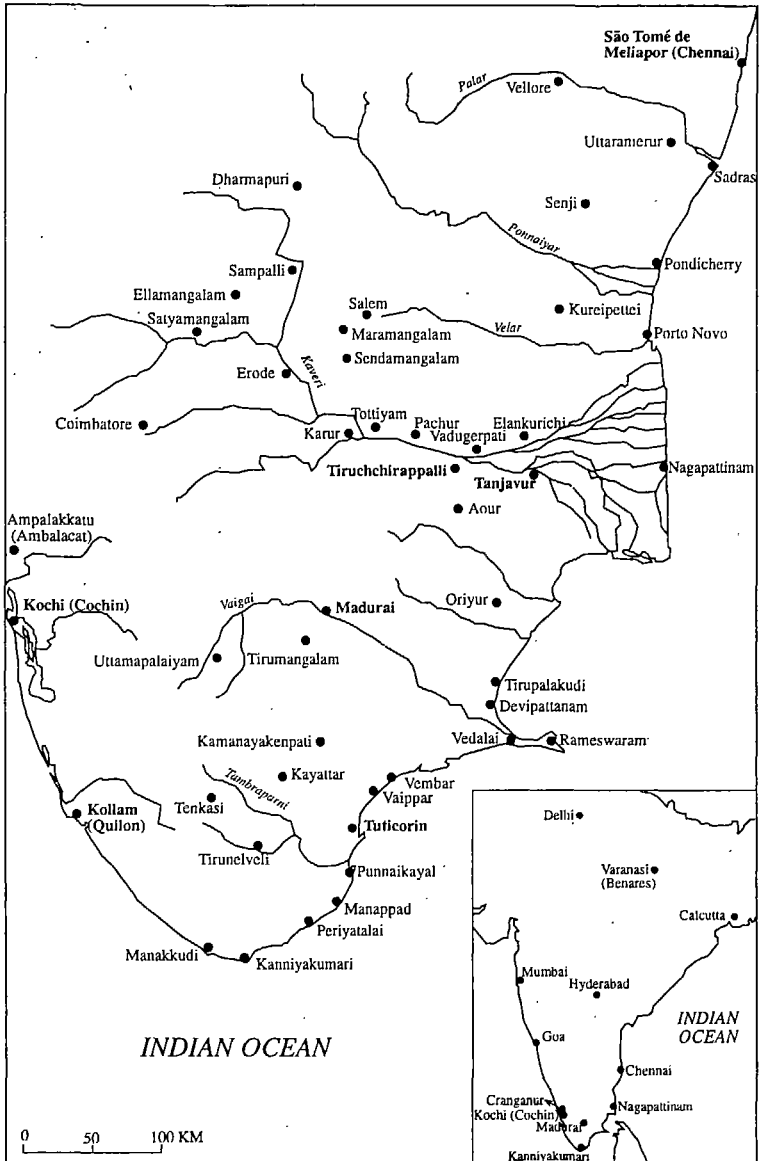
<i>padi, pasu, pāsam</i>	[Tamil] <i>pati, pacu, pācam</i> : the lord, the soul and the bond are fundamental philosophical/theological concepts of Śaiva Siddhānta
<i>padroado</i>	[Port.] Patronage; Portuguese royal patronage of ecclesiastical institutions overseas
<i>pagoda</i>	[Port.] Non-Christian temple. Also, designating a non-Christian idol or god. Corruption of <i>pakavati</i> [Tamil]. The goddess of virtue, Parvati, Durga
<i>pālaiyakkārars</i>	[Tamil] <i>Poligars</i> , as they came to be known in British colonial documents, were military commanders of the fortresses, or the 'little kingdoms'
<i>panam</i> [or <i>panāo, fanāo</i> ]	[Tamil] <i>paṇam</i> : money, small golden or silver coin used in India, also called fanam
<i>pandara[m]</i>	[Tamil] <i>paṇṭāram</i> : a devotee of the Śaiva sect, a non-Brahman Śaiva priest
<i>pandarasuami</i>	[Tamil] <i>paṇṭāracāmi</i> : title of one type of Jesuit missionaries in the Madurai mission
<i>paṇṭikai</i>	[Tamil] festival, a feast-day
<i>parangue, parangui</i>	see <i>frangui</i>
<i>parecer</i>	[Port.] opinion, theological opinion or statement
<i>pongāl</i>	[Tamil] <i>poṅkal</i> : boiling, bubbling, a festival in honour of sun in January
<i>praelectio</i>	[Latin] lecture
<i>Saniases</i> [or <i>Saneazes, Sanias</i> ]	[Skt.] <i>sannyāsi</i> (in Tamil <i>caṇṇiyāci</i> ): an ascetic, a monk, a celibate; a <i>Brahman sannyāsi</i> was a title of one type of Jesuit missionaries in the Madurai mission
<i>stirps</i>	[Latin] lineage, family, extended family, clan. Often translated as caste
<i>tampirān</i>	[Tamil] A master, lord, king, non-Brahman monk of Śaiva mutt. In the 16th century, Jesuit missionaries on the Fishery coast used the term to designate Christian god. Roberto Nobili opposed it
<i>tilakam</i>	[Tamil] Vermilion, a spot or point of sandal and vermilion on the forehead of Śaivas, etc
<i>tiruvīḷa</i>	[Tamil] a temple festival



## *Abbreviations*

AHSI	Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu, Rome (journal)
ARSI	Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome (Jesuit Archives)
<i>DI</i>	<i>Documenta Indica</i>
It.	Italian
Lat.	Latin
MHSI	Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu
PFA	Archivio Storico della Congregazione 'de Propaganda Fide', Rome
Port.	Portuguese
Skt.	Sanskrit
SOCG	Scritture originali riferite nelle Congregazioni Generali





Jesuit mission territory in South India (17th Century)

## Prologue:

### *I. Of Men, Letters, and Cultural Latitudes*

#### The Arrival at the Mission

In the life of a saint, destiny and destination neatly coincide. In 1605, glancing from aboard *São Jacinto*, a young Jesuit missionary, Roberto Nobili, educated in Rome must have felt, as he saw the littoral of the Konkan coast and the Portuguese colonial town of Goa approaching, the same urgency of discovering a corresponding geographical mission to complement his spiritual ambitions.<sup>1</sup> Years of adolescent trials were behind him. As the eldest son and heir of an aristocratic family from Montepulciano, his decision early in life to join the Society of Jesus and become a missionary in India had initially met with disapproval from his kinsmen.<sup>2</sup> Only after a series of dramatic escapes and mysterious concealment after the fashion of a would-be saint (or martyr), his family finally bowed to his wishes. He then successfully completed the novitiate training in Naples and theological studies in Rome before leaving Europe for good.<sup>3</sup>

As soon as he had reached his destination, the Asian province of the Society of Jesus, Nobili prayed fervently for 'new and wonderful

<sup>1</sup> Wicki, J., S.I., 'Liste der Jesuiten-Indienfahrer, 1541–1758', *Aufsätze zur Portugiesischen Kulturgeschichte*, 7, Münster, 1967, pp. 252–450; See also, Xavier, M., S.J. *Compêndio Universal de todos os visos-reys, gouernadores, capitães geraes, capitães mores, capitães de naos...que partirão de Lisboa para a Índia Oriental (1497–1683)*, Nova Goa, 1917, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Patignani, G. A. (continued by Boero, G.), *Menologio di pie memorie d'alcuni religiosi della Compagnia di Gesù che fiorirono in virtù e santità*, Rome, 1859, vol. 1, p. 295; On Nobili's growing up in Italy, see a well written and informed biography by Vincent Cronin, *A Pearl to India: The Life of Roberto de Nobili*, New York, 1959.

<sup>3</sup> Proenza (Antão de) to Nickel (Gosvino[Goswin]), (Port.) Kandalur, 20 October, 1656, *Annua da Missão de Madurè, 1655, 1656*, Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (hereafter ARSI), Goa 53, ff. 239–58.

## 2 • *Disputed Mission*

signs of God's grace', plentiful conversions, spectacular miracles and, if he were lucky, martyrdom and sainthood.<sup>4</sup> Equipped with the curiosity of a seventeenth-century 'scientist' combined with the speculative imagination of a theologian, he was both ready to understand and to trample underfoot all vestiges of 'paganism' that came his way.<sup>5</sup> With its stifling Portuguese administration, colonial lifestyle and ossified ecclesiastical institutions, Goa had little to offer to an ambitious and 'idealistic' young Jesuit. Like Francis Xavier, the first Jesuit missionary in India half a century earlier, Nobili was eager to escape church hierarchies, bishops, and competing missionary groups that restricted one's breathing space in the colonial setting. Goa, the Rome of the Orient, lacked the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the metropolitan papal capital. Personal interactions were often intense and prone to conflict, but ultimately conformist. Hence, in search for his 'mission', Nobili followed in the steps of Xavier and moved farther south.

From Goa, he sailed to Cochin, another important, but smaller, Portuguese stronghold on the Malabar coast. Within the city walls, besides the Jesuit church of São Paulo (Sam Paullo) and the college of Madre de Deos where he stayed, Nobili surely visited the cathedral, at least five parish churches, and three monasteries belonging to Franciscan, Dominican and Augustinian friars.<sup>6</sup> Three months later, however, he moved to the Fishery coast, a long sandy beach stretching from Kanniyākumari to Rameswaram, where half a century earlier Francis Xavier (1542–44) achieved fame as an apostle among the

<sup>4</sup> On the economy of divine signs and their political, social and psychological implication, see *Les Signes de dieu aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, (Actes du colloque), Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines de l'Université Blaise-Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> For a larger geographical context, see Pagden, A., *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology*, Cambridge, 1982; Schwartz, S.B. (ed.), *Implicit Understanding: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, Cambridge, 1994; Giard, L. (ed.), *Les jésuites à la Renaissance: Système éducatif et production du savoir*, Paris, 1995; Giard, L., and Vaucelles, L. de. (eds), *Les jésuites à l'âge baroque, 1540–1640*, Grenoble, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Bocarro, A., *O livro das plantas de todas as fortalezas, cidades e povoações do Estado da Índia Oriental*, (1635), Lisbon, 1992, reprint, vol. 2, p. 201, and vol. 3, *estampa XXXIV*. For the Dutch redrawing of the map of Cochin after 1663, see Baldaeus, Ph., *A True and Exact Description of the Most Celebrated East-India Coasts of Malabar and Coromandel and also of the Isle of Ceylon* (London 1703; trans. from Dutch in 1672), New Delhi, reprint, pp. 632–3.

clans of Parava fishermen.<sup>7</sup> As soon as he had learnt enough Tamil to preach and communicate with the local population, Nobili cast his sights towards the Tamil hinterland. Encouraged by Alberto Laerzio, another Italian Jesuit and the Provincial of the Malabar Jesuit province, Nobili settled in November 1606 in Madurai where, as rumour had it, the local kings lived in a manner similar to ancient Mediterranean pagan despots, where learned men possessed a language as precise as Latin and where priests jealously preserved hidden sacred texts.

In Madurai, a prosperous city built around the temple complex dedicated to the goddess Minakshi and her celestial spouse Sundar-eshwara ('the Handsome lord') in the heart of the Tamil country, Nobili discovered his mission, his Jerusalem, his Rome and his desert of temptation, his 'Christ's vineyard' swarming with angelic creatures and 'mustard [bitter] seeds'. Unlike what appeared to his Roman baroque eye as unrefined and scattered settlements of Paravas along the sandy coast, Madurai impressed him with its royal architecture and its intellectual and theological effervescence.<sup>8</sup> Converting the royal Nāyakas and the native priests and 'doctors', the Brahmans, appeared to him a task comparable to that of St Paul and the Apostles among the Jews and Romans. Moreover, as he started studying Sanskrit, the 'Latin of the Brahmans', he felt increasingly confident that some fragments of the 'true faith'—the monotheistic god, the Trinity, etc.—had been revealed to Tamils in a distant past.<sup>9</sup> From then on, Nobili endeavoured to 'sacralize' Tamil society, in the Augustinian sense of giving a visible form, the Catholic Church, to the invisible grace of God. He enthusiastically took upon himself to read the divine signs which, he felt, had already been bestowed on the Tamils (and hopefully, on himself), but had been suspended until his

<sup>7</sup> Schurhammer, G., S.J., *Francis Xaveir, His Life, His Times, India, (1541–45)*, (trans. from the German edition of 1963, by Costelloe, J., S.J.), Rome, 1977, vol. II. This is the most exhaustive biographical narrative of Xavier's apostolate among the Paravas.

<sup>8</sup> On Nāyaka rule in Madurai, see Satyanatha Aiyar, R., *History of the Nayaks of Madura*, 1924, reprinted Madras, 1980. For a different, anthropological approach, see Narayana Rao, V., Shulman, D., and Subrahmanyam, S., *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nāyaka Period of Tamil Nadu*, Delhi, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Still unsurpassed, the seminal work on the construction of European images of India is Partha Mitter's, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Chicago, 1977; For bibliographical details, see also Lach, D.F., *Asia in the Making of Europe*, Chicago, 1965–77, 4 vols.

#### 4 • *Disputed Mission*

arrival. His own apostolic preaching of the Gospel, partly based on the hermeneutics of indigenous sacred texts containing those hidden truths, were designed to produce a palimpsest-effect on all vestiges of Indian 'paganism'. Upon hearing the 'glad tidings', souls were to be caught and saved with his universalist dragnet, creating at the same time a larger, albeit internally diverse, Christian polity.

Making a saint is impossible without a demonic opposition. Nobili was prepared for his encounter with the Devil. In the Collegio Romano, he was thought to fight him in prayer, in deed and in writing. As he expected, all non-Christian spaces were infested with demonic influences, leaving their corrupting traces on all things. Even one's companion, a fellow Jesuit, might succumb to it.

This is how Nobili felt about Gonçalo Fernandes (1541–1619). Moreover, this is how Fernandes felt about Nobili.<sup>10</sup>

The two Jesuits, doomed to live together in the Madurai mission from 1606, were not an obvious mismatch. Ignatius of Loyola advised and prescribed that the Jesuits always stay in pairs in the distant missions and, that if one were young, the other ought to be old, one spiritually exalted, the other more pragmatic, each complementing and restraining the excesses of the other.<sup>11</sup> With Nobili and Fernandes, there were additional complications. What turned out to be a major dividing line between them was not simply age and temperament, but also class, nationality and education. Fernandes, who joined the Jesuit order in India after a brief career as a soldier, was very much a product of the Portuguese colonial enterprise in Asia.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, his scant theological knowledge made him unresponsive to Nobili's sophisticated theory and practice of *accommodatio*. Generally considered within the Jesuit community in Asia as an 'Italian' mode of proselytizing and applied in missions in which both Portuguese colonial and ecclesiastical administration were weak or nonexistent,

<sup>10</sup> Wicki, J., S.I., 'Die Schrift des P. Gonçalo Fernandes S.J. über die Brahmanen und Dharma-Sastra (Madura, 1616)', *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft*, 41, Münster, 1957; Humbert, J. 'Hindu Ceremonial of 1616, by Fr. Gonçalo Fernandes', *Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas*, Año III, Madrid, 1967.

<sup>11</sup> Loyola, Ignatius of, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, (translated, with an Introduction and a Commentary by George E. Ganss, S.J.), St. Louis, 1970, p. 277.

<sup>12</sup> On Fernandes's career, see Wicki, J., S.J., *Documenta Indica* (hereafter DI), vol. 5, p. 269 and Wicki, J. (ed.), *Tratado do Pe Gonçalo Fernandes Trancoso sobre o Hinduísmo (Maduré 1616)*, Lisbon, 1973, pp. 319–21.

*accommodatio* or adaptation, was a method of conversion that provoked at least two centuries of disputes between the Jesuits and other missionary orders and church hierarchy, and among the Jesuits themselves.<sup>13</sup>

When Nobili separated his church from that of Fernandes (1607), dressed as a Brahman hermit, employed Brahman cooks, became a vegetarian and refused to be called a 'Parangue',<sup>14</sup> a local designation for Christians, it marked the starting point for his own adaptationist practice, inspired by Matteo Ricci's Chinese and Alessandro Valignano's Japanese experiments.<sup>15</sup> Shortly thereafter, the dispute between Nobili and Fernandes erupted in a letter sent to the Jesuit authorities in Cochin denouncing Nobili for 'going native', insulting Portuguese honour, and for lacking the prescribed Jesuit virtues of charity, humility and obedience.<sup>16</sup>

For the next two decades, this dispute would generate hundreds of letters and treatises, circulating from one Indian mission to another, and to Rome and Lisbon. Almost every Jesuit in India chose one or the other side, wrote 'opinions' (*pareceres*) or condemnations, provided arguments *pro* or *contra*, and tried to use various networks at the Roman curia in order to persuade the Popes to approve, or destroy, Nobili's 'new' Madurai mission.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> George Elison's (J.A.S. Elisonas), *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, Cambridge, Mass., 1973 and Jacques Gernet's, *Chine et christianisme. La première confrontation* (first edn. 1982), Paris, 1990, are the two most seminal interpretative works on Jesuit adaptation in Japan and China. See also Mungello, D. E., ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy. Its History and Meaning*, Nettetal, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> *Parangui* is a generic, xenophobic term for a European. In its many regional phonetic, semantic, and spelling variants (Frangui, Farangui, Firinghee, Ifranji, Parangi, Prangue, etc.), it was used throughout Asia and the Middle East from the medieval period (designating Franks, 'European Christians', crusaders, etc.) until today. See Dalgado, S.R., *Glossário Luso-Asiático*, Coimbra, 1919, vol. 1, pp. 406-7, and Yule, H., and Burnell, A.C., *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical, and Discursive*, (1903), reprinted, New Delhi, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Spence Jonathan, D., *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, New York, 1983; Schütte, Josef Franz, S.I., *Valignano's mission Principles for Japan*, St. Louis, 2 vols, 1980; Moran, J.F., *The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in sixteenth-century Japan*, London and New York, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Fernandes (Gonçalo) to Pimenta (Nicolau), Madurai, 7 May, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff.29-31 (3<sup>rd</sup> via); ff.34-6 (2<sup>nd</sup> via), ff.32-3, ff.37-8

<sup>17</sup> In Jesuit technical vocabulary, a mission (*missio, missão, missione*) is a social category designating an apostolic task, a group of missionaries (at least two) in a given

## Letters and Actions

It is these documents in Portuguese, Latin, Spanish and Italian—written, either in haste and at the spur of the moment, in barely legible handwriting and swarming with omissions, or carefully recopied and neatly sealed with red wax, or partly burnt or damaged in shipwrecks—that reveal the plot of the dispute and serve as material witnesses in my investigation.<sup>18</sup> Not only are these *nothing more than narratives*, to paraphrase de Certeau, there is also nothing exceptional about them on the formal level of epistolary competence.<sup>19</sup> They all closely follow the structure of a medieval *dictamen*, starting with *salutatio* and *captatio benevolentiae* or *exordium* and then proceeding to *narratio* and eventually *petitio* and *conclusio*.<sup>20</sup> As for longer letters or treatises, the parts that underwent amplifications and digressions were mostly narration and/or petition. In addition, with few exceptions, these were no elegant, humanist *belles-lettres* since missionaries studiously avoided refined style and rhetorical ambiguities.

A direct, clear and literal language, being itself a form of Jesuit *active* asceticism and obedience, was expected from a correspondent. On the other hand, the diversity of missionary experience compensated for the lack of rhetorical inventiveness and skill. The most sought-after Jesuit letters, or parts of them, to which the general reading public of 17th-century Europe became rapidly addicted, were precisely the digressions and amplifications containing descriptions of foreign lands and peoples, peppered with eye-witness exaggerations, pious pathos and heroic adventures. Although these narrative digressions and amplifications may seem to be a series of disorderly events to the contemporary reader, they were, on the

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missionary space. A residence refers to a geographical site. As a rule, a residence is the first implantation in a given region. With the development of Jesuit activities, residences grow into colleges, professed houses and similar institutions held by the Jesuits. *Glossario Gesuitico, Guida all'intelligenza dei documenti* (typed, unpublished), ARSI, Rome, 1992. Nobili's 'new' residence (*residencia nova*) in Madurai was also referred to as 'new' mission (*missio nova*).

<sup>18</sup> Most of the letters consulted in this work are available in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu in Rome. See bibliography.

<sup>19</sup> Certeau, M. de, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris, 1975, p. 291.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy, George A., *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, Chapel Hill, 1980, p. 186.

contrary, very carefully selected 'pieces' of missionary experience corresponding closely to the general epistolary topics prescribed by Ignatius of Loyola: 'for the goal that we are aiming at: the service and glory of God, the common good and assistance to the Company, for the same goal especially in Portugal, in the Indias and Brazil you should turn your reflection and your efforts towards four points: *the kings and the nobles, the common people, the Company and yourself* [my italics].'<sup>21</sup> Information on these four topics was, henceforth, made central to the Jesuit missionary correspondence.

Nobili's letters and those of other Jesuit missionaries directly implicated in the dispute were perfectly attuned to Ignatius' epistolary and pastoral injunctions. In the overseas missionary setting, the reflection on the common people became an *ethnographic description*. The encounters with the 'native' kings, priests or nobles were recorded in *dramatic/theatrical* vignettes. The disputes and entanglements concerning the members of the Company were often couched in *dialogic/polemical* terms and repartees. Finally, the individual ambitions appeared most clearly in the rhetoric of *sainthood* and *utopianism*. These four epistolary topics are, moreover, concurrent with four dominant Jesuit 'profane' interests and actions: collection of information and normalization of knowledge about the foreign; ministry and proselytizing; institutional and internal litigation, and spiritual practices. Jesuit worldly success depended on the skill and ability in transforming these topics and actions into a powerful 'impression management', simultaneously in the world of written texts, spoken words and social performances, a task difficult for any mortal to fulfil.<sup>22</sup>

To the historian's eye, these Jesuit texts are archival remains, often ruins, of larger structures of arguments, descriptions, pleadings, allusions and similar socially situated enunciations. The dispute between Nobili and Fernandes attracted the most extreme counter-statements which should give us a glimpse, beyond Jesuit textual practices, into the contexts of multiple power productions and negotiations, institutional and psychological constraints exerted on the actors, as well as into individual *ad hoc* innovations in discursive

<sup>21</sup> Louis Gonçalves da Câmara was given this instruction before taking up his duty of co-Provincial in the province of Portugal in 1556. Loyola, Ignace de, *Ecrits*, ed. Maurice Guiliani, Paris, 1991, p. 973.

<sup>22</sup> The concept of 'impression management' is borrowed from Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, 1959.



## 8 • *Disputed Mission*

practices. Since Jesuit missionary writers followed, more or less to the letter, Loyola's four topical prescriptions, my intention is to illustrate the way in which these were put to use (in the form of letters and actions), and to show how they solicited a collusive relationship with the reader. In a way, the Jesuit missionary audience in Europe, separated from the Tamils by a cultural and linguistic wall, was invited to participate in Jesuit texts as *ethnographers*, *théâtre audiences*, *trial witnesses*, or even *juries* and *judges* and *confessors*.

In each of the four chapters of this book I will take up one of the four topics in order to understand the contingencies of its production, the way in which its literary configurations made sense in particular acts of reading, as well as to ascertain to what degree it seems to have mobilized or directed the behaviour of the actors within the given cultural setting. However, even if these topics and their primarily 'ascetic' rhetorical framing provided Jesuit writers with strategies of textual 'impression management', they also fragmented their texts into easily manipulable parts. Jesuit descriptions of the new and old worlds were widely plagiarized, their theological statements and political opinions decontextualized and turned against them. No wonder that Alessandro Valignano categorically demanded that before publication not a single word be changed in his texts.<sup>23</sup> But while he insisted that no European editor paraphrase, explain or interpret his descriptions of, for example, Japanese and Chinese customs and manners, he also tried to suppress opinions and narratives of those Jesuits whose experiences in the Eastern missions were different from his own.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, besides organizing the contents of the missionaries' letters, and through them their lived, imagined and expected experiences, these four topics also worked at times as figurative strategies (through metaphor, allegory, antithesis, etc.) that constituted objects and formulated basic representational concepts. Words were considered by Jesuits and their contemporaries as transparent icons and value-neutral tools of representation. The belief that the order of things could be adequately represented in the order of words was unchallenged in theory, but showed itself to be disorientingly impractical if taken literally in practice.<sup>25</sup> The power of persuasive

<sup>23</sup> Correia-Afonso, John, S.I., *Jesuit Letters and Indian History*, Bombay, 1955, p.36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

<sup>25</sup> These ideas were developed in Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*, Paris, 1966.

argument, even if refuted as an excess of casuistry (of which Jesuits were often accused by their opponents), was based on words rather than things. Therefore, the epistolary production organized around major topics was an effort at normalization, objectification and reification of missionary realities against hostile suspicions of false representation, Jesuitical *trompe-l'oeil*. Hence, it posed invisible limits to the domain of enunciation and legibility, as well as to contingency and causality.

A few preliminary remarks might be in order at this point to provide an understanding of the Jesuit obsession with writing and the roots and historical ramifications of their texts.

## From Letter to History

The impulse to write was built into the foundations of the Society of Jesus and it was amplified by the distances and 'proximities' that separated the correspondents, and by the increase in their numbers.<sup>26</sup> From ten founding fathers in 1540, the 'Little Company' as it was informally called, grew into an 'army' of 13,000 'soldiers of Christ' in 1615. Perhaps as early as Loyola's letter to Pierre Favre in 1542, the question of how to write, a meta-epistolary question, became one of the major topics of discussion and of epistolary exchanges. While complaining about confused and chaotic letters that cannot be 'shown' to other religious figures and laymen interested in a particular topic, Loyola requested that 'in our correspondence, we should act to ensure the greatest service to His divine goodness and the greatest utility to the neighbor'.<sup>27</sup> Having thus defined the goals of writing as a linchpin connecting the celestial and terrestrial worlds, he established in detail the blueprint for Jesuit epistolary production. According to Loyola, a letter should consist of two parts, the first being a principal letter for the edification of 'readers' and 'listeners', Jesuit or otherwise. This was, therefore, a public part, recounting

<sup>26</sup> Ignatius de Loyola's founding gesture of the Society of Jesus was itself a written document which he and his companions submitted to Pope Paul III in late June or early July of 1539. The Pope approved it and incorporated it into his bull of 27 September, 1540, *Regimini militantis Ecclesiae*. The text is in *Sti. Ignatii de Loyola Constitutiones Societatis Iesu*, vol. 1, *Monumenta Constitutionum praevia*, Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu (hereafter MHSI), Rome, 1934. This document, also known as the *Formula of the Institute*, became the foundation-stone of the Society and was later expanded in the *Constitutions*.

<sup>27</sup> Loyola to Favre (Pierre), Rome, 10 December, 1542, in Loyol, *Ecrits*, pp. 669–79.

apostolic actions, delivered sermons, spiritual exercises and similar topics. As for the technique of writing, he advised Jesuits to rewrite their letters at least once in order to bring regularity and systematic structure to the content. Loyola called this 'the ripening' of the text, because 'the writing stays' and cannot be corrected like the spoken word.

It was in the second and separate part of the letter, the annex, that Loyola thought it appropriate to 'open one's heart' and write quickly and without too much ordering of thoughts and ideas. 'If the apostolic field is dry', remarked Loyola, one should write about illness, about other Jesuits, discussions between them and about similar private and, in the context of the Society of Jesus, internal topics (often disputes!). It was also to be a place to express one's feelings and 'spiritual joy' at reading letters from other Jesuits, as well as for recording the exact date of each letter received.

The distinction between 'private' and 'public' writing corresponds closely to the major cleavage, simultaneously dividing and shoring up the Jesuit structure, between *nostrum* and *alienum*.<sup>28</sup> The tension between these two poles was responsible for both the creative and destructive forces that shaped, deformed and reformed a specific Jesuit relation to the world. The ideal of the unitary and universalist Jesuit perspective, albeit irrevocably cleft from within, engendered a field of contestation and internal and external dispute. The essentially dialogic, if not heteroglotic, relation between 'us' and the 'other' was also responsible for the accelerated circulation of letters and missionaries throughout the world.

The need to systematize and control this circulation, as well as its content, is reflected in the creation of the 'office of the secretary' in 1547. The epistolary system that Loyola sketched out in his letter to Pierre Favre was put into practice and further elaborated and centralized by Juan Polanco. The regulations that Polanco efficiently introduced into his office were based on secretarial and censorial impulses. He prescribed the appropriate writing styles and textual organization closely following Loyola's prescription. The letters were supposed to 'edify' and 'animate' their readers and were framed as didactic, polemical, theatrical, ethnographic and often utopian

<sup>28</sup> Certeau, Michael de, 'La réforme de l'intérieur au temps d'Aquaviva', *Les Jésuites, Spiritualité et activité; Jalons d'une histoire*, Bibliothèque de Spiritualité 9, Paris and Centrum Ignatianum, Rome, 1974, pp. 53-69.

texts.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the edifying content was to be separated from the *'hijueta'*, an appendix in which one could write 'that which is not to be shown, sometimes edifying, sometimes not, such as personal defects and those of others, and some other things, but not for everybody'<sup>30</sup>. Juridical, controversial and confessional topics enlivened these 'internal' messages.

Since missionary letters were already gaining a wider audience, certain strategic secrets or personal grievances were to be hidden from the view of the public and made accessible only to the initiated. As for the contents of the principal letter, the writers were urged not to be 'parsimonious' with words and to include details concerning climate, geography, and the customs and manners of their subjects, because some important people in Rome, well disposed to the Society, were eager to learn more about these.<sup>31</sup> From the Indies (i.e. from all Asian missions), the Jesuits were to write annual reports and these were to be sent by three different '*vias*', taking into account the vicissitudes of travel.<sup>32</sup> The incoming mail, therefore, was to be organized and pre-shaped according to Polanco's *Rules which are to be observed in the matter of writing by those of the Society who are scattered outside Rome* (a circular letter in which he also brought forward twenty reasons for diligent correspondence).<sup>33</sup> Once these letters reached Rome, they were subjected to further retailoring and even rewriting, that is, extracts were made of them or whole passages were cut out and then inserted into general reports from the missions. In this new, authorized, although author-less form, these texts re-entered circulation among the Jesuits.

With the publication of the missionary letters, the process of intertextualization went even further. The first collections of these documents—*Annuae litterae*—comprising letters from 1581 to 1654, appeared in print in 36 volumes between 1583 and 1658. Concerning the missionary field in New France, 41 volumes of letters were printed in Paris between 1632 and 1672. *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*,

<sup>29</sup> *Monumenta Ignatiana, Epistolae et instructiones*, Matriti, 1903–11, vol. I, p. 539.

<sup>30</sup> 'Lo que no es para mostrar, agora sea edificativo, agora no, como son los defectos propios y de otros, y algunas cosas, pero no para todos', *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 547.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 165.

<sup>32</sup> From European residences, the reports were supposed to be more frequent: trimestrial or quadrimestrial. Literally meaning route, a '*via*' is often marked on the top of the page of each letter. Letters were sent in two, three or even more copies, and preferably by different ships or means of transportation.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 547.

a French compilation of letters, selected on the basis of their 'curiousness' and moral and religious examples, was published in Paris in 34 volumes between 1703 and 1776 and saw numerous republications in full or abridged versions up to the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> This particular version was then translated into English, Spanish, Italian, German, Polish, etc. with further alterations and braided with additions from other travellers and different editorial opinions<sup>35</sup>.

The proliferation of such literature nourishing young novices and delighting the lay audience was soon perceived as corrupting the original message. Not only did readers/consumers complain that from one edition to another the same letters were not quite the same, the Jesuits themselves—those who saw their own letters published, those who figured in the letters of other Jesuits, or those who disagreed with their statements and, finally even those who prepared the publications—were all losing control over the printed word. These alterations were partly due to a combination of printing errors and sloppy translations. For example, one of the early Latin collections, *Epistolae Indicae de stupendos et praecaris rebus*, translated by Ioannes Rutilius Somberius, was denounced by Jerónimo Nadal as completely inadequate: 'A volume of letters from the Indies was published in Leuven in Latin, and according to what Father Canisius told me and the parts I saw, it is very much corrupted'.<sup>36</sup> Non-Jesuits

<sup>34</sup> See Masson, Joseph, S.J., 'La perspective missionnaire dans la spiritualité jésuite', *Les Jésuites, Spiritualité et activité; Jalons d'une histoire*, p. 142; Rétif, A., 'Brève histoire des Lettres édifiantes et curieuses', in *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, Imensee, vol. 7, 1951, p. 37–50 and Laszlo Polgar, *Bibliographie sur l'histoire de la Compagnie de Jésus 1901–1980*, Rome, 1980–90, 3 tomes in 6 vols.

<sup>35</sup> I have consulted two English editions. 1) *Edifying and curious Letters of some Missioners of the Society of Jesus, from Foreign Missions*. Printed in the Year 1709 (Bancroft Library, Berkeley), and 2) *The Travels of several Learned Missioners of the Society of Jesus into Divers Parts of the Archipelago, India, China and America...* London: Printed for R. Gosling, at the Mitre and Crown, over against St. Dunstan's Church, in Free Street, 1714. See, also, *Der Neue Welt-Bott. Mit allerhand Nachrichten dern Missionariorum Soc. Iesu*, initiated by Joseph Stöcklein, 1726–1761, 40 vols. See in particular copious anti-Catholic footnotes in Lockman, John, *Travels of the Jesuits into Various Parts of the World: Compiled from their letters. Now first attempted in English. Intermix'd with an Account from other Travellers, and miscellaneous Notes. Illustrated with Maps and Sculptures*. London: Printed for John Noon, at the White Hart near Mercer's Chapel, Cheapside, 1743, 2 vols. The second, corrected edition in 1762 (see Bibliography).

<sup>36</sup> 'Un tomo de las cartas de las Indias en latín se ha imprimado en Lavania, y según me han dicho el P. Canisio, y yo em parte he visto, es tudo muy corrupto', *Epistolae Nadal*, vol. 2, MHSI, Rome, p. 43.

especially, such as Somberius, and even non-Catholic compilers like John Lockman, a later British translator of *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, were accused of adulterating the original Jesuit texts, although the fashion of retailoring the letters actually started with Polanco's secretariat itself.<sup>37</sup> He shortened some letters in order to highlight edifying stories and 'improved' the style and tone of sometimes rather illiterate writing. In one of the letters by Alfonso Salmerón, it appears that Nadal ordered that some of the letters be corrected in Lisbon, their first stop in Europe, before being sent to Rome.<sup>38</sup>

Probably the most famous collection, which attracted a popular audience and became a mine of ideas for the Enlightenment *philosophes*, were the thirty-four volumes of *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*. This editorial enterprise was a great success, from the first volume edited by P. Le Gobien in 1702 until the end of publication in 1776, a date which coincides with the suppression of the Society of Jesus.<sup>39</sup> Already in 1705 (February 2), an article in the *Journal des savants* criticized Le Gobien's editorial policy of improving the style of the letters to the point where their veracity was dubious. Later editors took even more liberty with the texts. One can imagine what happened with further translations of the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* into other European languages, and the publications after 1776, when, instead of Jesuit editorial authority, anybody was able to abridge and refurbish these letters according to his own taste. After the reconstitution of the Society of Jesus in 1813, new Jesuit collections of unpublished letters appeared.

F. Joseph Bertrand, himself a missionary in Madurai during the 1830s, edited four volumes of *La Mission du Maduré d'après des documents inédits*, a selection of letters written in or about the Madurai mission, from 1606 until the suppression of the order.<sup>40</sup> From the choice of the founding date, which coincides with the appearance of Roberto Nobili on the scene and the exclusion of important letters

<sup>37</sup> Lockman, John, *Travels of the Jesuits into Various Parts of the World*.

<sup>38</sup> Salmerón to Nadal, 28 September, 1561, in *Epistolae P. Hieronimi Nadal Societatis Iesu ab anno 1546 ad 1577*, Madrid, 1898, vol. 1, p. 529.

<sup>39</sup> Vol. 1–7 were edited by P. Le Gobien; 9–26 by the China specialist P. du Halde, vols 27, 28, 31, 33 and 34 by P. Patouillet; the editorship of vols 29, 30, 32 is uncertain—either René Maréchal or J. B. Geoffrey.

<sup>40</sup> Bertrand, Joseph (ed.), *La Mission du Maduré d'après des documents inédits*, Paris, 1847–50, 4 vols.

criticizing his apostolic method, Bertrand's editorial bias is obvious. Secondly, as far as content is concerned, he condensed different letters into one, cutting out what he thought were 'tedious' descriptions, etc.

The problem of tightening control over the Jesuit literary heritage found its early solution in 'historical' works, from biographies of the founder Ignatius of Loyola to the histories of the Society.<sup>41</sup> During the generalship of Francis Borgia (1563–73), Polanco wrote about the need to undertake the preparation of the history of the Society of Jesus: 'Since some kind of history of the Society is desired from various parts, it would be appropriate if each college sent information (unless it has already been sent) concerning its foundation, as well as all remarkable events that have happened until now, making note of times and places'.<sup>42</sup> In 1567, Gonçalo Alvarez, who came to India as Visitor, had the additional task of finding local fathers able to write a history of the Society in India. He found none, claiming that the missionaries in India would rather work than write.<sup>43</sup> However, in 1568, Manuel da Costa sent a short digest of historical events in Asian missions to Rome, which found its Latin translator in Giovan Pietro Maffei, a famous Jesuit humanist. Maffei subsequently published in Dillingen (1571) the *Rerum a Societate Iesu in Oriente gestarum*. It was a rather modest beginning before Valignano's *Historia de principio y progreso de la Compañía de Jesús en las Indias Orientales (1542–64)*, which provided material for Maffei's *Historiarum Indicarum libri XVI* (Florence, 1588), Horatio Tursellinus's *Vita Francisci Xaverii* (Rome, 1594), João de Lucena's, *História de vida do padre Francisco de Xavier* (Lisbon, 1600), and Luis de Guzmán's *Historia de las misiones* (Alcalá de Henares, 1601), etc.<sup>44</sup> Some historical works were from their

<sup>41</sup> The first printed biography of Ignatius of Loyola was written by Pedro Ribadeneyra, S.J., *Vita Ignatii Loiolae, Societatis Iesu fundatoris*, Naples, 1572. The manuscript was completed three years before Loyola's death (d.1556).

<sup>42</sup> 'Porque de diversas partes se dessea que se hiziese alguna historia de la Compañía, sería bien que de cada collegio viniese una información de su principio (si no es venida), y también las cosas más notables que en él han sucedido hasta ora, notando los tiempos y personas', *Sanctus Franciscus Borgia quartus Gandiae Dux et Societatis Jesu Praepositus Generalis tertius*, Madrid, 1894, vol. 2, pp. 738–9.

<sup>43</sup> Valignano, Alessandro, S.I., *Historia del principio y progreso de la Compañía de Jesús en las Indias Orientales (1542–64)*, (ed. by Wicki, J., S.J.), Rome, 1944, pp. 33–4.

<sup>44</sup> Lucena, J. de, S.J., *História de vida do padre Francisco de Xavier*, (Lisbon, 1600), facsimile edition, Lisbon, 1952, 2 vols; Guzmán, L. de., S.J., *Historia de las misiones que*

inception destined for a larger public, such as *Imago primi saeculi*, published under the direction of Jean Bolland, and learned histories such as Daniello Bartoli's four volumes about Indian, Japanese, Chinese and English missions. Biographies and panegyrics of the Jesuit saints became very popular reading as well. Some of the most successful were Philippe Alegambe's *Mortes illustres* (1657) and Jean Nadası's *Heroes et victimae caritatis* (1658).<sup>45</sup>

Simultaneously, there was a movement to arrest this spectacularization of Jesuit 'history', its outward effusion, through the counter-production of a pious, disciplined literature, destined mostly for internal use. Such is the compilation of short biographies of famous Jesuits, among whom were many missionaries, in the seven-volume *Varones illustres* published between 1645 and 1736.<sup>46</sup> Similar projects were undertaken for and by important centres of Jesuit education and learning, such as António Franco's compilation of biographies of all Jesuits who had studied in Lisbon, Coimbra and Évora.<sup>47</sup>

In spite of the proliferation and exterritorialization of Jesuit correspondence in the form of secular histories and compilations, its intensive internal circulation managed to define and preserve a particular Jesuit epistolary morphology. Ignatius and Polanco, as we have seen, provided a general and quite detailed blueprint of an 'ideal' Jesuit letter. It was, however, the way in which the army of Jesuits responded to this initial call that inspired their own epistolary grapheme. Lest one be led to think that Jesuit reality consisted solely of epistolography and that their principal concern was description rather than action, it should be stressed that the Jesuits were well aware that their principal mission was not to describe the world, but

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*han hecho los Religiosos de la Compañía de Jesús, para predicar el sancto Evangelio en la India Oriental, y en los Reynos de la China y Japón*, Alcalá de Henares, 1601, 2 vols.

<sup>45</sup> Bartoli, Daniello, S.J., *Opere*, 80 vols, Naples, 1853–61: L'Asia (vols 27–34, 1856–57); See Joseph Masson, 'La perspective missionnaire dans la spiritualité jésuite', p. 143.

<sup>46</sup> The first four volumes were published in Madrid in 1645 by J.E. Nieremberg. Volumes 5 and 6 were published by Alonso de Andrade from 1666 to 1667. The last two volumes were published by J. Cassani from 1734 to 1736. Patignani's, *Menologio* was a later follow-up of this type of literature. See *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Franco, A., *Imagem da Virtude em o noviciado da Companhia de Jesus...de Evora*, Lisbon, 1714; *Imagem da Virtude em o noviciado da Companhia de Jesus...de Lisboa*, Coimbra, 1717; *Imagem da Virtude em o noviciado da Companhia de Jesus...de Coimbra*, 2 vols, Evora-Coimbra, 1719.



to change it. Particular circumstances in which they found themselves played a decisive role in their choice of apostolic actions and practices. These, in turn, were responsible for the choice of writing modes, rhetorical framing and topics. For example, if one had to defend one's conversion method against serious accusations, as Nobili did through a larger part of his missionary career, it was only natural to frame one's arguments in a dialectic/polemical, rather than a confessional, idiom. Theatrical and utopian framing was employed, on the other hand, to rally support and enhance the enthusiasm of those far-away readers or future missionaries. When Nobili had to oppose his 'knowledge' of Tamil culture, society and religion against that of Gonçalo Fernandes, the ethnographic style of writing was indispensable.

The source of the unstable and contested ethnographic descriptions and interpretations found in Nobili's, Fernandes's and many other missionary letters should not be attributed uniquely to their rhetorical failures or manipulations, but also to the vicissitudes of political, cultural, religious and economic circumstances in early seventeenth-century Tamil Nadu.

### Statecraft, Mobility and Religion in Seventeenth-century Tamil Nadu

The multiplicity of possible definitions of the true nature of Tamil laws, customs and religious ideas partly reflected the fluid political situation in seventeenth-century South India.<sup>48</sup> The segmentary system of political alliances in the region—often described in English district gazetteers of the nineteenth-century as chaotic and criminal and opposed to colonial 'rational' rule—facilitated, in fact, the cohabitation of various religious ideas and practices. Brahmanical tradition, devotional cults, as well as Islam and Christianity, served with varying success as ideologies of the ruling elites.<sup>49</sup>

Tiruchchirappalli, Tanjavur and Nobili's Madurai were capitals of the three important seventeenth-century successor states to a larger

<sup>48</sup> The metaphor of fluidity is borrowed from Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 1992.

<sup>49</sup> On the successful complicity between Hindu worship and state-building in the Maravar country, see, for example, Price, P.G., *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India*, Cambridge, 1996.

Vijayanagara military overlordship, often called somewhat misleadingly an 'empire', and located to the north of Tamil Nadu in the Deccan plateau.<sup>50</sup> Madurai was one of the old rice-growing, 'core' areas of Tamil Nadu.<sup>51</sup> At least until the 13th century, the symbiosis between the ruling agriculturists/landowners and ritual specialists (Veḷḷāla-Brahman alliance) produced a distinct South Indian river valley culture.<sup>52</sup> By the 17th century, however, in Madurai as elsewhere, the Veḷḷāla kings had been replaced by martial clans and lineages previously inhabiting the so-called dry zones, or by immigrant commanders from the northern Hindu and Muslim states.<sup>53</sup> Ruling from the middle of the 16th until the early 18th century, the Nāyakas of Madurai, some of whom Nobili knew personally, were Telugu commanders who splintered from Vijayanagara and engaged in typical South Indian state-building by creating and incorporating a network of smaller kingdoms such as Pudukkottai, Uṭaiyārpālaiyam, Sivaganga, and lesser domains under chiefs or *pālaiyakkārars* (known as *poligars* in British texts), all of whom acknowledged the ritual and political dominance of the Nāyakas.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Satyanatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madurai*; Stein, B., *Vijayanagara*, Cambridge, 1989.

<sup>51</sup> According to K. V. Zvelebil, Madurai (its original Tamil name was *kūṭal*) 'was the first, ancient Tamil colony (*ūr*) that was truly urbanized', mentioned by Megasthenes in the 4th century BC. Zvelebil, K.V., 'Les Idées—piliers de la tradition linguistique tamoule', *Journal asiatique*, t. 285, no. 1, Paris, 1997.

<sup>52</sup> Stein, Burton, 'The State and the Agrarian Order in Medieval South India: A Historiographical Critique', in Stein B., (ed.), *Essays in South India*, Honolulu, 1975; Karashima, N., *South Indian History and Society: Studies from Inscriptions, A.D. 850-1800*, Delhi, 1984; For the development of 'historical' and 'medieval' polities see Champakalakshmi, R., *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization: South India 300 BC to AD 1300*, Delhi, 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Baker, C. J., *An Indian Rural Economy 1880-1955: The Tamil Nadu Countryside*, Oxford, 1984; Ludden, David, *Peasant History in South India*, Princeton, 1985.

<sup>54</sup> *Poligars* or *pālaiyakkārars* were military commanders of the fortresses, or the 'little kingdoms', in the dry zones of south India following the decline of the strong central Nāyaka rule. Dirks, Nicholas B., 'The Structure and Meaning of Political Relations in a South Indian Little Kingdom', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, N.S., vol. 13, no. 2 (1979), *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Cambridge 1987 and 'The Pasts of a Palaiyakarar: The Ethnohistory of a South Indian Little King', in Spencer, G. W., (ed.), *Temples, Kings and Peasants: Perceptions of South India's Past*, Madras, 1987; On the literary solution to the problem of Nāyaka legitimacy, see, Waggoner, P.B., *Tidings of the King: A Translation and Ethnohistorical Analysis of the Rāyavācakamu*, Honolulu, 1993.

From grandiose palaces like the Nāyaka palace in Madurai to humble mud fortresses, these political actors maintained a tenuous balance of power and political hierarchy in the region. *Ad hoc* alliances and conflicts vove together, through indispensable rituals of submission, patronage and legitimation, a quilt of immigrant and sedentary, agricultural and service lineages, all in search of the security of temporal and spiritual patrons. The sovereignty of these segmentary political and territorial structures, prone to splintering into smaller elements or being devoured by larger ones, especially at times of dynastic crisis or change, was maintained and safeguarded by the 'real' physical presence of the king. He was the guarantor of the social order, not only by means of his military prowess and the distribution of justice and 'honours', but also in his likeness to a warrior 'deity', a traditionally revered supernatural being of the dry-zone clans and lineages, with a benevolent face and its vengeful, blood-spilling reverse. Altruism and violence both served as acts of incorporation and were geared, therefore, to create closer vertical ties between the chieftain/king and his clients in the this-worldly human domain, as well as in the invisible world of ancestral spirits, demons (*pēys*) and supernatural powers.<sup>55</sup>

On the micro-social level, each separate agrarian locality, community or village, whether an ancient settlement in the old river valley centres or newly founded by an enterprising poligar, operated as a ritual unit with its own recognized frontiers protected by divine guardians such as Aiyāṅār and Karuppaṅ and other boundary gods.<sup>56</sup> Through corporate rituals, the villages affirmed the existence of multiple linkages between various caste and kin groups, all of which were indispensable members of the locality's moral order. It was during these rituals that the hierarchical order between various segments of the community was established through the system of ceremonial 'honours' (*mariyātai*) consisting of privileges pertaining to the place in the solemn procession, the choice of food or flower offerings to the idol, etc.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> According to Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance* (p. 183), the Nāyaka literary evidence under discussion points to the emergence of the divine kingship ideology that may not have existed in a previous period.

<sup>56</sup> On boundaries see Shulman, David D., *Tamil Temple Myths. Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, Princeton, 1980.

<sup>57</sup> See Appadurai, A. and Breckenridge, C.A., 'The South Indian Temple: Authority, Honour, and Redistribution', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (N.S.), vol. 10, no. 2,

With the influx of immigrant groups and a general reshuffling of the population which often happened in times of war and changing political alliances and the economic vicissitudes, the village communities and urban centres were forced to adjust to new conditions and restructure their rituals of integration, especially those confirming hierarchical relations between occupational and kinship groups and their incorporation into a wider political structure. Similar changes were evident on the macro-level of South Indian politics such as, for example, in the most important temple festival in Madurai, the *Cittirai utsavam*. It was Tirumalai Nāyaka (1623–59), Nōbili's contemporary, who, helped by Brahmans from the Minakshi temple, created the festival in order to incorporate the powerful and dangerous Kaḷḷar warrior clan as his 'feudatory'.<sup>58</sup> A Kaḷḷar martial god, Aḷakar, became a brother-in-law of Śiva, Madurai's principal male god, and an incarnation of a supra-local god, Vishnu.

The temple, *kovil* in Tāmil, denoted formerly a royal palace, just as the god, *iraivan*, denoted king.<sup>59</sup> The connection is not arbitrary, for statecraft and temple building or its endowment were traditionally inseparable in South India. From the eighth century onwards, temples became the central institutions for determining social stratification in the locality and supra-local connections. Initially (3rd c. AD–8th c. AD), it was through temple festivals that the Vellāḷas and Brahmans enacted the drama of their political and ritual superiority over cultivators and pastoralists. From the same source, Brahman Sanskritic ideas of the world-order and divine transcendence seeped into the very different religious landscape of South India, populated by male and female divinities of blood and power.<sup>60</sup> Outside the Vellāḷa–Brahman wet zones, the divinities who continued to dominate the dry zone of South India populated by warrior pastoralists and hunters-and-gatherers, were considered both as protectors from suffering, such as illness or natural disasters, and as 'criminal' gods of

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1976; Appadurai, A., 'Kings, Sects and Temples in South India, 1350–1700 A.D.', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1977; and *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case*, New York, 1981.

<sup>58</sup> Bayly, S., *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society*, Cambridge 1989, p. 43. See also Fuller, C.J., *Servants of the Goddess: The Priests of a South Indian Temple*, Cambridge, 1984.

<sup>59</sup> Appadurai A. and Breckenridge, C.A., 'The South Indian Temple', p. 191.

<sup>60</sup> Heestermañ, J.C., *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Ritual, Kingship and Society*, Chicago and London, 1985.

destruction and terror.<sup>61</sup> In the 17th century, Sanskritic and warrior religious ideals were variously interlinked, allowing a plethora of gods and goddesses to live next to each other as kinsmen, clients, patrons or even as incarnations of each other. Like kings from their fortresses, gods from their temples tried to extend the boundaries of their fiefdoms by sword, marriage and religious ritual.

The growth in popularity of the major temples and pilgrimage sites, which continued through the 18th century, coupled with the creation of new rituals, reflected the warrior regimes' desire for legitimacy and elevated rank. It was a way of translating actual military power into ritual prestige and authority. Temples, 'vegetarian' or blood-spilling, were repositories of power and plenitude; they were the holy sites where the invisible and visible worlds took account of each other. Although certain devotional sects challenged the 'static' concept of the temple, since, in their view, the only place where the human and the divine actually meet is the human body—a moving temple—, even such an anti-structure ideology was ultimately harnessed by ritual incorporation and state-building.<sup>62</sup> Religious specialists, therefore, were sought after by mobile warrior-pastoralist groups in order to legitimize their expansion and their claim to new territories and conquests. A fierce competition ensued, of course, between professional ideology-makers. Especially hostile to 'independent' holy men ready to facilitate the state-building of any ambitious small warrior chieftain were established Brahman ritualists. Nobili, in spite of his intentionally ambiguous presentation, fell under the former category, and had to complain in his letters about the Brahmans' hostile tactics against their rivals.

Nevertheless, the struggle between martial groups, and between aspiring ritualists, was never one of all-out mutual annihilation. The goal of every chieftain was to incorporate other 'little kingdoms' and their gods in his dominion, enhancing in this way his own political and sacred landscape. Before Nobili, Jesuit missionaries, confined largely, though not exclusively, to the coastal area of South India where Portuguese military presence underwrote their 'spiritual' influence, followed mostly the opposite strategy. Christianization was for them identical to Portugalization and the less there remained

<sup>61</sup> Hildebeitel, A. (ed.), *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, New York, 1989.

<sup>62</sup> See A.K. Ramanujan's classical work, *Speaking of Śiva*, New York, 1973.

of the vestiges of former religious practices the better. Nobili reversed this politics of conversion because, in his view, it was neither efficient in Madurai, nor 'Ignatian' in spirit. It is obvious that 17th-century Tamil Nadu, where Nobili arrived at the beginning of the second decade, was a complicated region in which various warrior lineages challenged each other in wars and rituals, and for that reason cleared the space for religious innovation as long as it served the interests of conquest, state-building and status enhancement. Nobili was a stranger, but so were at least half of the local chieftains (poligars), mostly Telugus and Kannadas, with Muslims and Marattas still to enter the political landscape at the end of the century. When all these mobile newcomers, riding on their military success, decided to settle down, it was people like Nobili, Brahmans and similar 'holy men' who had to purify them of their sinful, passionate and therefore polluting, nomadic 'forest' existence.

### European 'Repertoire' and Predisposition of Jesuit Missionaries

Nobili had to learn local scenarios, rhetoric and all the additional tricks of the trade before he could effectively play the role of a Tamil 'holy man' and advisor to the 'king'.<sup>63</sup> As a Jesuit, especially as a Roman trained theologian and later professed father, he was well prepared for such a task.<sup>64</sup> From taking and giving *Spiritual Exercises*, as they were (written and) practiced by Loyola, to following the precepts of the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, the emphasis constantly invoked in Jesuit education and sociability was the opening to the other. Somewhat paradoxically, a religious order that jealously guarded its unity and a sense of belonging to the common body, often metaphorized as a body of the founder, conceived of its major goal and mission as growth and self-expansion through conversion and

<sup>63</sup> Leturia, P. S.J., 'Luis González de Cámara maestro del rey D. Sebastian (...)', *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* (hereafter AHSI), no. 6, 1937; Marques, J.F., 'Confesseurs des princes, les jésuites à la Cour de Portugal', Giard L. Vaucelles, L. de, (eds.), *Les jésuites à l'âge baroque, 1540-1640*, Grenoble, 1996.

<sup>64</sup> On Jesuit education and interior preparation for the active life: Codina, M.G., *Aux sources de la pédagogie des jésuites, le 'modus parisiensis'*, Rome, 1968; Dainville, F. de., *L'éducation des jésuites (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)*, Paris, 1978; Julia, D., 'Généalogie de la "Ratio Studiorum"', Giard, L. and Vaucelles, L. de, (eds.), *Les jésuites à l'âge baroque, 1540-1640*, Grenoble, 1996.

branching out into all spheres of social existence. Spiritual and polemical responses were two strands, tightly intertwined, that both dramatized and facilitated Jesuit creativity resulting from the tension between homogeneity and multiplication.

Spirituality, in addition to its religious connotation, promoted a particular sense of identity, and the Jesuits, who were not the first to understand this, were at that time the quickest to use and channel it towards their professed—missionary—goals. Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* was an eclectic text. As one of the Jesuit founding fathers, Jerónimo Nadal put it, '[they] contain almost nothing (*nihil fere*) that cannot be found in other books'.<sup>65</sup> It was also an original, open, porous 'libretto', infinitely adaptable to each exercitant in the course of his dialogue with the director of the exercises. While the role of the director was important in guiding or, according to the enemies of the Society, in manipulating, the consciousness of the exercitant towards the 'right' decision, ample interior space was provided for individual, 'free' self-examination through divine 'motion', discernment of mind, and 'natural faculties'.<sup>66</sup> Jesuit esteem for natural faculties, reasoning and personal experience points to the crucial role of the second strand in Jesuit mental equipment—empiricism. The other, the foreign, the strange, was seen as a '*factum*' to be surveyed, enumerated, described, explained and catalogued. Jesuits themselves were subjected to the same bureaucratic policing procedure, roughly translated into the language of spirituality as 'obedience', 'abnegation' and 'indifference'. The data thus produced and collected, amounting to numerous volumes even within the first decades of the existence of the Society of Jesus, remain as witnesses of various experiments in the methods of conversion, persuasion, surveillance and 'social engineering'.

The most famous of the Jesuit methods was *accommodatio*, understood and applied in very different ways and contexts. The fascination with this form of social interaction, often called 'adaptation', had a direct link with Jesuit spirituality. In its traditional theological sense, it connoted the attribution of a new meaning to a passage in the Scripture, unintended by the author. To change the signified or to apply metaphor, in its primary meaning of 'transfer', corresponds to

<sup>65</sup> Loyola, *Ecrits*, p. 72.

<sup>66</sup> Loyola, Ignatius of, *Spiritual Exercises*, 'Three (occasions) times for good and healthy decision' (175–183), New York, 1948.

Loyola's injunction to 'find God in all things'. Interior discipline conceived as self-effacement and absolute obedience to the superior will, which in its turn provides a common mooring, a unified body-spiritual, for particular Jesuit identities, calls for continuous 'accommodation' between the active and contemplative, the personal and universal, the celestial and terrestrial. In Europe of the Counter-Reformation, an effort to bridge the many gaps between the divine and the human by spiritual counselling (for some time an exclusive Jesuit turf) was also a way of bringing God back into 'all things', albeit already on the way to secularization.

The language of the interior, determining the relation of oneself to the other (divine, social and psychological), had to be built of spiritual 'stuff', itself not much more than an unselfconscious labyrinth of failed, desired or neurotic 'kinship' ties. Jesuits maintained their interior hygiene with the help of *Spiritual Exercises* that facilitated communication with the divine Family (the Father, the Mother and the Son) and, increasingly in the 17th century, in an effort to curb *effusio ad exteriora* and strengthen the *esprit de corps*, they resorted to the multiplication of 'internal' literature concerning the image of the founding father, history of the society, rules and regulations of Jesuit life. Nevertheless, the tension between 'us' and 'them', interior and exterior, one and many, divine signs and practical action, remained a source of creativity and frustration for the members of the Society of Jesus. Two solutions, mutually contradictory and yet inseparably conjugated in all Jesuit labours of maintaining their own *corps* and widening the *corps* of Catholicism, crystallized in the course of the Jesuit search for the optimal relation between the self and the other. These were at the origin of two principal Jesuit approaches to the Other—'universalist' and 'ethnic'.

The universalist approach, refined by the 18th-century Enlightenment, and then ironically turned against the Jesuits, was a desire to image the other as oneself. Uniformity of the world/word, discipline and hegemony of the same, levelling of differences were all endeavours clearly discernible in Jesuit pedagogy (*Ratio Studiorum*), in Jesuit theater, in Jesuit confessional and spiritual counselling and in missionary activities in Europe and abroad. The 'ethnic' approach, closely following the Biblical sense of the word—heathen, non-Christian—, appeared at best as a strategic, temporary slippage from the universal, a *faute de mieux*, and at worst as downright 'going native'. There was, however, no clear-cut distinction between the



two. As if constantly undergoing the fun-house morphing effect, they merged and separated in various elongated or compressed shapes. In Latin America, where Christianization followed in the wake of conquest, universalism in its coercive guise appeared as self-evident. The so-called *tabula rasa* technique was used to annihilate local Amerindian religious practices. When more resilient 'pagan' civilizations were encountered, a measure of accommodation was implemented, harking back to the words of St. Ignatius that one has to enter the door of the other in order to make him/her come out of the house.<sup>67</sup>

José de Acosta, a writer and a famous Spanish Jesuit missionary in Peru, summarized three conversion methods to be used for three different types of 'barbarians' or 'ethnics' in his *De procuranda Indorum salute* (1588).<sup>68</sup> The illiterate, 'lawless' hunters and gatherers were to be converted by force, for their own good, that is, in order to save their souls from permanent damnation. For those with higher civilizational achievements, with rudimentary letters and living in organized societies, such as the Aztecs and Incas, coercion was to be combined with persuasion, and they were to be governed by a Christian ruler. The third category of peoples whom Acosta knew from missionary reports rather than from personal, firsthand experience, as was the case with Amerindians, encompassed Asian 'cultured ethnics'—Chinese, Japanese and Indians. He prescribed rational persuasion as a method for their conversion, that is, in the manner in which the early Apostles converted the classical societies of Greeks and Romans: peaceful discussions and reasoned teachings.

### Brahmans, Ascetics, Martyrs and Saints: Indian 'Repertoire' of the Jesuits

In Nobili's view, a Jesuit missionary in Madurai resembled a spiritual 'athlete', combining hard work and a sense of his own unique, 'star-like' quality.<sup>69</sup> Trusting his faculty of discernment, his theological

<sup>67</sup> Loyola, *Ecrits*, p. 666.

<sup>68</sup> On Acosta's ethnographic contribution, see Pagden; *The Fall of Natural Man*: MacCormack, S., *Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru*, New York, 1991; Bernard, C., and Gruzinski, S., *De l'idolâtrie: Une archéologie des sciences religieuses*, Paris, 1988.

<sup>69</sup> My views on missionary religious anthropology were influenced by Brown, P., *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, 1982; Brown, P., *Authority and the*

expertise, and linguistic achievements, in addition to relying somewhat excessively on Brahman 'ancient' 'exts' (or laws—*leggi*), Nobili proposed a portfolio of possible Jesuit proselytizing strategies and religious investments in the Tamil hinterland. Some of these were counter-proposals to those advocated by his adversary Gonçalo Fernandes. Brahman converts/informants and their 'authentic' texts were Nobili's foremost obsessions during the first decade in the missionary field. As a Catholic humanist, he trusted 'ancient' texts more than his eyes, the 'origins' of phenomena more than their present, incomplete 'residues'.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Brahmanical 'theology', 'philosophy' and 'ethics', or rather what was distilled for him under these familiar categories by his Brahman teachers, gave him a reassuring sense of textual order that also claimed to represent reality. If there was no perfect fit between the two in Tamil Nadu, the same was true in Europe, and finally, this is why orders like his came into existence—to bridge the gap between the real and the ideal.

Proceeding in analogical fashion, Nobili assembled and tested part by part a model of—and for—Tamil 'holiness'.<sup>71</sup> Each Jesuit missionary replicated and made it operative in his own apostolic practice. Nobili clearly saw that the basic principle of 'holiness' was dissociation. A holy man had to estrange himself deliberately, physically and/or ritually from the community in which he intends to operate. The Indian model was in this respect similar to the European. With a view to this goal, after having spent a few months in Madurai, Nobili retreated into isolation or 'meditation', according to the local rumours, filtering drastically all possible communication. The few people allowed to approach him were his Brahman cooks and his Brahman teacher and, we are told, his missionary collateral, Gonçalo Fernandes, who sometimes came furtively at night to speak with him. His visits were mostly geared at dissuading Nobili from his newfangled missionary project. The fact that Brahmans were welcome and visible in Nobili's presence, while Jesuits had to hide, marked the break with

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*Sacred*, Cambridge, 1995; See also Turner, V. 'Social Dramas and Stories about Them', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn, 1980.

<sup>70</sup> On misappropriation of textual tradition before the age of scientific breakthrough, see Grafton, A., *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800*, Cambridge, Mass., 1991.

<sup>71</sup> The famous, and still applicable, distinction between model of and model for 'reality' is borrowed from Geertz, C., *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, 1973, pp. 93–4.

the European model, in 'accidents' if not in 'essence', as Nobili would explain later in his treatises.

The strategy of '*accommodatio*', already in practice by followers of Alessandro Valignano, proceeded in a similar manner by temporary effacement of offensive, or 'scandalous' European signs, as they were often called. The bad reputation of the Portuguese among the Asian communities exposed to them, which was based on a mixture of cultural misunderstanding and conflict of interest, hastened this decision. However, Nobili's gesture was not only intended to dissociate himself from the Portuguese but also from Portuguese Jesuits, one of whom was living next door to him in Madurai. The reason for such behaviour was Nobili's conviction that in the context of the overall Christianization of India, Fernandes's model of holiness was insufficient, even detrimental. It worked well enough when confined to an individual group of coastal Christians—in this case, low-caste Paravas—but provided no opportunities for the general conversion of non-Christians.

What Nobili was searching for was a more 'universalist' model, one that all people of Tamil Nadu would consider as representing 'holiness'. His written sources unmistakably pointed to Brahmanism, a conglomerate of religious and, as he would claim in his three major treatises—*Defensio*, *Apologia* and *Narratio*—political practices. To a Roman aristocrat, Brahmanism offered the closest analogue to the European culture of the literati. If somewhat extreme in details, Tamil purity and pollution rules were for Nobili equal to the separation of social orders in both contemporary Rome and even more so in its classical times. Therefore, he enthusiastically renounced polluting substances (meat and alcohol) and polluting relationships (low-caste people) in order to penetrate among those whom he considered his equals. With the gradual discovery of the Vedas and other philosophical texts (the Śaiva Siddhānta in particular) endlessly explicated to him by his informants (and, the more he asked, the closer Sanskrit texts came to resemble European texts), he was increasingly convinced that the divine message he had come to preach was hidden in them. The Fourth Veda, reputedly lost, could easily have been replaced, he wrote to his superiors in Cochin and Rome, with the Christian evangel.

In Nobili's top-down view of Tamil culture and religion, low-caste practices, blood-spilling cults, even devotional (*bhakti*) piousness,

were merely reflections, miscegenation, or shards of the Brahmanical ideal. The primacy of Brahmanism as a general social model of Indian civilization, privileged by the missionaries in Madurai, became axiomatic in the centuries to follow.<sup>72</sup> Jesuit 'descriptive' documents from the 17th and 18th centuries provided the blueprint for the Brahman-centered perspective. Brahmans were not just keepers of religious, ethical and philosophical prescriptions and commandments, the wise men, the 'doctors', they were also tight-knit and impenetrable clans and lineages in which membership was exclusively by birth. It was, therefore, a category of ritually estranged Brahmans that provided Nobili with his first missionary model—the *Brahman sannyāsi*. As a celibate renouncer, renouncing even certain aspects of the Brahman lifestyle, seeker of ultimate soteriological knowledge, the Brahman sannyāsi appeared to Nobili as a perfect role model for an ambitious, conversion-oriented missionary.<sup>73</sup>

General obsession with rank and precedence based on rules of purity reminiscent of those of the Brahmans was not solely Nobili's aristocratic hallucination. There is evidence that the move to hierarchical stratification was on the way among many South Indian 'non-Brahman' lineages.<sup>74</sup> Christians, such as Paravas, were no exception and when the newcomer Nobili bypassed them by targeting conversions of Brahmans and Veļļālas, they worked to discredit his mission. A Brahman sannyāsi missionary was mistrusted by the Parava Christians in Madurai as well as by the church authorities in Cochin and Goa. Moreover, in Nobili's missionary expeditions beyond the Madurai area, into the climatically drier, politically erratic and (from the point of view of the former) ritually 'impure' hinterland, the Brahman sannyāsi model was not viable. Hence, a *paṇṭārācāmi* model came into being.<sup>75</sup> Missionaries assigned to this category were able to deal more directly with groups and lineages considered, according to the Brahmanical value system, as ritually inferior. As the conversion of

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Dumont, Louis, *Homo Hierarchicus: le système des castes et ses implications*, Paris, 1966.

<sup>73</sup> According to Hindu normative texts there are four stages of life, *varṇāśramadharmā*, of a perfect Brahman: *brahmacarya*—studenthood (of Vedas); *gṛhastya*—life of a householder; *vānaprasthya*—life in the forest; *sannyāsa*—life of a homeless ascetic. Klostermaier, Klaus K., *A Survey of Hinduism*, New York, 1989, pp. 320–1. In his Tamil texts, Nobili referred to three of those stages, excepting *vānaprasthya*.

<sup>74</sup> Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses*, p. 392.

<sup>75</sup> *paṇṭāram* is a non-Brahman, Śaiva renouncer.

Brahmans practically ceased in the second half of the 17th century and the missionary field among the non-Brahman groups became more extensive, the sannyāsi model was completely replaced by the paṅṭārācāmi. For example, as the militarized clans of Kaḷḷars and Maṛavas were in the process of regrouping and becoming more caste-like in the second half of the 17th century, Jesuit paṅṭārācāmi missionaries were able to attract them to Christianity, precisely on the basis of a promise to promote their ritual status through spiritual intercession. However, in the long run they were not able to secure a permanent conversion because of the lack of missionary personnel and because these clans turned to other ritualists and their patronage networks. These, obviously, offered a quicker and easier way of translating Maṛava military power into ritual honours.

While Jesuits made an effort to distinguish between what they thought were two indigenous 'priestly' models, in practice the situation was more complex. Through the role of a sannyāsi or ascetic, Nobili was easily led to *bhakti*, another important religious tradition in South India. Bhakti, a powerful, theistic devotional movement, which at times cut across caste or lineage barriers, while at others helped to consolidate new separate communities, was an unbroken current of South Indian religious sensibility from the 3rd century onwards. It affected Brahman and non-Brahman groups, both high and low, and it affected Muslim and Christian cults, as well. Even before Jesuit missionaries moved inland from the coastal areas, certain Christian signs and saints had already become objects of bhakti worship in Tamil Nadu. These had nothing to do with organized Roman ecclesia or Portuguese royal *padroado* (royal patronage), or with Europe for that matter. As independent cults they were organized around a spiritual master, male or female, who claimed connection with a higher deity and defined his/her own divine empowerment as 'submission'. In turn, his or her devotees were required to behave in the same manner of holy surrender. Intimate union with God, rejection of hierarchy, ecstasy and unorthodox worshipping practices were only general principles of bhakti devotion. Each individual community of devotees was able to shape its own rituals and objects.

By the end of the 16th century, the independent shrines of St Francis Xavier and St James (Yāgappan) mushroomed along the trade routes connecting the southern coastal regions with inland trading marts and the Coromandel coast in the east. However, besides a borrowed sign, very often a cross, a figure of the Virgin Mother, and

an orally transmitted foundation legend, little else resembled the cult of a European saint. On the contrary, these local 'Christian' saint-centred cults were a blend of various existing religious traditions, from the worship of hero warriors, fierce goddesses and *amman*s, to the vegetarian Sanskritic gods.<sup>76</sup> The spontaneous process of indigenization of Christianity facilitated the initial success of the missionary message but, in the long run, worked to undermine the Jesuit project of global conversion as envisaged by Nobili, and to some extent by Francis Xavier before him. Christianity became associated with individual Jesuit missionaries resembling Tamil power divinities and/or *gurus* (spiritual teachers). In other words, it became a personalized institution depending directly on the religious preceptor in question, such as Nobili, João de Britto, Giuseppe Beschi, Francis Xavier, etc. According to individual missionary charisma, the network of followers either expanded or contracted. Upon the death of such a divine figure, his disciples often splintered, establishing their own personalized sects or groups. In this way, individual converts, usually with only scant knowledge of Christian theology or liturgy, spread into various regions and, with different degrees of success, established their own (more or less independent from the Jesuit missions) devotional sects. Some of these Christian bhakti communities survived into the 19th century and were incorporated into new movements of Catholic and Protestant proselytism that swept the South Indian countryside.<sup>77</sup>

At the root of missionary success or failure of conversion was the ability to find local and rooted symbolic expression for the new religious sensibility and sociability. Those rituals and ceremonies that fostered community, kinship and the hierarchical organization of 'honours' (*mariyātai*) served as vehicles for the implantation of Christianity. In a Durkheimian sense, only those communities of believers that found a way to worship themselves in Christian ritual adhered enthusiastically to the new religion. Nevertheless, the Indian pre-colonial model of creative and resilient religious pluralism frustrated all efforts towards the globalization of Catholicism, in spite of its remarkable adaptability to change. Nobili's universalist dream, based partly on his Brahmanical bias and his belief in 'textual'

<sup>76</sup> Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses*, pp. 379–419.

<sup>77</sup> See, Oddie, G.A., *Hindu and Christian in South-East India*, London, 1991; Bugge, H., *Mission and Tamil Society*, Richmond, 1994.

Hinduism, had to be replaced by strategies similar to those of the indigenous bhakti movements and to the Parava type of caste-forming conversion.<sup>78</sup> According to Sanskritic tradition and various South Indian schools of theism to which Nobili, the theologian, was naturally inclined, all manifestations of the divine and supernatural had a single source—the supreme deity. By mistaking these philosophical texts for Indian ‘laws’ and ‘prescriptions’ for religious behaviour, and viewing all other actions and practices as their corruptions, Nobili focused in his proselytizing on local ‘doctors’, the Brahmans, and presumed that with their conversion the Christian message would necessarily trickle down to the low ‘impure’ castes.

It took him at least two decades to understand that his approach was inadequate, that the Brahmans were not the key figures for global conversion and that there were other models of holiness and authority. In the course of his life he experimented with all of them—Brahman sannyāsi, paṅṭāracāmi, guru, muni, etc. Nevertheless, the globalizing project was never abandoned, only deferred for the time in which, as the missionaries hoped, the political situation would become more propitious for their enterprise.<sup>79</sup> In an ironic turn, the missionaries’ experience of religious pluralism in India and their utopian project of globalization, infiltrated a century later into the British colonial and administrative imagination. Popular Hinduism, that is, the tightly-knit, community-based religious practices, were to be devalued as ancestral demon- or hero-worship, having no religion at all; while textual Hinduism, as expounded to the British by the Brahman literati, gained respect and became the ‘true’ representation of the Indian religious spirit. This inherent ambiguity in the interpretation of the ‘essence’ of Hindu religious belief and practice would be left as a dubious legacy to Indian religious reformers and nationalist intellectuals and leaders, whose reformulations of Hinduism as a global Indian religion (partly based on the model of Christianity), never corresponded, all things considered, to the local, ‘traditional’, ‘village’, and ‘microcosmic’ religious and cultural realities.

<sup>78</sup> See Županov, I.G., ‘Prosélytisme et pluralisme religieux: deux expériences missionnaires en Inde aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles’, in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 39<sup>e</sup> année, 87, Juillet–Septembre, 1994.

<sup>79</sup> The most exhaustive history of the Madurai mission is still Besse, L, S.J., *La mission du Maduré. Historique de ses Pangous*, Trichinopoly, 1914.