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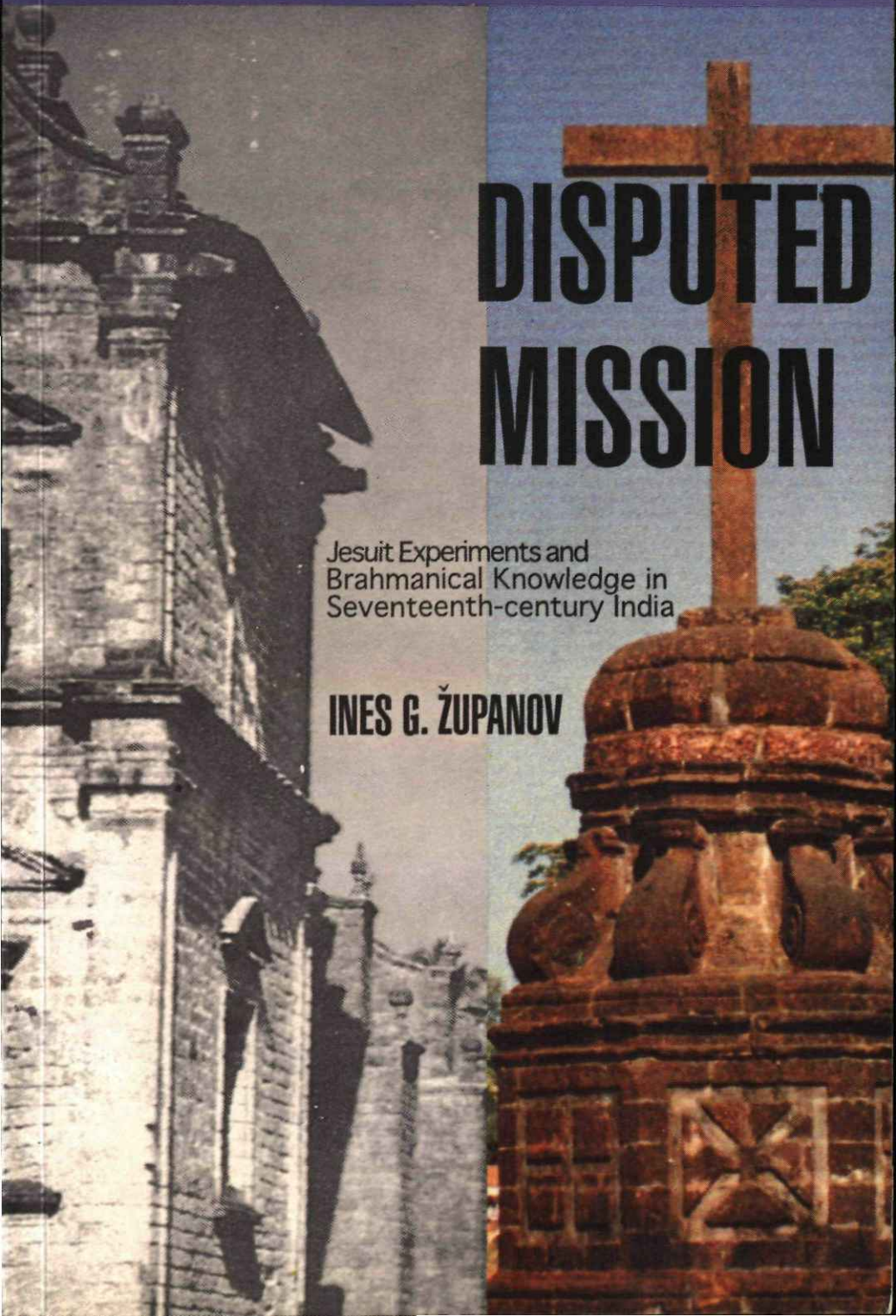

DISPUTED MISSION

Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-century India

INES G. ŽUPANOV

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Contents

Glossary

Note on Transliteration and Spelling of Non-English Words

For 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.

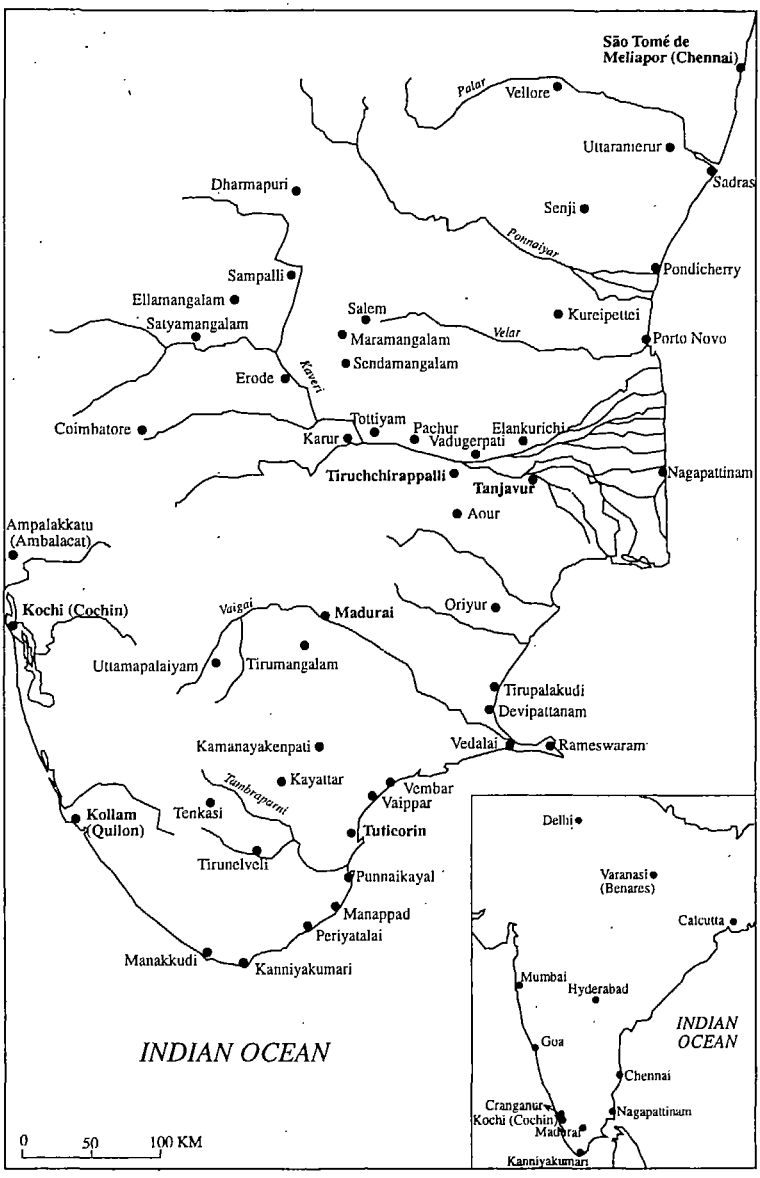
Aiyer [or *Ayer, Aier*]	[Tamil] *aiyar*: Priest, father, superior, king, a Śaiva Brahman, Nobili's priestly Tamil title.
ammaṉ	[Tamil] mother, goddess
Badagà [or *Vaduga*]	[Tamil] *Vaṭuku:* Telugu country. In missionary texts it is both ethnic and linguistic designation
bezoar	[Port.] a stone with healing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

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

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

Abbreviations

AHSI	Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu, Rome (journal)
ARSI	Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome (Jesuit Archives)
DI	*Documenta Indica*
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.[1] 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.[2] 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.[3]

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

[1] 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 viso-reys, gouernadores, capitães geraes, capitães mores, capitães de naos...que partirão de Lisboa para a Índia Oriental (1497–1683)*, Nova Goa, 1917, p. 40.

[2] Patignani, G. A. (continued by Boero, G.), *Menelogio di pie memorie d'alcuni religiosi della Compagnia di Gesù che fiorirono in virtù e santità*, Rome, 1859, vol. I, 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.

[3] 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.

signs of God's grace', plentiful conversions, spectacular miracles and, if he were lucky, martyrdom and sainthood.[4] 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.[5] 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.[6] 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

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

[5] 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'age baroque, 1540–1640*, Grenoble, 1996.

[6] 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.[7] 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 Sundareshwara ('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.[8] 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.[9] 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

[7] 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.

[8] 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.

[9] 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.

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.[10]

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.[11] 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.[12] 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,

[10] 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.

[11] 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.

[12] 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.[13]

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*',[14] 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.[15] 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.[16]

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.[17]

[13] 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.

[14] *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.

[15] 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.

[16] Fernandes (Gonçalo) to Pimenta (Nicolau), Madurai, 7 May, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff.29–31 (3rd via); ff.34–6 (2nd via), ff.32–3, ff.37–8

[17] 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.[18] 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.[19] 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*.[20] 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 (*residentia nova*) in Madurai was also referred to as 'new' mission (*missio nova*).

[18] Most of the letters consulted in this work are available in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu in Rome. See bibliography.

[19] Certeau, M. de, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris, 1975, p. 291.

[20] 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].'[21] 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.[22]

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

[21] 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.

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

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, theatre 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.[23] 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.[24]

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.[25] The power of persuasive

[23] Correia-Afonso, John, S.I., *Jesuit Letters and Indian History*, Bombay, 1955, p.36.

[24] Ibid., pp. 15–17.

[25] These ideas were developed in Michel Foucaults'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.[26] 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'.[27] 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

[26] 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. I, *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.*

[27] 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*.[28] 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 heteroglottic, 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

[28] 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.[29] Furthermore, the edifying content was to be separated from the *'hijuela'*, 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'[30]. 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.[31] From the Indias (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.[32] 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).[33] 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*,

[29] *Monumenta Ignatiana, Epistolae et instructiones*, Matriti, 1903–11, vol. I, p. 539.

[30] *'Lo que no es para mostrar, agora sea edificativo, agora no, como son los defectos proprios y de otros, y algunas cosas, pero no para todos'*, ibid., vol. 1, p. 547.

[31] Ibid., vol. 5, p. 165.

[32] From European residences, the reports were supposed to be more frequent: trimestrial or quadrimestial. 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.

[33] 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.[34] 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[35].

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'.[36] Non-Jesuits

[34] 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 fur Missionswissenshaft*, 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.

[35] 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).

[36] '*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.[37] 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.[38]

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.[39] 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.[40] From the choice of the founding date, which coincides with the appearance of Roberto Nobili on the scene and the exclusion of important letters

[37] Lockman, John, *Travels of the Jesuits into Various Parts of the World.*

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

[39] 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.

[40] 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.[41] 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'.[42] 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.[43] 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 progresso 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.[44] Some historical works were from their

[41] 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).

[42] '*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 succedido 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.

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

[44] 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 Nadasi's *Heroes et victimae caritatis* (1658).[45]

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.[46] 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.[47]

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 inspirited 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.

[45] 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.

[46] 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, *Menelogio* was a later follow-up of this type of literature. See Ibid.

[47] 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.[48] 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.[49]

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

[48] The metaphor of fluidity is borrowed from Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 1992.

[49] 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.[50] Madurai was one of the old rice-growing, 'core' areas of Tamil Nadu.[51] At least until the 13th century, the symbiosis between the ruling agriculturists/landowners and ritual specialists (Veḷḷāḷa-Brahman alliance) produced a distinct South Indian river valley culture.[52] By the 17th century, however, in Madurai as elsewhere, the Veḷḷāḷa 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.[53] 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, Uṭaiyārpāḷaiyam, Sivaganga, and lesser domains under chiefs or *pāḷaiyakkārars* (known as *poligars* in British texts), all of whom acknowledged the ritual and political dominance of the Nāyakas.[54]

[50] Satyanatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madurai*; Stein, B., *Vijayanagara*, Cambridge, 1989.

[51] According to K. V. Zvelebil, Madurai (its orignal Tamil name was *kūṭal*) 'was the first, ancient Tamil colony (*ūr*) that was truelly 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.

[52] 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.

[53] Baker, C. J., *An Indian Rural Economy 1880–1955: The Tamil Nadu Countryside*, Oxford, 1984; Ludden, David, *Peasant History in South India*, Princeton, 1985.

[54] *Poligars* or *pāḷaiyakkārars* were military comanders 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, Wagoner, 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 vowe 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.[55]

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 Aiyaṉār and Karuppaṉ and other boundary gods.[56] 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. [57]

[55] 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.

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

[57] 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), Nobili'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'.[58] A Kaḷḷar martial god, Aḻakar, 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 Tamil, denoted formerly a royal palace, just as the god, *iṟaivaṉ*, denoted king.[59] 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 Veḷḷāḷas 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.[60] Outside the Veḷḷāḷa–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.

[58] 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.

[59] Appadurai A. and Breckenridge, C.A., 'The South Indian Temple', p. 191.

[60] Heesterman, J.C., *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Ritual, Kingship and Society*, Chicago and London, 1985.

destruction and terror.[61] 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.[62] 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

[61] Hiltebeitel, A. (ed.), *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, New York, 1989.

[62] 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'.[63] As a Jesuit, especially as a Roman trained theologian and later professed father, he was well prepared for such a task.[64] 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

[63] 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.

[64] 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 (XVIe–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 find in other books'.[65] 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'.[66] 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

[65] Loyola, *Ecrits*, p. 72.

[66] Loyola, Ignatius of, *Spiritual Exercices*, '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.[67]

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).[68] 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.[69] Trusting his faculty of discernment, his theological

[67] Loyola, *Ecrits*, p. 666.

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

[69] 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' 'texts' (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'.[70] 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'.[71] 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.

[70] 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.

[71] 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.[72] 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.[73]

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.[74] Christians, such as Paravas, were no exception and when the newcomer Nobili bypassed them by targeting conversions of Brahmans and Veḷḷāḷas, 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 *paṇṭāracāmi* model came into being.[75] 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

[72] See, for example, Dumont, Louis, *Homo Hierarchicus: le système des castes et ses implications*, Paris, 1966.

[73] According to Hindu normative texts there are four stages of life, *varnāśramadharma*, of a perfect Brahman: *brahmacarya*—studenthood (of Vedas); *grhastya*—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*.

[74] Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses*, p. 392.

[75] *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 paṇṭāracāmi. For example, as the militarized clans of Kaḷḷars and Maṟavas were in the process of regrouping and becoming more caste-like in the second half of the 17th century, Jesuit paṇṭāracāmi 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 Maṟava 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 (Yāgappaṉ) 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 *ammaṉs*, to the vegetarian Sanskritic gods.[76] 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 same 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.[77]

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'

[76] Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses*, pp. 379–419.

[77] 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.[78] 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, paṇṭāracāmi, 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.[79] 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.

[78] See Županov, I.G., 'Prosélytisme et pluralisme religieux: deux expériences missionnaires en Inde aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles', in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 39e année, 87, Juillet–Septembre, 1994.

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

II. Counter-reading Jesuit Sources

Contemporary Jesuit historians made considerable efforts in publishing critical editions of the missionary letters and texts, as well as monographs of individual authors and regional histories of the Jesuit order in India.[1] Concerning the Indian missionary field, Joseph Wicki's *Documenta Indica* in 18 volumes contain almost all Jesuit letters from 1540 until 1597 available in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu in Rome. These fully annotated and transcribed original letters in Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and Latin are invaluable for the study of the Jesuit enterprise in India.

However, while the best aspects of Jesuit historical writing can be found in painstaking documentary scholarship, the monographs and histories tend to be apologetic and partisan, at times, to the point of silencing or downright suppressing contrary evidence or embarrassing details in the lives of their chosen Jesuit subjects.[2]

Other than Jesuit historians, very few secular historians paid any heed to the Jesuit missions in South India. Those who did, until

[1] Georg Schurhammer and Joseph Wicki have both authored an impressive number of articles, books and editions of original documents concerning Jesuit missions in India. See Bibliography.

[2] Meticulously researched work on Nobili by S. Rajamanickam suffers, perhaps, only from the excess of the author's personal devotion to the subject. See his published doctoral dissertation, *The First Oriental Scholar*, Tirunelveli, 1972 and his edition of Augustine Saulière's biography of Nobili (*His Star in the East*, Anand, 1995), in which Rajamanickam reprinted some chapters from his dissertation. Still the most readable popular work on Nobili is Cronin's, *A Pearl to India*, New York, 1959 (based on Saulière's manuscript). Among rich Jesuit biographical and hagiographic production, see, Dahmen, P., S.J., *Un Jésuite Brahme, Robert de Nobili, S.I., 1577–1656, missionnaire à Maduré*, Bruxelles, 1924; Rocaries, A., S.J., *Robert de Nobili S.I. ou le 'sannyasi chrétien'*, Toulouse, 1967; Bachmann, P. R., S.J., *Roberto Nobili, 1577–1656; Ein Missionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zum christlichen Dialog mit Hinduismus*, Rome, 1972; Tornese, N., S.J., *Roberto de Nobili, 1577–1656, Contributo al dialogo con i non cristiani*, Cagliari, 1973.

recently, came in two varieties: those who bitterly criticized the Jesuit adaptationist strategy of conversion—the 19th-century British historians of Christianity belong to this group, or those who more or less openly defended it. However, neither did any substantial or original work on the subject. In the 1980s, a new interest in Jesuit missionary history in South India attracted some fresh approaches. Such is the work of Sylvia Murr, who tried to grasp the importance of the 18th-century French missionaries in the context of the European Enlightenment.[3] Chronologically, my 'Jesuit story' ends where Murr's begins. Also, while Murr focused her attention on Jesuit texts in the context of European intellectual controversies and disputes, my intention is to propose a more heterological approach in which texts and actions serve as a medium for understanding interactions between various European and Indian actors and their cultural, social and epistemic consequences.

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My inquiry into Jesuit cultural and textual experiments in the Madurai mission of the 17th century is organized around four epistolary writing modes: geo-ethnographic, dialogic/polemical, theatrical, and self-expressive. These four modes correspond to four major *textual interests*, that is, messages directed to the European, Jesuit and non-Jesuit audience and clearly spelt out by Loyola—*the kings and the nobles, the common people, the Company, yourself.* Written responses to his practical advice followed the fourfold schema that worked as a centripetal force, regrouping around its core appropriate contents and tropology. Finally, each Jesuit epistolary statement necessarily became enchained and prefigured by one of the writing modes that also served to simplify both Jesuit cognitive and writing tasks. In this respect, these were not merely modes of writing, but rather a visible (t)exterior of Jesuit institutional language. By delimiting the field of enunciability through these four modes, the Jesuits were able to define their own practical and textual authority.

Directions given to the Jesuits as to how to write their letters already show the emergence of these unstated, but underlying, writing modes. As I have already pointed out, the Jesuit missionaries were exhorted, in particular, to provide ethnographical and geographical

[3] Murr, Sylvia, *L'Inde philosophique entre Bossuet et Voltaire*, II vols, École française d'Extrême Orient, Paris, 1987.

descriptions presenting a panoramic view of common people and less common spaces (geo-ethnographic mode) and to zoom, in a photographic sense, their face-to-face encounters with the important 'natives' (theatrical mode). This information was to form the main body of the letter intended not only for the edification of the Jesuits, but also for the 'delectation' of the larger public. In an additional letter, reserved only for the members of the Society of Jesus (sometimes not all of them), mostly for the superiors, the missionaries wrote about their inner thoughts, feelings and spiritual stirrings (self-expressive mode), as well as about their problems in the missions, and they aired their complaints against other Jesuits (dialogic/polemical mode).

For practical reasons, the missionaries often wrote a single letter, in at least two copies, which generally contained all four modes. Each mode was represented according to the author's immediate purpose and according to his principal audience. A semi-private letter to a Jesuit friend was mostly permeated with the self-expressive mode, peppered with gossip and requests for practical advice and favours. On the other hand, annual letters written by regional provincials were in large part devoted to descriptions of foreign places and peoples, conversations with the local nobles and religious specialists, evaluations of each missionary and the general progress of the missions.

By reading Jesuit missionary texts on and about the Madurai mission in the first half of the 17th century against the grain, and by viewing them through a prism of the four types of epistolary modes and topics prescribed by Loyola, I analyse in each chapter a problematic Jesuit relation to the world and to writing. To paraphrase de Certeau again, my aim is to understand how the power of texts reworks both the social space and the space of the texts. The dispute between Nobili and Fernandes amply documents this process. Furthermore, I am not only interested in the personal power struggle and the result *per se* of the epistemic battle between these two Jesuit missionaries, but rather in the way their texts composed, distributed and delimited cultural fields and perceptions in the context of increasing European divisions and Tamil intriguing 'otherness'. Therefore, each chapter is a double project of elucidating simultaneously the problems that the alterity of Tamil culture posed to the Jesuit missionaries in Madurai, and the way in which these cultural problems were 'chosen' and recast as a part of the larger European epistemological, literary or aesthetic scheme. Accompanied by inflated deictic effects and

postures, opening themselves to the 'other' is the Jesuits' generally proclaimed intention. However, a self-generated multiplication of voices incessantly interfered with the desired 'harmonious' direction of Jesuit social, cultural and political maneuvers.

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The first chapter—Disputed Customs: 'Political' versus 'Religious': The Dialogic/Polemical Mode—is an autopsy of the dispute which started with Gonçalo Fernandes's letter denouncing Roberto Nobili as 'gone native' and continued until a pithy Papal approval of Nobili's method of accommodation in 1623.[4] I begin by uncovering the European origins of the conflict, that is the explosive cultural baggage that the Jesuits brought with them to Madurai. The social distance prevailing among them due to ethnic, or to put it in their own words, 'national', class and educational differences, created in the colonial context a heteroglossia of European voices. Some of these voices were, for the first time, given space and incentive to talk about themselves and to articulate 'their own' perspective. These belong to the Jesuit missionaries recruited from popular *milieux*, generally Portuguese, a fair number of whom were recruited in India from among disabled soldiers, impoverished merchants, etc. My claim is, therefore, that Jesuit European 'ethnic' and, in particular, class issues were decisive prisms for an early ethnographic condensation and an epistolary vision of India. Following closely the development of the controversy, it should become clear, however, that 'class language', more than social class, was at stake. Nobili's and his partisans' competence in juridical writing, procedures and behind-the-scene networking were mostly responsible for his 'winning' this internal litigation.

Hence, Loyola's exhortation, *'Turn your reflection and efforts towards...the Company'* often encouraged internal disputes between Jesuits. The Nobili-Fernandes controversy is a perfect example of how a minor personal, class problem amplified into a century-long dispute, *the Malabar Rites controversy*, which contributed to the ultimate suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773.[5] The Jesuit mode of

[4] A shorter and somewhat altered version of this chapter appeared in French. See Županov, I.G., 'Le repli du religieux: Les missionnaires jésuites du XVIIe siècle entre la théologie chrétienne et une éthique païenne', in *Annales*, no. 6, Paris, 1996.

[5] See, 'Malabar Rites', *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 9, 1910, pp. 558–62; 'Malabares (Rites)', *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, (eds Vacant, A., Mangenot, E., and Amann, E., Mgr.), Paris, 1927.

writing, which I defined as dialogic/polemical, is a particular epistolary strategy of presenting or 'eliciting' truth, refuting contrary arguments, and/or destroying one's enemies through slander and denunciation. It is a disputative mode, which partly drew its inspiration from the rhetorical model of *disputatio*. The dialogic/polemical mode was also a gestation site for competing discourses prefiguring the three vital and unsolved issues within the Society of Jesus—the national, the political and the religious. These problems were collapsed, in various guises, into the Nobili–Fernandes controversy.

Since the material that 'accused', or as Fernandes had it, 'that killed', was Nobili's *accommodatio* experiment introducing a certain amount of Hindu–Christian syncretism, we will also witness in the course of the controversy the emergence of conceptualizations aimed at 'total' explanation and containment of the foreign. These were not descriptive, but prescriptive and speculative categories authored by theological minds such as Nobili, not Fernandes. The concept of the 'religious' sphere as separate from the 'civil' would become a powerful tool in Nobili's hands/writing for the apology of Brahman 'civilized' customs and for the method of accommodation. By insisting that Brahmanism was mostly a social system, as opposed to Fernandes's 'pagan machine' (*máquina do Bramanismo*), Nobili unwittingly relativized the concept of religion itself. Jesuit detractors in the 18th century, the French Enlightenment *philosophes*, were nourished on and later 'processed' such and similar 'ethnographic' conclusions provided by missionaries in India and China. The opening up of (and to) the 'other' proved to be a double-edged enterprise. The rift between religion and morals, belief and ethics, created a new social space ready to accommodate modernity.[6]

In the second chapter—Between Aristocratic Analogies and Demotic Descriptions: The Geo-ethnographic Mode—I look into how two distinct 'ethnographic' *Indias* were created through Nobili's and Fernandes's arguments and counter-arguments, substantiated by their respective Brahman informants, who continued to provide, fabricate and interpret Indian 'ancient' sacred texts.[7] In Nobili's India,

[6] Certeau, Michel de, 'La Formalité des pratiques', *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris, 1975, pp. 153–215.

[7] The main theme of this chapter was developed earlier in Županov, I.G., 'Aristocratic Analogies and Demotic Descriptions in the Seventeenth-Century Madurai Mission', *Representations*, 41, 1993.

the Brahmans were singled out as the principal targets of conversion. Portrayed as indigenous notables consisting mostly of 'learned men', they were also likened to the ancient Jews and Romans of early apostolic times. Nobili, who saw himself as Paul, found it natural *to become a Brahman in order to convert Brahmans*. Since the method of *accommodatio* that he applied for this purpose was primarily geared at the local elite, his choice did not seem overtly eccentric.

In following Loyola's prescription of epistolary topics, Brahmans were, in fact, represented by Nobili as both Indian *common people* and as *nobles*. Deftly shifting the backcloth, Nobili managed to pass off Brahmanical practices and behaviour both as the model of indigenous 'civility', which everybody imitated to a varying degree. Therefore, Brahmanism informed all Indian social strata and provided, according to Nobili, a template for the behaviour of the *common people*, who followed it more or less succesfully. In Fernandes's view, Nobili had got it all wrong. According to his experience, the Brahmans were the most fanatical 'pagans' and their practices the worst kind of superstitious behaviour to be found in India.

The startling difference between Nobili's and Fernandes's definition of the Brahmans is developed in their two opposing ethnographic perspectives. Nobili's 'aristocratic' approach privileged analogy, theological speculation, indigenous 'written' text and translation, while Fernandes' 'demotic' stand made him oppose the former through description, enumeration, transcription and ocular evidence. On the other hand, while the missionary dispute revolved around issues of social and missionary status in Madurai and within the Society of Jesus, the epistolary conflict also configured the topography of Tamil alterity. Helped, of course, by the local informants selectively chosen on the basis of a willingness to corroborate their preconceived ideas and arguments, both Nobili and Fernandes recreated for their European audience two opposing perspectives of Tamil society. Following contemporary anthropological terminology, we can say that Nobili assumed a proto-*emic* view, while Fernandes promoted a proto-*etic* view. As a writer and actor in the missionary field, Nobili was close to 'participant observation'. Fernandes, on the other hand, firmly defended his 'outsider' position, and his writing is akin to that of descriptive ethnology.

In the conflict between Nobili and Fernandes, we can thus see the symptoms, if not the origins, of an important epistemic cleavage.

Michel Foucault's distinction between the 17th-century emphasis on seeing and representation and the Renaissance emphasis on reading and interpretation seems, at first sight, to explain Nobili's analogical and Fernandes's descriptive approach. The problem is that Fernandes was older than Nobili and therefore, chronologically speaking, 'closer' to the Renaissance. Again, 'class' difference seems to be more important here. Fernandes came from a popular milieu and was excluded from elite humanist education. Without rhetorical competence stressing the language of resemblance, he did as best as he could, and what came out was description. The description, however, did not flow out of Fernandes's text as a kind of natural impulse. Actually, Fernandes began writing after having read Nobili's texts. And what he did, was to flatten the interpretation and emphasize classification and enumeration. The relationship between aristocratic and demotic textuality and social practice as exemplified by Nobili and Fernandes most certainly stands at the threshold of 'scientific discourse' on India.

Most of the critiques pertaining to the Jesuits were due to their 'theatrical' dissembling. As a part of the general educational programme, theatrical performances were an important component of the Jesuit experience.

In the chapter—Conversion Scenarios: Discussions, Miracles and Encounters: The Theatrical Mode—the Madurai dispute is examined by looking into a series of dramatic events presented and framed as theatrical impromptus or scenarios for future and/or ideal missionary performances. At the same time, Jesuit theatrical effects are also embedded in the seemingly straightforward epistolary narrative or theological writing. These theatrical fragments in the missionary epistolary production are situated on the very boundary between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction'. The theatrical mode of writing, in addition, manipulates strong emotions, heroic deeds, miracles and death. In missionary letters, these dramatic digressions stand out as tectonic relieves or textual folds. Each, even the shortest one, is carefully structured through inaugural, transitional and terminal motives. Completed and delimited in that way, the dramatic pieces are easily detachable from their original letters. They were, consequently, the most plagiarized and dis/authorized of all Jesuit texts. Besides the dramatic appearance, they are also closely affiliated in their particular temporal dimension with the medieval *exemplum*. Their real

historical time and epistolary time are both subsumed under the eschatological future or utopian time-space (like the Last Judgement Day), which serves as a referent to its ultimate meaning.

In the Jesuit letters from the Madurai mission there are, strictly speaking, only four topics that are prefigured by the theatrical mode of writing: Jesuit encounters with local kings and chieftains, theological discussions with Brahmans, and miracles and conversions. Each of these dialogic situations is suspended between conversation and violence. Without the military support of the Portuguese authorities, the Jesuits in Madurai had to rely exclusively on a peaceful technique of persuasion. Moreover, it was Nobili's discovery of the indigenous models of 'non-violent' coercion that helped him fashion his missionary persona. The cultural interactions between the missionaries and the Tamils embedded in these theatrical scenes evoke the uneasy ground of their mutual cognizance. We can see Nobili skilfully using both kingly and priestly models in order to attract followers from the higher castes, and we can also see how subtly manipulated he was by his neophytes.

The miracle and conversion stories overlap at times with the kingly and priestly encounters. However, they are generally less glamorous and involved lower castes. The principal topic of these stories is daemonomachia in its European garb. The Jesuits cured their neophytes with holy water, reliquaries, and the holy cross, or by reciting prayers and performing exorcism. While the remedy was European, the demons were local. Hence, the possession scenes and the techniques used by the indigenous 'sorcerers' reveal a rich world of Tamil cultural practices. For those missionaries who lived 'among the Gentiles' and were subjected to the non-Christian rulers, the most dramatic moments were encounters with indigenous kings, their ministers (often Brahmans) and army chieftains. These were defined, according to Loyola's nomenclature, as the *'kings and (the) nobles'*, whose love and respect it was imperative for every Jesuit to gain.

Jesuits, therefore, had to and did excel not only in writing 'roles', but also in assuming the 'role' of the other. In Nobili's case, he appropriated indigenous models of holiness and leadership and concocted two types of Indianized missionaries—Brahman sannyāsi and paṇṭāracāmi. The first one was in charge of the Brahmans and 'nobles', and the second of the lower status groups. These were not easy roles to play and various slippages were possible. Some Jesuits,

Fernandes foremostly, opposed the idea of 'playing roles' altogether. Nobili's 'ethnographic' theater in Madurai was, therefore, a suitable place for rehearsing and testing Jesuit political and religious *authority*. The desire for symbolic and political power legitimized by individual holiness is, moreover, the site of Nobili's utopian campaign.

In the last chapter—Utopian Prefiguration and Saintly Signs: The Self-Expressive Mode—I propose to examine the mechanism that transformed a non-space, *atopia*, a name and a qualification attributable to any 'foreign' mission, imagined or real, into a *utopia*, that is a space marked by exemplary perfection (or expected to acquire perfection in the future). Since Nobili's Madurai mission was an object of contention from its inception, utopian protective walls were erected in order to fend off criticism. In the home territory, Michel de Certeau pointed to the fact that the cleavage between *nostrum* and *alienum* (or *peregrinum*) brought forth Jesuit spiritual literature that was in itself a form of utopian desire. The second generation of Jesuits, in particular, was vulnerable, according to de Certeau, to the problem of the interior-exterior chasm.

The beginning of Roberto Nobili's apostolic career in South India, in 1606, coincides with the first big institutional upheaval within the Society of Jesus which called for urgent remedy. General Claudio Aquaviva, the fourth General of the Society of Jesus (1581–1615) initiated an inquiry, in the form of a questionnaire, into the problems and weaknesses of the Society.[8] In 1606, the responses from all Jesuit residences showed that with a sharp increase in numbers, with the rise of nationalistic tendencies, and faced with the problematic relation to the world on the way to 'secularization', the Society was not able to manage and define its institutional identity. It was the lack of a common language that produced a crisis in which many Jesuits rebelled against the established rules and hierarchies, deserted the Order, or recoiled towards the language of the interior.

How the interior institutional divisions manifested themselves in the distant missions is the main topic of the fourth chapter. First, the missionaries had less time to engage in *vita contemplativa* than their European brethren. Their apostolic days were filled with activities

[8] Nobili arrived in Goa on 20 May, 1605. De Certeau takes 1606 as the symbolic date of Aquaviva's institutional reforms. See de Certeau, 'La réforme de l'intérieur au temps d'Aquaviva', p. 53.

involving constant interaction with neophytes and 'pagans'. When the missionaries did gesture towards their interior and spiritual preoccupations, the latter were conveyed in the self-expressive mode of writing. However, they rarely wrote about their most private spiritual experiences, mystical raptures or visions. Deeply (dis)connected with the foreign social context in which they found themselves, often opaque and difficult to deal with, the missionaries wrote about themselves by borrowing the language of utopian visions and saintly obsessions.

Roberto Nobili brought his ambition to become a saint with him from Rome, and in the Madurai mission it became the generator of his utopianism. As he acted out his utopian ideas, he appeared ever more saintly to his supporters and ever more demonic to his adversaries. As for the utopian writing that substituted his spiritual impulses, he anchored it around saintly metamorphosis, which then transformed in concentric circles his human environment. He often referred to himself as 'opening the door' to let the light of 'reason' penetrate the 'pagan' land. Caught up in his own saintly fashioning, Nobili needed recognition from both his Tamil and his European audiences. While European approval and disapproval came mainly through letters, his Tamil audience interacted with Nobili on a daily basis and even helped him accomplish his saintly transformation. At the centre of the utopian circle stood, therefore, Nobili himself. The reports written by him or by his sympathizers were carefully composed and worded in order to underlie those missionary events that gestured towards Nobili's 'saintly' personal charisma.

As a rule, Jesuit missionaries were invited *to write about themselves*, about their spiritual anxieties and conquests. However, a 'true' saint, comparable to Loyola whose canonization had been prepared while Nobili fought his case, privileges silence on personal matters, all the while allowing of the circulation of stories and narratives concerning his life-story. In a similar way, Nobili cast himself as a saintly person by combining different *clair-obscure* strategies for his two different audiences. He both drew and opened the curtains abruptly in order to hide or reveal parts of his persona, encouraged others to spread rumours about him among the Tamils and to write letters to his European superiors. Nobili's individual sanctity was crucial for acquiring both spiritual and political authority over his converts and for being accepted as a guru, or a religious teacher, by the larger community. His Tamil informants provided him with 'indigenous' models

of sainthood, which he adapted and refurbished according to his better judgement. Some important traits and characteristics of Tamil leadership structure and of the functioning of the caste system can be distilled from Nobili's accounts referring to these models. In addition, a small community of 'noble' Christians cultivated by him needed periodical manifestations of their 'leader's' extraordinary signs of holiness. These signs were also imitated, amplified and disseminated by the new Christians. Since many of the saintly signs Nobili adapted and granted to his converts were inspired by Tamil ideas of the sacred and of individual piety, the spiritual outpourings and adaptations of his Christians were perceived by his opponents as a slippage into paganism.

Exemplary 'native' Christian biographies, pieced together from various Jesuit letters, should help us grasp the motivations and interests, the spiritual, social and material investments by Nobili's Tamil converts. The stories of their Christian lives point to the complex nature of their relationship with the missionaries and other European pre-colonial actors. Although portrayed by the Jesuits as a reflection and refraction of missionary activities, they stand independently as wilful personalities with an agenda of their own. The utopian 'game' proposed by the missionary appealed to discontented individuals, in particular to those who used spirituality as politics in order to promote their family status or prevent its decline.

Jesuit missionaries in their utopian culture manipulations were, to paraphrase de Certeau, the closest to 'angels', to 'Time' and ultimately to the writer who stands alone to remake the world out of relics.[9] The Madurai mission was converted into a 'primitive church', an imitation of the early Christian communities of late antiquity, a veritable archaeological vestige, but also a new beginning of Christian history.[10] In view of the divisions that followed the foundation of Christianity and irrevocably divided the corporate Christian body, the utopian sites migrated farther from its centre, springing into existence along the missionary routes. Jesuit missions in particular, those outposts of European desires and curiosity, opened unimaginable

[9] Certeau, Michel de, 'Writing vs. Time: History and Anthropology in the Works of Lafitau', in *Yale French Studies*, 59 (1980), p. 44.

[10] 'A "return to origins" (...) is the principal symbolic indication of a new practice', in de Certeau, 'La Formalité des pratiques', p. 180 (English translation used from *The Writing of History*, New York, 1988, p. 167).

spaces of freedom and opacity in which a plurality of human realities—social, religious, spiritual—was apprehended by description, reshaped through action and reassembled into a new Catholic 'world' order.

For a brief period, the Madurai mission was such an experiment in post-Tridentine reconstruction. The unknown, namely South Indian society and religion, was filled with the Jesuits' own definitions, prescriptions, ethnographic fragments, utopias, theatrical effects and theological references, simultaneously revealing, hiding, translating and converting the real. Through momentary missionary failures or successes something can be glimpsed, I hope, of the intricate relation between the labour of writing, the legibility of actions and the glittering background space, an unknown immensity, the sepulchre of time, in which they interacted.

Disputed Customs: 'Political' versus 'Religious': The Dialogic/Polemical Mode

The intricate network of epistolary communication prescribed by Loyola's *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* so 'that the news about the Society may be communicated to all', was set up primarily 'to have better information about the persons and to govern the whole body of the Society, better, for the glory of God our Lord'.[1] The 'persons' in this passage include both outsiders and the members of the Society while the need to keep each member under surveillance by all other members, regardless of their respective position in the Jesuit hierarchy, was a symptom, if not yet a sign, of a new historical transition towards centralization and methodical control by the emerging institutions and their discourses.[2]

In spite of its policing function, which stressed obedience and respect of the order and hierarchy imposed by the Society of Jesus, surveillance had, at the same time, a rather different effect on its subjects. It tended to minimize social, cultural and national distinctions between Jesuits. Especially in distant, isolated Jesuit outposts, like China or India, missionaries who worked together shoulder to shoulder came from very different social layers. Although, some sort of hierarchy of age, education or rank in the Jesuit order defined the position of individual Jesuits in the missionary field, there was

[1] Loyola, *The Constitutions*, see especially paragraphs 504, 507, 673–6.

[2] See Michel Foucault's various books on this subject. According to Jean Delumeau, it was precisely the Jesuit order with its emphasis on method, organization and centralization that marked a threshold into the new *Weltanschauung*. Delumeau, Jean, *Catholicism Between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation*, Philadelphia, 1977 (original *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire*, Paris, 1971).

nevertheless a great deal of egalitarian spirit which motivated not only their apostolic action but also their mutual interaction.

By fostering this egalitarian spirit of *communitas*, and at the same time imposing institutional hierarchy and obedience, the Society of Jesus opened a wide area of internal 'litigation' which more or less successfully contained these two contradictory impulses working against each other.[3] Controversies on a variety of issues, from strictly personal tensions to significant political imperatives, circulated in Jesuit missionary letters, at times creating international crises, especially when disgruntled members sought alliances outside the Society.

The dispute which took place between 1610 and 1623 in and about the Madurai mission is an example of a personal feud between Jesuits turning into an international issue which lingered on until it reached its resolution in the 'Malabar Rites' controversy a century later. It was by a twist of fate that Nobili, a young, educated Roman aristocrat landed in Madurai where Fernandes, an old Portuguese ex-soldier of dubious education, had been tending to his low caste Parava Christians for the previous decade or so. Moreover, it was only a matter of time before their respective worldviews, one aristocratic and the other demotic, clashed in the field and in the letters and treatises they wrote against each other. Later, as the controversy grew in scale and intensity, further opposing interests and issues were associated with the controversy, such as Jesuit 'nationalism' (Portuguese vs. Italian, Spanish vs. Portugues, etc.), and the role and limitations of the Portuguese political authority in India.

Although the controversy, mostly epistolary, between Nobili and Fernandes was about 'truth'—such as the nature of Hindu customs and ceremonies, or the correct apostolic missionary approach to Asian civilizations—, the means employed by both parties closely resemble judiciary procedure, obsessed less with reason than with winning the case. The syntax of the arguments used follows a traditional rhetoric of both judicial and deliberative oratory: accusation, proof (witnesses, evidence, possibilities), refutations, conclusions. In the absence of strictly defined laws, and considering the fact that the 'jury' and the 'judges' were often thousands of miles away, controversies of this kind were kept alive even when their initiators had long since passed away.

[3] The concept of *communities* developed in Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca, New York, 1969.

The skill to outargue one's opponents, evident in these dialogic/polemic passages, was actually taught in Jesuit colleges. The sessions, which would take place 'after dinner on Sunday or some other day of the week (unless a special reason impedes the exercise)', were simulations of real and anticipated controversies with heretics and pagans. Students were encouraged to defend temporarily an unorthodox thesis only to arrive, through discussion, at the truth as it was, or was thought to be prescribed by Catholic authorities.[4] Jesuit theologians held public theological disputations with Protestants which were attended by large audiences until 1625, when the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith (the 'Propaganda Fide') forbade it as useless.[5]

The subject in the dialogic/polemical mode of writing is, in fact, always situated in the monologue, which is necessarily a dialogical structure.[6] However, unlike the self-expressive mode of writing (i.e. in confessional genres), which masks a dialogue with the reader whose attention it sought in the first place, with an interior (one's soul) or an extrahuman (divine) dialogue, the dialogical/polemical mode is entirely exterior. It constitutes a chain of references which branch out and permeate a whole cluster of different missionary letters, creating an intertextual network which, for analytical purposes, can assume the status of the text itself.

Although the dialogic/polemical mode in the Jesuit missionary texts is interwoven with the geo-ethnographic, theatrical and self-expressive mode in an osmotic way, it is nevertheless easily discernable as writing which 'incites' dialogue. Each statement couched in the dialogic/polemical mode asked for some kind of official or personal response. Briefly, it forced its audience, even if provisionally, to take sides. As it happens, some of these responses were negative or downright hostile. Hence, a controversy would be born, implicating or bringing other actors into the initial (monologue) dialogue.

While both missionaries worked out their theological and practical ideas through their apostolic action, that is by interacting with their Tamil converts, neophytes and non-Christians, as well as with each

[4] Loyola, *The Consitutions*, p. 194.

[5] Ganss, G. E., *St. Ignatius' Idea of a Jesuit University*, Milwaukee, 1956, pp. 268–70.

[6] I am referring here to Bakhtin's idea that dialogism is inherent in language itself. Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, 1965 and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Ann Arbor, 1973; see also Kristeva, Julia, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', in *Desire in Language*, New York, 1980, pp. 64–91.

other, the final gestation site of this epistemological laboratory was their epistolary production itself. In the form of the dialogic/polemical writing mode the dichotomy between the political and the religious became fully articulated. In addition, insofar as it functions as a mode of writing, the dialogic/polemical mode is also a mode of acting, since the outcome of its appropriate or failed application has a direct repercussion on the social status of the writer.

While European issues of post-Tridentine methods of evangelization, personal honour, theological and legal precedents were at stake for the actors in this controversy, their epistolary battle also affected their discursive backcloth, in this case Hindu cultural practices. One of the outcomes of the dispute between Nobili and Fernandes was the constitution of a particular and operative epistemic configuration of Hinduism and the Indian social stratification (or the Indian 'caste' system). With Fernandes firmly espousing, partly in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, a centralizing, legalistic and intolerant approach to non-European 'pagan customs and ceremonies', Nobili developed in the course of the dispute an adiaphoristic appraisal of Indian social and cultural institutions, defining them mostly as 'indifferent', 'external' things which did not stand in the way of Christianization as Fernandes and his party had claimed. In this manner, Nobili opened a way for diversity and respect of local Indian cultures within the Catholic proselytizing mission. His was, however, a two-edged proposition, especially since the experience of the Protestant Reform in Europe had made the Catholic Church suspicious of both 'regionalism' and doctrinal innovation. In the same vein, a terror of crossing the thin line between condoning difference and causing dissent, between sewing diversity and reaping separatist movements, was a constant element in the Portuguese political paradigm in Asia. Preventive violence was one possible way of alleviating this fear; another way, better suited for the missionary enterprise, was to obliterate local traditions through forced assimilation and evangelization.

Nobili's preference for the accommodation method of conversion, hardly new in Asia after the already publicized efforts of Valignano and Ricci in Japan and China, made it imperative for him, in the course of the dispute with Fernandes, to interpret Hindu culture as 'mature' and ready to accept the Gospel. The analogy with ancient Roman and Greek culture helped this transition and brought to the fore actions and methods used by the Apostles in their early missions.

By severing Hindu customs and ceremonies from the religious context imposed by the Brahman priests, Nobili thought the conversion of India would be completed rapidly. This is precisely what he did, in his Latin texts if not in practice. He proposed the view of Hindu customs as divided roughly into two spheres: political (social, civil) and religious. While the religious sphere consisting of superstitions had, of course, to be eliminated, the social was not seen as simply 'neutral' or 'indifferent', but as necessary for the grafting of Christianity.

This dichotomy echoed not only current theological debates in Europe, but also reflected the precarious position of Jesuit missionaries in certain Asian missions in which temporal power was *de facto* and *de jure* in the hands of local, native kings. Unable to influence regional politics, although at times he was obliged to act as a Portuguese envoy, Nobili defined his locus of authority as purely religious, unconcerned as yet with indifferent 'externals' under jurisdiction of the Hindu 'civil' courts. In the ensuing controversy which involved just about everybody in the Portuguese colonial and ecclesiastical administration in Goa, Nobili forged a definition of the social which significantly reduced the domain of the religious. His opponents, on the contrary, inflated the religious, that is the 'superstitious', as the dominant characteristic of Hindu society.

The problem of true 'Indian customs' was left unsolved, but the explanatory transept overarching it remained for centuries to come locked in the dichotomy of religious and civil, nourishing various 'scientific' disciplines such as Indology and anthropology. The anatomy of the litigation between Nobili and Fernandes as it is still decipherable from the epistolary fragments conserved in the Jesuit archives should disclose in the following pages the way in which the indeterminacy of rhetoric helped create a particular discursive configuration for grasping the Hindu otherness.

Accusation—Gonçalo Fernandes's First Letter of Denunciation

Fernandes's first denunciatory letter, dated 7 May, 1610 and addressed to the Visitor Nicolau Pimenta, was a statement of 'truth' constructed by juxtaposing three problematic models of acting in the Madurai mission. One was Nobili's innovation of sartorial missionary appearance and performance, the adaptationist model which then brought into relief the other two: the Tamil (Brahmanical) model and, from

Fernandes's point of view, the 'true' missionary model. The purpose of the letter, as Fernandes explained, was to signal that Nobili's practice needed to be corrected[7] 'by the Society, (rather) than by someone else' and to provide a 'clear idea (*notíçia*) of what is going on in this city concerning this matter'.[8]

Fernandes's principal authorial move was to juxtapose simultaneously Nobili, on the one side, and Brahmanical behaviour on the other, and to distance himself at the same time. In this way, he neatly underlined Nobili's 'pagan' proclivity:

'...none of them (Christians) designate themselves otherwise than as disciples of the Aiyer, which is the way the natives indicate whose disciples they are and to which sect they belong, because when they know who is their *Curu* (Guru), they know which is their sect and what (God) they venerate. The dress of the Father is that worn by the pagan *Saneazes* (sannyāsis) of certain sects and he wears a thread... The serving (of food) and the food are according to Brahman usage, which is everything except meat, fish and eggs...'[9]

The series of similarities between Nobili and the 'Bramenes' (Brahmans) highlighted by Fernandes generated fragments of information about indigenous religious practices and cognitive categories. Just like Nobili in his letters, Fernandes referred to the controversial term *frangui* (or *frangue)* used by Tamils to designate all Europeans and Christians. However, while Nobili interpreted the native category as a humiliating and abusive term directed against those who used it as a self-appellation, Fernandes saw nothing wrong with it. Where Nobili saw the social and symbolic hierarchy with its intricate branching out, with the frangui being at the bottom end, Fernandes saw only two parallel categories—Christians, whatever their local name might be, and 'Pagans'. Not only, according to Fernandes, did Nobili unnecessarily discard the term Frangui, but he also tampered with Christian vocabulary introduced and used by Fernandes and other missionaries in South India:

For the same reason, the names are changed which the Malavar (Malabar) Christians use for sacred things, sacraments and rites and other names of divine persons, and which are used by Christians from Cochim (Cochin or

[7] The word is used two times, once spelled *consserto* and the second time *conçertado*.

[8] Gonçalo Fernandes to Nicolau Pimenta, Madurai, 7 May, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 29–31 (3rd via); ff. 34–6 (2nd via), ff. 32–3, ff. 37–8.

[9] Ibid.

Kochi) to S. Thomé (São Tomé de Meliapor). It is by the use of these names that the Christians are recognized, and they (Nobili's Christians) use others which the pagans use, and there are alterations and changes of words in prayers printed in Tamil, approved by the Holy Inquisition and used from Cochim to S. Thomé. Yet I dare affirm that the prayers made and printed by our Fathers are so faithful that not even one Malavar word has any other meaning than the Latin word, nor the Latin word any other meaning.'[10]

Fernandes did acknowledge that there were some mistakes, which he had himself pointed out, but not all Nobili's substitutions were better than previous terms. What Fernandes, of course, neglected to mention was that he was illiterate in Latin and that the Tamil Christian books were written in a particular local idiom used by the Parava Christians on the Fishery coast, whose author Padre Henrique Henriques had helped Fernandes join the Jesuit order.[11]

To further strengthen his point, Fernandes referred to a Brahman who 'affirmed that Padre Ruberto [Roberto] was not a *Frangui*, because during the course of a long conversation of several hours he had not heard him pronounce the name of Jesus... which *Franguis* always have on their lips'.[12] In order to execrate Nobili's missionary actions, Fernandes used both European sources of authority, such as the Inquisition and established conversion methods—already unquestioningly employed in India by other Jesuit missionaries who taught their converts to speak a Catholic Tamil—, and the indigenous source of authority, a Brahman. Probably the only tenuous point of agreement between Fernandes and Nobili was that Brahmans played an important role in Tamil society. However, their consensus also ended there, because Nobili saw Brahmanical cultural performances as providing a role model for Jesuit behaviour, while Fernandes came to perceive them as demonically inspired pagan practices. For that reason, the conclusion Fernandes ultimately drew in his letter was that Nobili 'behaved in everything as a man of another religion', 'of a different nation and of a royal race', and that the natives had no clear

[10] Ibid.

[11] On Henriques's linguistic achievemnts, see my 'Mission linguistique; L'indigénisation du Verbe en pays tamoul (XVI^{e}–XVII^{e} siècles)', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 103, (Juillet–Septembre), 1998. Also see Wicki, J., 'Ein vorbildlicher Missionar Indiens, P. Henriques (1520–1600)', *Studia Missionalia*, XIII, Rome, 1963.

[12] Ibid.

idea who he was since he 'deceives them and does not tell them the truth'.[13] Therefore, it was the 'truth' which was at stake and Fernandes thought that the 'facts' were on his side. In his linguistic simplicity he firmly believed in the reality of what he considered to be 'facts' as well as in the mutually perfect semiotic overlap between languages: Tamil=Latin=Portuguese. In this first letter, he was letting these 'facts', speak for themselves in a conversational, almost colloquial manner. Sure of himself, he wrote as he probably spoke, repeating the points he had already made, mixing informational, ironic and authoritative statements.

Around the middle of his letter, he even conceded that 'Padre Ruberto knows very well the Malavar (Tamil) language as well as *Guirandão* (Grantha = Sanskrit) and now is learning *Badagà* (Vaduga = Telugu). He has much zeal and ardor for the Christians and works much with them. He has made some conversions which, I believe, may be sixty or even more'.[14] However, this precarious compliment was toppled almost immediately by the two phrases that 'innocently' followed, both frequently used as addresses of politeness and courtesy: 'Your Reverence knows much better then I do, from various sides, about his virtues, his erudition and his experience, so there is nothing to say about it. May God, our Lord, open the eyes of those poor people so blind in their errors'.[15] Fernandes juxtaposed two typical epistolary formulas in such a way that they cancelled their initial purpose and, having turned against it, became an accusation. The first statement is completely emptied of any positive admiration for Nobili. What Fernandes did was to use only the skeleton of the formula, which in the hostile context incarnated as a hostile signification. The second statement, seemingly an invocation connecting, through Fernandes as the intermediary, the highest authority, God, and the 'blind natives', alluded, in this particular discursive concatenation, to another vertical connection Fernandes wanted to evoke: between Nobili (=blind native) and the Jesuit Superiors (=God).

After collapsing Nobili and 'the blind natives' into the same category, Fernandes invoked the Divine Majesty, 'who alone knows how long this method (of conversion) will last', to 'order it to last until the

[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

end of the world'.[16] The function of this mid-text digression was to shift the emphasis from the exposition of what might have appeared as Nobili's personal extravagance to, according to Fernandes, the larger ramifications of his actions. The critical point he was making was over the question of obedience. In presenting himself as willing to submit to the divine decision, even if it were to run counter to his current personal beliefs, Fernandes was hinting at his own unquestioning obedience as an important difference between Nobili and himself.

Obedience, Surveillance and Confusion of Jurisdiction

Obedience, as a normative imperative, was built into the very foundations of the Society of Jesus precisely because the technologies of enforcing it were, paradoxically, and at the same time, breeding both dissent and disobedience. Briefly, from the very start of the Society of Jesus, the issue of obedience was more talked about than practised and the controversies raging within the Society and without were based on a proliferation of disobedience. The term itself was ideologically overdetermined in such a way that it became juridically vague and ambiguous. Literally anybody could have been charged with disobedience and probably every single Jesuit at one time or another had to face a similar accusation.

The rules and regulations of the Jesuit order were, in an indirect though significant way, responsible for kindling the controversies. The obsession with mutual supervision and surveillance of missionaries bred all sorts of denunciations. The *Constitutions* clearly prescribed that,

> it would be wise when possible that one member should not be sent alone. At least two should be sent, that they may thus be helpful to one another in spiritual and bodily matters... when one less experienced in the society's manner of proceeding and of dealing with the neighbor is sent, it seems that he ought to be accompanied by another who has more experience...from whom he can take counsel in the perplexing matters which he encounters. With one very ardent and daring it seems that there could well go another more

[16] Ibid.

circumspect and cautious. A similar procedure could also be used in regard to other combinations, in such ways that the diversity may, when united by the bond of charity, be helpful to both of them and may not engender contradiction or discord, either among themselves or with their fellowmen.[17]

In practice these precepts of social mechanics geared to smother dissent and wilful behaviour often misfired. This was especially true in the overseas missions where mutual Jesuit control was difficult to enforce. If consensus concerning a 'true' interpretation or definition of the situation was not reached quickly by an authoritative decision, the ramifications of conflict usually became too complicated to deal with. Hence, the duel between Fernandes and Nobili became partly entangled in another ongoing national dispute between the Portuguese and the Italian Jesuits in India.[18]

Underlying the problem of obedience in the early modern period of European history were the shifting conceptions of the nature of both religious and secular political authority. The widening gap between the political and religious sphere worked to undermine both of them, with the result of creating multiple fields of instability. Distant missions were one such field in which confusions in jurisdiction were not simple anomalous defects, but building blocks of the system. These became fertile soil for the utopian projects which permeated the missionary calling in the first place, to be converted from the imaginary to the real. Fernandes forced Nobili to reflect in depth upon these issues and to design his own coherent utopian procedure as a way of justifying and proving his adaptationist method of conversion.

Fernandes, in 1610, referred to Nobili's newfangled method as a '*máquina*'.[19] He would use the same word, which meant a fabrication or an artifice, six years later when referring to Brahmanism as a religious system. Clearly, Fernandes equated Nobili's type of Catholicism with Brahmanism. There are sociological and psychological reasons which caused him to think that way. When Fernandes talked about Brahmans and Brahmanism, he was actually describing a social system which he had thought to have escaped by joining the Jesuit order and by 'emigrating' to the edge of the Portuguese empire.

[17] Loyola, *The Constitutions*, paragraph 624, pp. 277–8.

[18] Ferroli, D., S.J., *The Jesuits in Malabar*, Bangalore, 1939, vol. 1, pp. 281–2. There were other nationalistic rifts in the Society, e.g. Castillians vs. Portuguese, etc.

[19] Machado, J.P., *Dicionário Etimológico da Lingua Portuguesa*, Livro Horizonte, 1952, p. 57. From Latin *machina*. *Máquina—obra composta com arte*. Fig. *artifício, maquinação*. Camões, Luís de, *Os Lusíadas*, X, 80—A universal *máquina do Mundo*.

Nobili's presence in Madurai was for him a painful reminder of his own stigmatized position in Portuguese society. By joining the Society of Jesus and, finally, obtaining the post in the Madurai mission, Fernandes had enhanced his social status. He was in charge of a large community of Christians, ran a hospital and a school. Since his Christians all belonged to the same Parava caste, he probably had a very influential position among them and served as a kind of religious headman.[20]

In the segmented social and political situation which he found in Madurai, Fernandes was able to raise himself to the highest ritual position among his Christian flock. This is how he described the divisions in Madurai:

> There are in this town more than ten or twelve different sects among the *Mouros* (Muslims) as well as among the *gentios* (gentiles=Hindus), and there are Portuguese Christians and the *christãos da terra* (indigenous Christians). Each *ceita* (sect) and *nação* (nation) wears a different dress. In the same manner the *Curus* (Gurus) and the *Saneazes* (Sannyāsis) (wear a dress) by which they are distinguished one from another...The manner of dressing shows to what caste and sect one belongs'.[21]

His black cassock must have been a sign of his own distinct position within this nomenclature of castes and religious sects. Also, his particular status in Madurai society qualified him for special privileges from local political bodies. In 1599, seven years before Nobili's arrival in Madurai, the Visitor, Pimenta, informed Aquaviva that during his visit to the Tamil country, Fernandes provided him and his companions with a letter of recommendation from the Nāyaka 'which enabled (them) to travel throughout the whole country without being molested'.[22] Therefore, Fernandes obviously had access to the Nāyaka court and probably had his own network of alliances within local society. Even if the Brahmans considered him as a

[20] ARSI, Goa 24 II, f. 268 v. See Wicki's, 'Introdução', *Tratado*, p. XVI. The original manuscript is in ARSI, Goa 59. S. Rajamanickam claims in his 1995 edition of Saulière's biography (see Bibl.) that the treatise was written by Nobili's Brahman convert Bonifacio Xastri/Śivadharma and translated into Portuguese by Andrea Buccerio. The proofs for this claim are, however, lacking

[21] Fernandes, G. to Pimenta, N., Madurai, 7 May, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 29–31 (3rd via); ff. 34–6 (2nd via), ff. 32–3, ff. 37–8.

[22] Pimenta, N. to Aquaviva, C., [Port]), Madurai, 2 December, 1599, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 3–6. He paid several visits to the Malabar province. See Ferroli, *The Jesuits in Malabar*, vol. 1, p. 282.

frangui and of a low caste status, it is possible that he never really felt it to be a special problem. Finally, he himself came from what was considered in Portuguese society as a modest background and he saw absolutely nothing wrong with his missionary work among the low-caste Paravas.

With Nobili's arrival, everything changed. The sixty-five year old missionary, who had lived in the Madurai mission for about eleven years, took Nobili's strategic separation of the 'old' and the 'new' mission as a slap in the face.[23] The young Roman missionary, soon after settling down in Madurai and while Fernandes was away on the Fishery coast, 'gave orders that it should be said in town that we were not eating together, that we lived separately, and that he had no dealings with me. Even our servants had to be separated'.[24] In spite of their ideological differences, both Fernandes and Nobili reacted to the caste system in the same manner. Each accepted a Tamil definition of their respective position in the local social hierarchy and structure and continued to play the role in which they had been cast. The only difference was that Nobili was simply not able to accept Fernandes's status-niche. His aristocratic upbringing, coupled with intellectual curiosity and an early obsession with becoming a saint, made him choose and adapt another indigenous model of impression management. Fernandes, in his effort to slander Nobili, presented him as falling under the influence of the Brahmans and other 'noble' castes: 'During the time of my absence he made some Christians (i.e. conversions) and they told him about the (adaptationist) method of conversion'.[25]

Fernandes was right in asserting that the indigenous ideas were very important in shaping Nobili's method of conversion. A famous paṇṭāram advised him to adopt the clothing of an indigenous religious specialist and his permanent entourage of Brahman converts served to whisper in his ear the secrets of the Indian sacred books.[26] In many ways, however, Nobili found what he already knew or wanted to find. His adaptationist moves and choices were, besides other

[23] Gonçalo Fernandes Trancoso was born in Lisbon in 1541 and came to the Madurai Mission in 1595. For more on Fernandes's biographical data, see 'Introdução' in Wicki's *Tratado*.

[24] Fernandes, G. to Pimenta, N., Madurai, 7 May, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 29–31 (3rd via); ff. 34–6 (2nd via), ff. 32–3, ff. 37–8.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and 17–75.

biographical reasons, a product of his Jesuit education. Adaptation 'to places, times and persons' was Loyola's idea expressed in his *Constitutions* as a first draft to the instruction system later elaborated as *Ratio studiorum*.[27] The founder of the Jesuit order saw education as an instrument for shaping different individuals into appropriate and, therefore, 'useful' human roles. In a letter of directives about the founding of the colleges he stated:

> From among those who are now merely students, in time some will depart to play diverse roles—one to preach and carry on the care of souls, another to government of the land and administration of justice, and others to other occupations. Finally, since young boys become grown men, their good education in life and doctrine will be beneficial to many others, with the fruit expanding more widely every day'.[28]

In a larger context, these statements, and there are many similar ones in Loyola's *oeuvre*, could easily be translated into a missionary technique, especially the emphasis on 'playing roles', which inspired the enemies of the Society who branded it as 'the art of dissembling'. Nineteenth-century British and American Protestant missionaries were especially vocal in denouncing the Jesuit deception created by Nobili. J. W. Kaye, for example, declared, 'There is no more pregnant chapter in the whole narrative of human imposture, than that which embraces the astonishing narrative of the Jesuits' Missions in South India'.[29]

As for Loyola's statement concerning the dissemination of education by those who were already 'shaped' in the colleges, it was further developed in the *Constitutions* in relation to missionary activity.

> Preference ought to be given to those persons and places which, through their own improvement, become a cause which can spread the good accomplished to many others who are under their influence or take guidance from them. For that reason, the spiritual aid which is given to *important* and *public persons* ought to be regarded as more important (my italics)'[30]

Therefore, when Nobili decided that the Brahmans and the 'noble' castes had to be targeted first, he was closely following Loyola's

[27] Loyola, *The Constitutions*, p. 216.

[28] Ganss, George E., S.I., *The Jesuit Educational Tradition and Saint Louis University*, 1969, p. 8.

[29] John, William Kaye, *Christianity in India: An Historical Narrative*, London, 1859, p. 37.

[30] Loyola, *The Constitutions*, p. 275.

injunction. For Nobili, as well as for Loyola, the circulation of cultural and spiritual commodities and ideas had to start, if they were not yet in motion, at the top, from where they would naturally trickle down.

Fernandes, very probably felt the same way, as long as he was the only missionary in Madurai and the source and the centre of Christianizing activities. He also tried to establish a dialogue with the Brahmans in order to win them over to Christianity. Nicolau Pimenta witnessed a few of such encounters: 'In our house (in Madurai), we often held discourses on the Christian religion which were attended by several Brahmans, who came out of friendship or curiosity'.[31] However, when Nobili came to Madurai, he disclaimed all Fernandes's gradual efforts to cultivate the 'pagan' Tamil 'vineyard'.[32] As a young missionary, he wanted mass conversions, miracles and martyrdom quickly. In his impatience, he struck Fernandes where he was most vulnerable. He established a hierarchy among the Jesuit missionaries in Madurai based on birth, rather than on age or longer experience in the field. Fernandes complained to the Visitor of Malabar Province, Father Pimenta: 'Let your Reverence know that the whole fabrication (*máquina*) rests on this: the preachers, although coming from Europe, ought to be of a princely race'.[33] What started as personal animosity ended up in a century-long controversy simultaneously posing two general questions: the nature of Hindu religion and society and the evangelizing methods of the Society of Jesus. The dilemma revolved around the issues of hierarchy and equality, authorial legitimization, theological efficacy and social engineering in all their opaque, elliptic and undecided contours. Both of these questions gave rise to very different opinions, rebounding back and forth among different actors, European and Tamil.

The 'Religious' and the 'Social'—Formation of Public Controversy

The immediate response to Fernandes's letter divided the opinions of the expatriate Europeans in India. Two Goan theologians, António Fernandes and Francisco de Vergara, issued their opinion condemning Nobili's actions with the *proviso*—'supposing...the

[31] Pimenta, N. to Aquaviva, C., (Port)), Madurai, 2 December, 1599, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 3–6.

[32] Loyola's favourite metaphor, which he used to designate a foreign mission.

[33] Fernandes, G. to Pimenta, N., 7 May, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 29–31 (prima via) (34–6, 32–3, 37–8).

information contained in the letter (by Gonçalo Fernandes) is true'.[34] Peppered with quotations from the New Testament, their basic objection was that Nobili tried to establish divisions among the Christians. However, what seemed to have bothered them most was Nobili's effort to dissociate Christianity from the Portuguese.

> It is not good to encourage the gentiles in the erroneous opinion that they should not deal with the Portuguese, because they (the Portuguese) are of low caste. This can only increase their disgust for our religion and ourselves. Moreover it is a point which touches the reason of state...

Therefore, they reacted mainly as Portuguese colonial actors, seeing in Nobili's experiment an anti-*padroado* scheme.[35] However, they were cautious enough not to take for granted that the information was 'true' and did not commit themselves strongly on the basis of only one letter.

At the same time, in June 1610, a (theological) Consultation held in Cochin came up with a different conclusion.[36] According to the document (which was probably written by Luís Cardoso) reporting the proceedings to Pimenta, the Visitor, two letters were read by Laerzio, the Provincial, before the session began. One was Pimenta's order to hold the Consultation, and the other General Aquaviva's letter to Laerzio stating: 'We approve the mode of life which your Reverence has prescribed for Father Roberto Nobili'. The bias in favour of Nobili, which Laerzio tried to impose on others by flaunting a written opinion of the highest Jesuit authority (the General of the order, who, according to the *Constitutions*, 'in the place of Christ our Lord directs' the missionaries), was thus subtly suggested by the writer of the document.[37] Hints and cues were promptly discarded in favour of more aggressive stratagems for undermining Laerzio's strategic advantage. Cardoso, therefore, informed the assembly that

[34] ARSI, Goa 51, f. 122.

[35] The *padroado* or royal patronage (a parallel institution in Spain was *patronato real*) was an institution that consisted of royal privileges and duties concerning overseas missions. Hence, according to the regulations of *padroado*, the king was responsible for providing financial support to the missions. On the other hand, he had authority over all ecclesiastical appointments in his domain.

[36] Report of the Consultation convened by Alberto Laerzio concerning the Madurai mission by order of Father Visitor (Nicolau Pimenta). ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 27–8. No date is indicated on the document. According to Rajamanickam, the date was 20 June, 1610. Rajamanickam, *The First Oriental Scholar*, 1972, p. 226.

[37] Loyola, *The Constitutions*, paragraph 618, p. 273.

Manuel Leitão, Nobili's companion who stayed in Madurai less then a year but turned against his methods, affirmed that the new mission was very expensive and that Nobili behaved in an unorthodox way.

> He wore velvet slippers which people would kiss, he bathed twice a day before meals as Brahmans do, but without reciting prayers (...). This he did not do out of love of cleanliness, but to show himself as a Brahman, and when he went out, he used to go in a *palanquim*.'[38]

After this initial division of opinions, the statements of the remaining twelve consulters, all Jesuits, were recorded in the document.

In spite of Laerzio's efforts to intimidate them by Aquaviva's written opinion, and in spite of Cardoso's negative *exposé*, the consulters seemed to have formed their own opinions concerning the matter. However, they all agreed that the solution of the problem lay in determining whether or not Brahman customs, clothing and general body signs, belonged to a religious or to a political sphere. Those who supported Nobili stressed the 'political' origins of the Indian signs of social distinctions and ranking, while those against Nobili, the 'religious' origins.

One of the most prominent members of the Consultation, Francisco Ros, Archbishop of Serra (Cranganore), who might have faced problems somewhat similar to Nobili's while working among the Syrian Christians in Kerala, also called St Thomas Christians, supported the opinion that 'the thread (*a linha*) was not the emblem (*sinal*) of a religious sect (*ceita*) but of the caste'.[39] Gaspar Fernandes, who was characterized according to the 1594 Catalogue of the province of India as '*flegmático sanguino*', evaded a straightforward answer.[40] 'If the thread', the writer of the document cautiously purported, 'was

[38] According to *Hobson-Jobson*, a palankeen or palanquin is 'a box-litter for travelling in, with a pole projecting before and behind which is borne on the shoulders of 4 or 6 men'. Yule, and Burnell, (eds.), *Hobson-Jobson*, pp. 659–61.

[39] Francisco Ros was Catalan. Portuguese authorities, and probably some Portuguese missionaries, looked on Spanish Jesuits with suspicion. See Santos, Angel, S.J., *Francisco Ros, S.J. Arzobispo de Cranganor, primer Obispo Jesuita de la India (1557–1624)*, Madrid, 1948; Ferroli, *The Jesuits in Malabar*, vol. 1, pp. 300–60; for Syrian Christians in India, see Brown, L., *The Indian Christians of St Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar*, Cambridge, (first edn. 1956), 1982.

[40] Wicki, J., S.J. and Gomes, J., (eds), 'Catálogo primero (y segundo) de las informaciones comunes de los Padres y Hermanos de la Compañía de Jesús de la India Oriental, echo a 15 de Deziembre de 1594', DI, vol. 16, p. 936.

the sign of a sect, it could not be worn on any account, and it was this last point which was to be investigated'. Not wanting to take sides, he was obviously playing his own game, which remains opaque to us, except that from some of his later actions in the Malabar Province, at that time as its Provincial, Fernandes seemed to have also cautiously participated in an anti-Italian campaign.[41] Estevão de Britto, a close friend of Francisco Ros, confirmed that the thread was not a religious sign, but one of the caste.[42] He felt, however, obliged to attach an *addendum*, by which he displayed and affirmed his knowledge of Indian customs.[43] According to his better judgement, 'since the *sannyāsis* did not wear it (the thread), though they were Brahmans, the Father ought to do away with it'. Gonçallo Monteiro and Cristovão João made the same point, as did Ambrósio Soeyro, who was generally in favour of the new mission with the *caveat* that Nobili should try to economize on his expenses, '(especially) if he is going about in a *palanquim* for ostentation'. Vincente Alvares was also reported to be supporting the new method of conversion, while Gaspar Andrade presented himself having once been against it, 'but after passing through it (Madurai)', had changed his mind. Cristovão d'Abreu, described as 'flegmático' in the 1594 Jesuit Catalogue, declared that the thread was an indication of caste and could be worn by the missionaries 'without scandal', and that the change of dress was already practiced among the Fathers in China; nevertheless, he did not believe in the future of the Madurai mission, 'because it was very hard, and it will be difficult for the Father to hide for long that he is Portuguese'.[44]

The prejudice of the writer of this document against Nobili, or perhaps simply his pro-Pimenta stance, can be seen in the way he allocated space to different opinions. The main proponent of adaptation, and one of its creators, Alberto Laerzio, had his statements pared

[41] Ferroli, *The Jesuits in Malabar*, vol. 1, pp. 376–7.

[42] Gaspar Fernandes had a dispute with Francisco Ros when he removed Estevão de Britto from his service. Ros designated Britto as his successor to the Serra (Cranganore) Archbishopric. Britto became Archbishop after Ros's death, to the great dismay of Franciscans and Dominicans eager to fill the seat with one of their members. Ferroli, *The Jesuits in Malabar*, vol. 1, pp. 361–5.

[43] His proficiency in Malayalam was excellent according to the sources. Ros, however regretted his inability to speak Syriac.

[44] DI, vol. 16, p. 980.

and spread through the document, which in turn produced a defensive effect. Thus, when Domingos Pereyra criticized Nobili along the usual lines of argument and concluded that, 'the Father strove to make people understand that he preached a religion different from that of the Franguis on the Coast', Laerzio 'interfered, and in so many words said that those who spoke in this way of the mission were imperfect, that it was attacked because it had been founded by strangers (Italians), and he made other remarks with great anger and passion'[45]. In an atmosphere of rising controversy, it is doubtful that Laerzio was the only one to interrupt other participants. The dismembering of his statements might have also served to stress Laerzio's impulsive character and his inclination to make unmeditated decisions. One such example was his decision a year earlier, in 1609, to renounce all the churches under Jesuit administration on the Fishery coast because of a dispute between the Bishop of Cochin (Andrea de S. Maria O.F.M.) and the Jesuits.[46] Not all Jesuits were happy with his defeatist decision.

Moreover, the views of those who directly spoke against Nobili's method, although only four out of the fourteen present, were quoted extensively in the document. Diogo da Cunha, who was described as '*colérico sanguino*' in the Catalogue of 1594, was one of the most vocal opponents of the new mission. According to him, 'the method (...) did not seem to conform to that of the Apostles, nor to that of our ancient Fathers, Master Francisco (Xavier), Gonçalo (da Sylveira) and others'.[47] It is possible that da Cunha's hostility had some connection with Alessandro Valignano's opposition to his promotion to professed father. Since Valignano and other Jesuit missionaries in Japan and China, along with their local converts, already experimented with the adaptationist method, da Cunha might have taken here his personal vengeance against Valignano and his ideas.

While more than a decade before, Valignano had disqualified da Cunha as being ignorant of theology, a bad preacher and possessing

[45] Report of the Consultation convened by Alberto Laerzio concerning the Madurai mission by order of Father Visitor (Nicolau Pimenta). ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 27–8.

[46] See Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. II, p. 175. Malabar Province was riddled with confused jurisdictions.

[47] Among copious literature on Francis Xavier, see especially Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier, His Life*, 4 vols; On the Munhumutapa martyr, Gonçalo da Sylveira, see Leite, B., D., *D. Gonçalo da Sylveira*, Lisbon, 1946.

'neither (...) talent for governing nor pronounced prudence nor pronounced virtue'[48], da Cunha was able at the Consultation of Cochin to say what he thought of Valignano and his method.

That method is not in keeping with the humility and charity which should inspire the preachers of the Gospel. The Father makes a great display of nobility and arrogance, but he shows very little charity, (...) so that if some of the Fathers on the coast were dying like Fr. Gonçalo Fernandes, he would not take care of them, nor even hear their confession, which seems to be wrong[49].

The second opponent, Luís Cardoso, objected to everything Nobili did and reminded the other participants that the question of wearing the thread was already settled and forbidden by the third and fifth Council of Goa (1585 and 1606).[50]

Although this document, entitled *Relacão da Consulta que o P. Provincial Alberto Laerzio fez sobre a Missão de Madurè conforme a ordem do P. Visitador*, appeared at first to be an official statement, it was actually an intelligence report for the Visitor Pimenta, witnessing and apprehending in the text the formation of the pro-Nobili party.[51] The text itself is a patchwork of voices solidified into individual statements with a full name attached to each of them. The author, Luís Cardoso, recorded even the smallest differences of opinion among those who approved of Nobili's method and concluded the text with a negative opinion and a reference to a higher authority in Goa.[52] This produced a menacing effect. Although the majority of the theologians were, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, supportive of Nobili, the writer was against him and therefore the whole document exudes ambiguities to counter any possible positive interpretation.

[48] This character judgement actually refers to both Miguel Leitão and da Cunha and it is not entirely negative: '*ni tienen talento de govierno ni señalada prudentia o señalada vertud con que sean eminentes a los otros, aunque son virtuosos y buenos hombres.*' Valignano, A., to Acquaviva, C., Macao, 15 November, 1593, DI, vol. 16, p. 267.

[49] Report of the Consultation convened by Alberto Laerzio concerning the Madurai mission by order of Father Visitor (Nicolau Pimenta). ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 27–8.

[50] Cunha Rivara, J. H. da, *Archivo Portuguez Oriental*, fasciculo 4., (*que contem os Concílios Provinciaes de Goa e o Sýnodo Diocesano de Diamper*), (Nova-Goa, 1862), reprinted, New Delhi, 1992.

[51] Nicolau Pimenta was favourable to Nobili during his first mission as Visitor. On the other hand, he wrote against the conversion method of accommodation/adaptation in a letter to Aquaviva in 1596, denoucing Valignano's East-Asian missionary enterprise . DI, vol. 13, pp. 724–5.

[52] For Luís Cardoso's biography, see DI, vol. 17, p. 30*.

Unlike the documents relating the two Goan Consultations, the '*relação*' from the Cochin Consultation was not signed. The names of the members were listed at the very beginning of the text as if forming a column, and the order of the names followed more or less the order of their statements in the text. It served, therefore, as a *clé* to the actors of the Consultation. These neatly handwritten names instantly attract the attention of the reader and call for a vertical, top-down and bottom-top, scanning of the inquisitorial gaze. Nicolau Pimenta, to whom the letter was addressed, must have read it that way, as a strategic document which called for action: networking with the allies, arguing against and slandering those who firmly supported Nobili and persuading those whose support was rather hesitant to change sides. It was an operative text which, besides its edifying purpose, served as a coded spy letter containing important tactical information. The fact that the document was not signed may indicate that Luís Cardoso mailed it to Pimenta without showing it to the others, who might have objected to its contents.

Between 'Inquisitorial' Objectivity and 'Theological' Neutrality

The two 'Goan' documents[53] were very different textual and tactical enterprises. No contradictory voices disturb their surfaces, as much as they might pulsate at deeper layers, while individual signatures authenticate the documents.[54] They were both answers to two of Pimenta's tendentious questions: 'Are any of the facts mentioned in this information (Fernandes's 1610 letter) deserving of censure, and what censure?', and 'Are the Superiors bound under pain of mortal or venial sin to forbid any of them (facts)?' While in the 'Cochin document' the names of the participants served as a *clé* for reading the rest of the text, these questions had a very similar role. They were inquisitorial tools soliciting, in this case, accusations so that in due time they might produce the main product of the inquisitorial situation: the confession. As accusatory mechanisms, these texts were fused into points arranged in numerically ordered paragraphs. The dismembering of the argument was at once a sign of the intellectual

[53] ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 122 and ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 123.

[54] One of the important historians of the Society of Jesus in the early 17th century, Sebastião Gonçalves, is among the five Jesuits who signed the second document. See bibliography.

and 'spiritual' inability of the writers to produce a synthetic and universally valid opinion, and a sign of the will to normalize and tidy up all individual opinions into official statements.

However, just like the two theologians, Francisco de Vergara and António Fernandes, who signed the first Goan document, the fathers who signed the second one took great care to preserve some distance from Pimenta's ready-made judgement. A letter by Gonçalo Fernandes, an unknown, low-class missionary with a rudimentary education directed against Roberto Nobili, an Italian aristocrat, versed in theology and with many useful connections in Rome, was not sufficient proof. Hence, these documents were permeated with a hybrid tone of neutrality and authority.

Following Pimenta's two provocative questions, the text of the second document began with the members of the Consultation asserting their reservations concerning the *'informatio'* written by Fernandes and passed on to them by Pimenta. Having thus covered their tracks in case the *'informatio'* was found to be fabricated, they proceeded to build a 'neutral' stand by condensing and reordering the 'facts' presented by Fernandes's unkempt letter. Each of the points brought one particular issue into focus. The taxonomy of these 'pointed' paragraphs was hierarchically arranged, from the less controversial to those which had an outright heretical position. Following the same order, the authors start with descriptive statements:

1st point: The Father wears the thread. When a Brahman becomes Christian, the thread he previously bore is broken and a new one, blessed by the Father, is given to him, with a lamina and a cross in the form of that of Avis, bearing the name of Jesus written in Latin script.[55]

After this initial descriptive innuendo, already in the second point, they slipped straight into value judgements:

2nd point: The Father and his Christians bathe and wear sandal on the forehead blessed by the Father on the previous Sunday before Mass. He never says Mass without first performing this ceremony, as the pagans do before their *puja*.

It is the juxtaposition of the Mass and the *puja*, a generic Sanskrit term for religious worship, that tipped the balance of neutrality. The third and the fourth points already gestured towards accusation, although they still preserved their impartial descriptive focus. In a

[55] The Portuguese royal House of Avis which ruled from 1385 to 1580.

similar play of juxtaposing contrary or ambiguous enunciation, the third point established that Nobili had 'removed from the Christian doctrine approved by the Holy Inquisition certain words and replaced them by others, not that suitable'.[56] Here, in one statement, we find two opposing voices. One which hid itself behind the authority of the Inquisition and a second almost ready to approve the substitution of certain Tamil vocables by others which were 'not that suitable'. The fourth and final point, that Nobili 'is not considered to be a Christian' because of his behaviour and dress code, was a serious accusation. However, this accusation was softened, again, by the possibly dubious credibility of Fernandes's letter.

These four descriptive points were followed by four judgements which were supposed to serve as official, prescriptive, action-oriented orders. The tone of these pronouncements, although trying to maintain an authoritative and impartial descant, progressively rose to condemnation. To Pimenta's dismay, they had nothing *per se* against the neophytes wearing the thread with a cross attached to it, but they still considered it to be a sign of 'a false religion and not a sign of nobility'. The use of sandal paste and baths before the Mass was for them a superstition *idebiti cultus* and therefore a mortal sin. They declared changes in the Christian vocabulary as 'rash and open to error' and Nobili's way of creating/acting was deemed 'a schism'. This last judgement was the most serious accusation. Following the logic of Nobili's method, they went a step further and found an interesting conjuncture.

> The Christians of the Father (do not recognize) any other head of their sect, than the Father himself whom they call Aiyer... if the Pope or their Bishop went to visit them, they would not consent to communicate with them, (to admit them to) their sacraments and their church because they (the Pope and the bishops) are *Franguis*, and for that same reason they would not recognize them as their heads. Not only do they (Nobili's converts) show that they are separated from the head, but also from the whole body.

[56] The suitable Tamil translation of Christian doctrine, according to this statement, refers to the catechisms written by Henrique Henriques. A small catechism—*Doctrina Christam en Lingua Malauar Tamul* or *tampirāṉ vaṇakkam* was printed in Coulam (Kollam/Quilon) in the Collegio do Saluador on 20 October, 1578. See *Tamiḻnādaṉ, tamiḻ moḻiyiṉ mudal accup puttakam*, Selam, 1995. The big catechism—*Doctrina Christam* or *kirisittiyāṉi vaṇakkam* was printed in Cochim (Kochi/Cochin) in the Collegio de Madre de Deos on 14 November, 1579. See S. Rajamanickam, *Vaṇakkam*, Tuttukkudi, 1963.

This was an outright accusation that Nobili's conversion theatre in Madurai was breeding something like Lutherans or Calvinists, and that Nobili's impersonation was not apostolic, as he claimed, but heretical. Moreover, in the conclusion to the first of Pimenta's questions, the five theologians claimed that Nobili's Christians 'wish to believe and to practice a different religion from the one practiced and believed by other Christians'. If this were so, then Nobili either failed in his apostolic effort, or became a schismatic. The theologians' final recommendation was that 'these mistakes' had to be corrected with the *proviso* that, in consideration of Nobili's new Christian community, it be gradual and not 'all of a sudden'.

Spiritual, Profane and National—A Counter-accusation

While the official documents of all these theological consultations were on their way to Rome, counter-opinions, and responses multiplied and were dispatched in haste. Nobili wrote three letters[57], one co-authored by Antonio Vico, to the General of the Society of Jesus, in October 1610, and signed and distributed his first treatise, explaining and defending his conversion method, *Responsio ad ea quae contra modum quo, nova Missio Madurensis utitur ad Ethnicos Christo conuertendos, obiecta sunt* [58]. In one of these letters, dated 19 October, 1610, Nobili commented upon the second Consultation in Goa, which censured his method for having excessively relied on information provided by Gonçalo Fernandes, 'who never took kindly to the method we are using here, because he thought it detrimental to the honour of the Portuguese...'[59] In this way, he subtly tried to deflect at

[57] Nobili, R., to Aquaviva, C., Madurai, 19 October, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 162–3; Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C., Madurai, 21 October, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff., 164–5; Nobili, R. and Vico, A. to Aquaviva, C., 12 November, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff., 168–9

[58] *'Responsio ad ea quae contra modum quo nova Missio Madurensis utitur ad ethnicos Christo convertendos obiecta sunt'*. Published in *Robert de Nobili, L'Apôtre des Brahmes, Première apologie. 1610*, ed. Pierre Dahmen, SI, Bibliotheque des Missions; Memoires et documents, Paris, 1931. Appended to this treatise is *'Responsio ad censuram RR. PP. Antonii Fernandez et Francisci de Vergara'* in which Nobili refutes their accusations point by point. The original manuscript is in Rome—ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 125–44 and ff. 145–61. Pages 125 to 144 are written by two hands and in two different inks. It is dated 12 October, 1610 and signed—Robertus de Nobilibus. Pages 145 to 161 are written in three hands and not signed. In the upper left hand corner of the first page *2 via* is indicated.

[59] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C., Madurai, 19 October, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 162–3. Nobili writes about the Cochin and the second Goan Consultation. He mentioned in

least a part of the controversy in the older and ongoing national disputes between the Jesuits. A more important point in Nobili's behalf, and he was quick to underscore it, was Fernandes's poor education.

I do not think that this Father's opinion should, unless I am mistaken, count for much, because he is not well versed in Sacred Theology, and was always opposed by the Archbishop, the Provincial, and the most important Fathers in the College of Cochin'.[60]

By denying Fernandes's theological competence, Nobili exposed his own epistemological ground based on hierarchical positioning. In a war of opinions, according to his tacit proposition, one should look into who spoke and who supported whom. Hierarchy was, therefore, the key to truthful meaning.

Only two days later, in another letter to Aquaviva, Nobili sharpened his arguments in an *ad hominem* attack on Pimenta, who was responsible for putting in circulation the letter written by Fernandes and was, according to Nobili's careful but defamatory phrasing, a dogged and disobedient character.[61] The problem with Pimenta was that, in terms of the Jesuit internal hierarchy, his position was superior to that of Nobili. He was a doctor of Theology from the University of Évora, had already held very important ecclesiastical posts in Portugal and had came to India as Visitor[62]. For that reason, Nobili used 'political' and 'national' arguments against him, which in many ways transcended the questions of rank within the Society.

Writing as an inferior, Nobili asserted and strengthened his argument by referring to more authoritative persons than even Pimenta himself. Concerning Pimenta's ability to deal with the matters of secular administration, Nobili implanted a personally communicated opinion of the late Viceroy of the Indies, Don Martim Afonso de Castro:

I remember hearing (from him...) who was very intimate with me, that Father Pimenta, (...) though endowed with a distinguished character, seemed to him in his way of governing more like a secular ruler, or a general,

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passing that at the Cochin Consultation, only Luís Cardoso, Pimenta's *socius*, was against him. In the same letter he mentioned that he wrote a treatise responding to the Goan censures (*'Responsio'*).

[60] Ibid.

[61] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C., Madurai, 21 October, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff., 164–5.

[62] Pimenta was vice-rector of the College of Arts of Coimbra (1580–82), twice rector of the same college, once rector of the University of Évora and twice provincial of the Portuguese Province (1588–92, 1601–04), DI, vol. 16, p. 580.

than a religious man, and he assured me that he had gathered this impression from two or three conversations he had had with him.[63]

The Jesuits did not shun administrative, secular skills. On the contrary, these were respected and encouraged, provided that they were guided by a spiritual source. The Jesuits learned to interpret all their actions as an earthly deflection of the divine light. The frontispiece of Daniello Bartoli's *Historia della Compagnia di Giesù*[64], which portrays Ignatius of Loyola suspended in mid-air on a cloud and holding a host which radiates beams of light onto the four parts of the world, represented by a globe and four 'ethnic' women, is a polyvalent metaphor/allegory which contains the notion that every Jesuit action is divinely inspired through the mediation of the founding father. Just as Loyola captured and deflected an invisible sunbeam in the engraving, each Jesuit in the missionary field was supposed to capture, as a gesture of obedience and humility, whatever light trickled down from the translucent host inscribed with the coat of arms of the Society of Jesus, a monogram IHS (Jesus Hominum Servator). What Nobili tried to convey in his letter to Aquaviva was that Pimenta lacked this divinely inspired spiritual treasure.

The system of government of our Father Visitor seems to be in opposition to the divine glory, because it does not seem to promote either our sanctification or the conversion of souls, because it is too imperious and more political then spiritual.

The attack on Pimenta's moral and spiritual competence was relatively short in comparison with a list of grievances against his 'political' and 'administrative' errors. Therefore, after disclaiming Pimenta's interior, spiritual motivations, Nobili discredited his exterior, worldly activities. Pimenta, moreover, sided with the Bishop of Cochin, a Franciscan, in the dispute with the Jesuit missionaries in 1609.[65] The

[63] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C., Madurai, 21 October, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff., 164–5. These accusations were already directed against Simão Rodrigues, one of the first ten founding fathers of the Society of Jesus whose Portuguese 'nationalist' agenda, penchant for 'royal' life style and disobedience was well known among the members. His was a negative model for Jesuit *curriculum vitae*. See O'Malley, J. W., *The First Jesuits*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1993.

[64] Bartoli, Daniello, *Historia della Compagnia di Giesù, Della vita e dell'Instituto di S. Ignatio...libri cinque*, Rome 1650.

[65] The Jesuits denied that Andrea de S. Maria O.F.M., the bishop of Cochin, had any jurisdiction over their missions on the Fishery coast. After a fierce controversy, Laerzio gave up, in February 1609, all the churches on the Fishery coast and in the diocese of Cochin. In 1614, the king of Portugal (Spain) ordered the reestablishment of the Jesuits on the Fishery coast. It took Jesuits another seven years to recover their churches.

cause of disagreement was the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over churches, missions and Christians along the Fishery coast. Pimenta's *socius*, Luís Cardoso, who was staunchly against Nobili at the Consultation of Cochin, gave a sermon criticizing the Jesuit Fathers in charge of the Province and suggested that they humbly ask forgiveness from the Bishop of Cochin. Nobili's grave conclusion was, therefore, that, 'we seem to be lacking in that unity and harmony, which our Blessed Father Ignatius recommended so strongly, and which has so far been the proud characteristic of our Society'.[66] Furthermore, Pimenta reshuffled the missionaries, which was one of his prerogatives, but this, according to Nobili, had 'disastrous consequences'. Apparently, Pimenta transferred missionaries from one mission to another without paying attention to their language competence which, acquired after long years of study, was completely wasted.

The most important accusation which Nobili wove into his letter concerned Pimenta's 'national' prejudices. To support his accusation against his superior, Nobili made another important Jesuit, also already dead, speak before him.

> Father Alessandro Valignano, a man worthy of eternal memory, used to say that, though the provincial in India could be Portuguese, the good of the Society demanded that the Visitor should never be, for with your permission, if I may let my vanity speak, I would say that generally speaking those who are not Portuguese occupy the first and not the second place in their zeal and labours for the conversion of the infidels, because discarding easily their national customs, they become all to all, which Portuguese cannot do, except with great difficulty.[67]

Slanderous intentions led Nobili to express in this way what was perceived by the Jesuits as the 'national problem'. Nobili's rather simplistic perspective was not altogether wrong. Italian Jesuits such as Valignano and Ricci designed and put in operation the adaptationist method of conversion in Japan and China, just like Nobili did half a century later in India. However, some Portuguese Jesuits and other religious figures sided with Nobili, while Andrea Buccerio, an Italian and one of his own early companions who initially wrote laudatory letters about the new residence in Madurai, became his ferocious adversary. There is something to say about Nobili's claim that Italian

[66] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C., Madurai, 21 October, 1610 (Lat.)ARSI, Goa 51, ff., 164–5.

[67] Ibid.

Jesuits were much more open to cultural experimentation than the Portuguese. This was in part due to Portuguese national and political interests and pretensions in India. The fact that, from 1580, the Portuguese crown itself was in hands of a Spanish king, made the question of national pride even more conspicuous. The dilemma of the Portuguese Jesuits was how to balance their national identity, officially sealed with the vow of obedience to their king, with their Catholic-cosmopolitan identity, prescribed by the vows of the Jesuit order and their special vow to the Pope 'concerning the missions'. Their experiments oscillated between these two axes. An additional factor was that in India and other Portuguese oriental colonies, the Jesuits recycled soldiers, merchants and other adventurers. Gonçalo Fernandes was one of those. For these locally recruited Jesuits, who were mostly Portuguese, the missionary project in India was identical with the Portuguese colonial enterprise. Italian Jesuits, on the other hand, recruited from the highest classes in Italy, came to India straight from the Collegio Romano where they learned not only how to refute and convert 'heretics' and 'pagans', but also that they were the avant-garde corps of the Catholic *reconquista* transcending nationalities. Therefore, a fault-line between the Portuguese and Italian Jesuits in the oriental Provinces ran along both national and class lines.

Meanings and Evasions—Interpreting 'Official' Opinion

What Nobili defined as accommodation to 'national customs', Pero Francisco, who replaced Laerzio as a Provincial of the Malabar Province, bluntly dubbed it as dissimulation in his letter to Aquaviva in November 1612.[68] Probably, in the same bundle of letters from India, Aquaviva received another letter written in Cochin by Francisco Ros, Archbishop of Cranganore, who clamoured that: 'As to dissimulation, scandal, or sins... they exist only in the minds of some people who are blinded by their national prejudices...'.[69] Obviously, each party in the controversy was trying to disclaim the other by reducing their arguments to the slippery ground of the ongoing, unresolved and unresolvable Jesuit controversies.

[68] Francisco, P. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 4 November, 1612 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 181–2. He was appointed Provincial of the Malabar Province in 1611 by Nicolau Pimenta.

[69] Ros, F. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 28 November, 1612 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 184.

Like Pimenta, Pero Francisco was an accomplished theologian, and already in 1594, was listed in the Jesuit Catalogue of the Province of India as a professor of philosophy in the professed house in Goa.[70] Consequently, his main line of argument against the adaptationist method was that the categorial apparatus used by Nobili and Vico to justify their missionary endeavours was 'speculative and metaphysical'. Francisco did not believe in Nobili's 'eucharistic' effort to change the ends and intentions of the Brahmanical ceremonies so that they would be devoid of superstition and yet look outwardly the same.

> In all he behaves like a Brahman...(as if) all these Brahmanical ceremonies were to belong to cultural and political commerce more than to religion or superstition, and though they may have another bad end, he gives them an end which is good; though the use of those things is in one sense bad, yet in another it is not vicious, but indifferent.[71]

The folding of a Christian layer over 'Brahmanical superstitions' in order to ultimately smother the latter, appeared to Francisco as a useless, unproductive method.

However, another thing bothered Pero Francisco about both Nobili and Vico, and this he had in common with Gonçalo Fernandes, namely their noble pretensions. Referring to personal communications from Nobili and Vico, Francisco related the linguistic and genealogical contortions which the Fathers used in order to attract converts. 'The fathers found in the books of these people that the Brahmans are also called *papus* or *papas*' and therefore proclaimed themselves 'of the caste of *papas* and their relatives'.[72] As a good logician, Francisco, not without irony, conceded that 'the minor, so far as the two Fathers are concerned, may be affirmed because according to what I have heard, both are relatives of Popes'.[73] This was only the first of the two genealogies Francisco mockingly claimed not to have understood because of their obscurity. Vico and Nobili, however, did not invent the second one.

> (...) Brahmans come from Abraham and are their descendants according to the flesh, whilst we are his descendants according to the spirit, and also because the kingdom of Abraham extends to the Indians through Jesus

[70] DI, vol. 16, p. 994.

[71] Francisco, P. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 4 November, 1612 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 181–2.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

Christ, it is perpetuated in the Pope of Rome and also in the Bishops and priests.[74]

There is little doubt that Vico and Nobili were less than eager to identify the notorious Guillaume Postel as the most vocal mouthpiece of this Judeo-Hindu analogy.[75] In his effort to found an ideal religion by mixing Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Postel searched for connections between them wherever he could. In *De Originibus* (Basel, 1553), he even claimed that Hindus might have still preserved some old doctrines of Moses which had not been preserved by the Jews. While Francisco found the theory connecting Brahmans and Abraham 'very hard to believe', a century later many important Jesuit missionaries in India, one being Venantius Buchet, used this analogy in their writings as a self-evident truth.[76]

Francisco proved to be a tenacious adversary of the adaptationist method of conversion until his death in 1615. Nevertheless, all his efforts to impose his will were swamped by Nobili's and Vico's counter-arguments. Both sides claimed that they were strictly obeying orders from their Jesuit superiors. However, the transparency of these orders and the interpretations of their meanings were incessantly disputed. There is no doubt that the arbitration of the Jesuit authorities in Rome often only contributed to the polemical muddle in the distant overseas colonies, and *in partibus infidelium*. In fact, the decisions were delayed or postponed, usually due to both centrifugal political reasons and contradictory evidence and opinions seeping in from the distant missions. In 1612, Aquaviva pronounced his judgement about the new conversion methods in the Madurai mission. Each of the disputing parties interpreted his letter in a completely different way. Therefore, the referent, Aquaviva's will or opinion,

[74] Ibid.

[75] Marco Polo called Brahmins—Abraiman. By the beginning of the 17th century, identifying Brahmans as the descendants of Abraham was quite common. Guillaume Postel, an eccentric and prolific French *savant* from the middle of the 16th century, disseminated this etymology in his many books. He joined the Society of Jesus with great pomp in 1544, only to be expelled a year later. See his *De originibus, seu, de varia et potissimum orbi latino ad hanc diem incognita* (...), Basel, 1553 and *Des merveilles du monde, et principalement des admirables choses des Indes et du nouveau monde*, Paris, 1553. On Postel's career, see Bouwsma, W. J., *Concordia Mundi: The Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel (1510–1581)*, Cambridge, Mass., 1957. For the use of the same analogy see also, Charpentier, Jarl, *The Livro da Seita dos Indies Orientais* (Brit. Mus. Ms. Sloane [1820]), Uppsala, 1933, p. 68.

[76] See Joseph, Bertrand, *La Mission du Maduré*, 4 vols.

lost itself or was lost in the distance between Rome and its overseas missions. Hence, various actors, Francisco, Nobili and Vico, read into the General's response their own desires. Each of them 'transported', in a Greek sense of *metaphorein*, Aquaviva's text into their own field of expectation.

From the sparse quotations found in Nobili's and Francisco's mutual altercations concerning the meaning of Aquaviva's text and from Vico's pretentious hermeneutic analysis of its major arguments, it seems that both Vico and Nobili tried hard to squeeze out a favourable interpretation. What Nobili did, in his typical analogical style, was to argue that all that Aquaviva ordered in his letter corresponded perfectly to Vico's and his apostolic actions. Sometime in January 1613, Pero Francisco received Nobili's letter explaining how he understood Aquaviva's orders.[77] By cutting and pasting together selected quotations from Aquaviva's letter and then commenting on each point, Nobili came to his own conclusions as to the 'true' intentions and prescription of the Father General. Concerning Aquaviva's injunction to 'show and declare the truth to the Christians...that the law of Christ embraces princes, people of noble and of low condition (*ignobiles*)', Nobili solemnly pledged complete obedience by combining it with another of Aquaviva's statements: '(in Catholicism) each one keeps his rank (*grado*), (and) distinct places are assigned in the Church for the nobles and the plebeians'.[78] Having, thus re-constructed Aquaviva's 'true' order from these two quotations, Nobili turned it against Francisco's reading of the same letter:

> Your Christians must visit openly the Church of Fr. Gonçalo, make their confession and hear Mass... and the Christians of Fr. Gonçalo must do likewise regarding your Church, for all this follows clearly from our father's (Aquaviva's) letter.[79]

Consequently, Nobili declared that he would tell his Christians to go to Fernandes's church, under the *proviso* that distinct places were assigned for high and low castes, 'a thing which is much in use among the Christians of St Thomas, where the *Paleas* (Pulayas)[80] and the

[77] Nobili, R. to Francisco, P., January 1613 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff.176–77.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Francisco, P. to Nobili, R., Cochin, 6 December, 1612—inserted in his letter to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 21, Nov. 1613, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 187–90.

[80] Pulayas were members of a caste of agricultural serfs (also called Cheruman and Cherumukkal). Thurston E., and Rangachari, K., *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Madras, 1987 (first publ. in 1909), vol. II, pp.45–91. Salvador Cortês wrote in his

Moucos (Mukkuvas)[81] remain near the porch, while the Brahmans sit in the first rank, and next the Rajahs and other castes'.[82]

In spite of its logical ruses, Nobili's letter to Francisco was emotionally charged with a plethora of contradictory directions, like quasi-repentance, self-defence and defiance. Antonio Vico, in his interpretation of Aquaviva's letter, exercised the self-restraint of a seasoned theologian. His arguments were enclosed in or moored to sixteen points. The tone and position assumed by Vico in his letter was that of a theological arbitrator. By employing a dispassionate idiom, Vico tried to maintain two positions simultaneously: that of an 'objective' Vico-cum-theologian passing judgement on the Vico (and Nobili)-cum-missionary, while at the same grafting this onto Aquaviva's letter, which appeared to have been written as a theological opinion parceled out into points. Ostensibly, the purpose behind these 'pointed' letters was to minimize diverging interpretations. However, the written word from the superiors in Rome turned out to be quite elusive and opaque once it had reached the distant missions, and vice versa. Hence, Vico's exegesis of Aquaviva's letter is diametrically opposed to to that of Francisco. The difference comes out in the procedure of decipherment. While Francisco waded through Aquaviva's text in search of theological directions, apostolic orders and political advice, Vico sought the Father General's deeper 'desires' and implicit or implied opinions. He found them, of course.

According to Vico, Aquaviva 'clearly shows his desire that this mission should go on' and 'towards the end of the letter, our Father approves all the customs which are essentially 'political', if we deem them necessary'.[83] However, the nature of the 'political' as opposed to the 'religious' found no consensus among the two parties. Francisco clearly identified this problem in his letter which censured the adaptationist method. His condemnation was based, he asserts, on Aquaviva's letter.

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annual report from Cochin, 3 January, 1572 that the 'poleas' were considered as low and polluting, and that the missionaries had to give them separate mass on Saturdays (as a memento of their conversion on 5 August, 1570). For the same reason, they celebrated *'la Navidad del Señor'* on December 26, DI, vol. VIII, pp. 503–4.

[81] Mukkuvas are fishermen and divers residing on the Malabar coast. Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. V, pp. 106–17.

[82] Nobili, R. to Francisco, P., January 1613 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 176–7.

[83] Vico, A. to Francisco, P. (*Parecer*), no date, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 245–7.

Our Father says that in the church a special place could be assigned to the nobility...and thus a certain special decorum could be kept out of regard for the nobility in purely political matters. But by purely political matters, I do not mean all the things which your Reverence puts in that category, but those which are considered as political by all, without exception, regarding which there is no difference of opinion, or point of view.[84]

To this static conception of knowledge, Vico opposed a dynamic one—a progressive acquisition of information concerning Indian customs.

Formation of Privileged Knowledge—Brahman Informants and Divine Communication

The Western notion of epistemological progress merged at a certain point with indigenous Tamil 'revisionist' strategies. From his Brahman teachers Nobili had learned of the fragmentary nature of the most sacred and secret texts: the Vedas or *maṟai*.[85] The motif of a 'hidden' or 'lost' Veda enthralled Nobili and appeared to him providential, both for his historical task of implanting Christianity and as a sign and proof that Indian religion bore traces of the true revelation which had been lost or forgotten. What he was not aware of was that by accepting this classical Hindu concept of truth as 'won from transcendence', in David Shulman's words, and elaborated in various Tamil temple myths, he entered the Hindu world of incessant cultural rewriting.[86] In trying to substitute his truth in place of the 'lost' one, Nobili inscribed himself into a genealogy of Hindu revivalist *gurus*, making Christianity appear to his Tamil audience as another Hindu dissident movement. The only local informants who substantiated and advocated ideas corresponding to Vico's and Nobili's expectations were learned Brahman teachers who, in turn, attuned their interpretations of Hindu religion and culture to suit missionary assumptions. Therefore, not all information was valid, and a simple 'seeing with one's own eyes' was a necessary, but insufficient requirement for Nobili's and Vico's epistemological construction. In his

[84] Francisco, P. to Nobili, R., Cochin, 6 December, 1612, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 187–90.

[85] *Maṟai* = the Vedas, the sacred writing, a secret, etc. J. P. Fabricius's *Tamil and English Dictionary* (first version printed in 1779), Tranquebar, 1972, p. 783.

[86] Shulman, David, 'The Enemy Within: Idealism and Dissent in South Indian Hinduism', in *Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Dissent in India*, Mouton Publishers, Berlin, 1984, p.25.

letter to Aquaviva, Francisco Ros evaluated the state and development of knowledge about Indian customs. His basic argument was that relying on information by ignorant Goan Brahmans, fishermen and other people of low social status with whom the first contacts, missionary and political, were made, produced wrong ideas which were 'unfortunately' accepted by the first two Provincial Councils of Goa.[87] As for the informants used by Nobili's adversaries,

> from them they (Pimenta, Francisco, etc.) could learn nothing, for they never tell the truth when they speak to us about their ceremonies, which are not taught except to certain classes of Brahmans, while the other castes are merely told how to practice their religion, but not what it really is. These things we learned through their most secret books written in their various languages which we have studied.[88]

An accomplished linguist himself, Ros therefore imposed certain conditions such as language competence and access to the secret 'books' for any authoritative statement about Hindus.[89] In a modest way, he was trying to set the standards of 'scholarship' by excluding a certain kind of cognition and by emphasizing another.

His statement surreptitiously promoted another quite devious impression, which is that, certain learned Brahmans excepted, Hindus themselves did not know what their religion was really about. Two propositions follow from his argument, although Ros did not develop them all the way. The first one is that religious practices and ceremonies performed without knowledge of their 'religious' signification become shallow and emptied of any meaning, whether religious or political. Of course, in that case, one can fill it with a new context, such as Christianity. The second proposition is that the religious context was until then provided by the Brahmans. When the pro-Nobili party endorsed the necessity to adapt to local political customs, they insisted that the lack of a 'true' religious signifier resulted in a demonic intervention into the secular sphere, that is, in

> a custom, introduced by the Devil, according to which those of noble families do not consort with those of inferior status, as the Jews of Old did not mix with the Samaritans. And if they accept food from them or enter their

[87] See, 'Os Concílios de Goa e o Sýnodo de Diamper', *Archivo Portuguez Oriental*, fasc. 4, pp. 1–107.

[88] Ros, F. to Aquaviva, C., Cranganore, 4 July, 1613 (or 7 July, 1613) (Port), ARSI, Goa 51, ff.195–9

[89] Ros knew both Malayalam and Syriac, besides his native Catalan, Portuguese and Latin. See Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India*, p. 31.

houses, they are looked upon by their parents and relatives as degenerates and are rejected by them, and even punished by the amputation of their limbs.[90]

Although the Jesuits had nothing against hierarchically structured societies, and perceived inequality as a sign of social maturity, they still identified strict indigenous purity/pollution observances as aberrations. The severing of limbs especially attracted their attention and figured prominently in their descriptions of punishments for caste transgressions. Since the Portuguese in India amply practiced mutilation and public whipping, it is surprising that the Jesuit missionaries felt such abhorrence to indigenous corporal torture. Yet, there are at least two reasons for that. First, the use of violence was seen as an exclusive privilege of European authorities, and second, in the missions located inland and at quite a distance from the Portuguese enclaves on the Konkan and Malabar coast, the Jesuits learned to interact with their converts in a less violent way. Without Portuguese military support, the missionaries were forced to develop other, non-violent strategies of persuasion. As different as they were, their common denominator was the screening of violence, physical and psychological, inherent in the process of conversion. The missionaries also learned, through interaction with their local informants, about certain indigenous non-violent models of acting which at the same time conveyed a ritually high status appropriate for religious specialists. Nobili's ascetic, Brahman sannyāsi model was the most radical among many other experimental ones. The display of non-violence, therefore, triggered positive responses from indigenous conversion-targets. On the other hand, it also enabled Jesuit missionaries to define their position in the colonial hierarchy, that is *vis-à-vis* Portuguese secular authorities, as the keepers of universal morality, which in an ideal, Christian world is free of violence.

The universalizing pretensions also implied that Jesuit missionary actions transcended Portuguese colonial enterprise and, in certain cases, emanated from a divine agency. When Francisco Ros wrote to Aquaviva that, 'the Madurai mission which is in my diocese is truly a supernatural work, very hard, and altogether worthy of perfect religious and true sons of the Society',[91] his message between the lines was that human agencies had no right to judge it. In the light of

[90] Consultation of Cochin, 1613 (Lat.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 193–4.

[91] Ros, F. to Aquaviva, C., Cranganore, 4 July, 1613 (or 7 July, 1613) (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff.195–9.

mounting controversy, it was one of the rhetorically strongest arguments, even if invalid, in the medical sense of the word, that is, amputated from a verifiable frame.

Jesuit Orders and Disorders

Before Aquaviva even received the letter from Ros, Pero Francisco issued an 'Order which ought to be observed in the new Madurai Residence',[92] taking no notice of the alleged 'divine inspiration' which underscored the mission and, instead, dissected it along the seams. In a surgical impulse, Francisco, cut through and removed all the limbs and muscles of the new Madurai mission in thirty-four points. He imposed his control, at least textually, over Jesuit bodies, over their way of dressing, acting, talking and writing.

Instead of the sannyāsi ochre loincloth, Nobili and Vico were ordered to 'wear a gown, which reaches the ankle (*artelho*)'.[93] How far Francisco's modifications and commands went, can be seen in his prescription of the proper missionary underwear: 'As for underclothing, let them wear some sort of pants or drawers or other kind of breeches, as religious decency requires'.[94] Excessive cleansing activities, from wearing newly washed clothes every day to frequent baths, were also forbidden as belonging to Brahmanical superstitions and 'pride'.

While certain activities were banned on the basis of their pagan connotations, others, such as the abstinence from meat and fish, were discouraged as contrary to 'nature'. After having pruned the appearances of the individual missionary body in the first ten points/commands, Francisco turned to the social body, the church as a container of social, cultural and spatial signs. All resemblance to ceremonies in the *pagodas* was to be eliminated from the performance of the Mass:

> The blessings and distribution of sandal to Christians which is done in the Church before Mass must be given up, nor is the opening and closing of certain curtains during certain parts of the Mass permitted. To make offerings to the pictures of the crucifix or to paint the shoulders is forbidden[95].

[92] Francisco, P., to Nobili, R. and Vico, A., '*Ordem que se deve guardar na noua Residença de Madurè*', 11 Aug. 1613, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 191–2.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

Similarly, all local distinctions of rank and status were to be abolished in the church, among other things, in the manner in which the holy communion was distributed:

> The priest must not carry the blessed sacrament to each one, as has been done till now, but let him remain at the communion table, at the foot of the altar...Let not the places reserved for the nobles be so arranged that those who are less noble cannot go to communion[96].

Finally, in the last five points, Francisco's prescriptive intervention cut through the linguistic questions. Translations of Christian sacraments and their Tamil or Sanskrit etymologies coined by Nobili appeared to him as completely uncontrollable. Moreover, he clearly sensed that whoever appropriated the license to produce Christian language in translation would have a privileged epistemological and juridical authority. In a word, Francisco perceived Nobili as a power-thirsty character aspiring to slip away from Jesuit hierarchy and control. No doubt, some of Francisco's fears were legitimate insofar as all distant Jesuit missions served as nurseries for original, eccentric or outright rebellious ideas. Nobili was certainly not the only one who tried both to participate successfully in the system, and to push the limits of personal expression. This, at first sight, contradictory drive provided a creative axis for Jesuit actions, as can be seen in the biographies of Loyola, Xavier, and other famous Jesuits.

For the same reason, Francisco's efforts to delegitimize Nobili's experiments suffered from arbitrariness and inconsistencies. Wanting to establish, once and for all, some kind of tangible standards for transposing Christian language into local Indian idiom, and to prevent free-wheeling adventurers from within and without the Society of Jesus alter the established standards, he proposed his own 'mixed' translation model. Except 'the name of God, *Tambiran*, (which) need not be given up as it is used in the whole of India, and they call God by that name', Francisco maintained that

> the names proper to things pertaining to the Catholic Church, which are not found among the gentiles, are better and more safely preserved in their Latin or Portuguese proper names. Better (conserve) these than invent other names in the languages of the gentiles.[97]

Names were protective clothing for meanings, Francisco seemed to be suggesting, but some meanings, like Eucharist, Confirmation, etc.

[96] *Ibid.*
[97] *Ibid.*

denoting Christian sacraments, were so filled with the sacred that they actually solidified into 'holy' things themselves. As such, they were untranslatable into a foreign language. In other words, Indian languages, *terra incognita* to Francisco, appeared to him intrinsically pagan and unsuited to articulate Christian ideas. On the other hand, Tambiran (tampirāṉ), used as a name for Lord, both secular and divine, only by certain groups on the Malabar coast such as 'grave Pandarams, Mours and fishermen', was magnified by Francisco into a term that perfectly overlapped with the Christian word for God.[98]

What appeared as an inconsistency of method in Francisco's choice of the Christian vocabulary for Indian languages, which he wanted to institutionalize as a 'true' order, was nothing more than an 'arrested' photograph of Henrique Henriques's pioneer efforts at translating and adapting Christian terms to the 'Malabar' (Tamil) language. *Flos Sanctorum* written by Henriques was riddled with hybrid language.[99] Portuguese and Latin words were phonetically adapted and inserted into more or less Tamil syntax. The same procedure was followed in his two catechisms—*Doctrina Christam en Lingua Malauar Tamul* or *tampirāṉ vaṇakkam* and *Doctrina Christam* or *kirisittiyāṉi vaṇakkam*.

Nobili's proposed rewriting and re-translating the Christian Tamil catechism by eliminating Portuguese and Latin words was presented by Francisco as a deviation from the 'old version (*versio antiqua*)... which may be a novelty among the Christians'.[100] In his normalizing efforts, Francisco tried to establish a ground and precedent against all future re-writings. He felt that Henriques's translation ought to have served as a foundational Christian text in Malabar or Tamil. Any attempt to change it amounted to unmitigated dissent.

[98] Proença, A. de, *Vocabulário Tamúlico, com a significaçam portvgveza...na imprenssa Tamúlica da Prouíncia do Malabar: por Ignacio Archamoni impressor della, Ambalacatta em 30 Iulho, 1679 annos* (facsimile copy published in *Antão de Proença's Tamil-Portuguese Dictionary*, AD 1679, ed. by Xavier S. Thani Nayagam, Kuala Lumpur, 1966, p. 175.

[99] Henriques, H., *Flos Sanctorum eṉṟu aṭiyār varalāṟu*, ed. S. Rajamanicakam, Tuttukkudi, 1967. Printed in 1586, *Flos Sanctorum*, conceived as a compendium of biographies of Christian saints, consists of 669 pages. Extant are only two copies of the work. One in the Vatican Library which was republished by Rajamanickam. The other one is in Copenhagen, Denmark. (I am grateful for this, albeit fragmentary, information to Graham Shaw, India Office Library, London).

[100] Francisco, P., to Nobili, R. and Vico, A., '*Ordem que se deve guardar na noua Residença de Madurè...*', 11 August, 1613, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 191–2.

Francisco's orders were constituted in this text as an illocutionary act and institutional force.[101] Each order was referring to and creating a reality in which each enunciation was supposed to become a pragmatic imperative of action. In other words, the addressee ought to have translated his statements into cultural performances. As such, 'illocutionary' enunciation always gestures towards its single literal meaning. However, in the cultural context, there are no literal meanings and the alchemy of translating texts into actions is a multilevelled enterprise. Obviously, Aquaviva's letter, which Francisco and Nobili interpreted in quite different ways, did not consist of explicit orders and left enough space for contradictory 'translations'. Francisco wrote his orders making sure that all murky connotations were trimmed from their contents, at least those which might be open to multiple interpretations by the readers/actors who were to obey them.

Subverting Texts and Orders

When faced with Francisco's direct commands and without a possibility of 're-interpreting' them, Nobili and Vico, used another common missionary strategy, which consisted in simply eluding the orders. Writing petition-letters to their superiors in Rome was one of the typical evasion strategies. Again, the problem, or for some, the solution, was the distance from Rome. Each Jesuit had a right to appeal to the higher authorities of the Society against orders of their direct superiors. In the meantime, while waiting for the final decisions he was able to not only try to convince others that his point of view was correct, but also to disobey local superiors. In distant missions, the period between the petition and the decision from Rome was at least a year and a half long, if not longer, since the Roman curia had hundreds of such letters to deal with daily.

Because of Pero Francisco's censure of Nobili's method and Nobili's disregard of Francisco's orders, in November 1613, each party involved in the controversy rushed to present its view to the

[101] I am borrowing this term from Austin's and Searle's speech act theory. The act of speaking according to them consists of three separate acts. 1) the locutionary or propositional act, the act of saying; 2) the illocutionary act or force, that which we do in saying; 3) the perlocutionary act, that which we do by saying. See, Austin, John, *How we do Things with Words*, Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1962; Searle, John, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1969.

superiors in Rome. Out of six extant letters, four were addressed to Aquaviva and two to Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621), a famous Jesuit theologian and controversialist. Pero Francisco wrote two letters to the General of the Society of Jesus, both of which were actually meta-letters because he tried to piece together and annotate the epistolary circulation which had produced such divergent interpretations.[102] At stake was, as usual, a definition of 'correct' reading and 'correct' acting which both parties tried to privilege or subvert. Hence, Francisco informed Aquaviva that

> they (Nobili and Vico) understand the letter of Your Paternity in a manner quite different from my own, and they think that while fulfilling the commands of Your Paternity they may very well continue the kind of life which they have embraced, that is, using the same dissimulation and the same feints which Your Paternity reproves so explicitly in your letter.[103]

This passage, however, carries more than simple information. The way he framed his statement, it looks as if Aquaviva's letter stands at the very beginning of the controversy and at its future resolved end. Francisco implicated Aquaviva as a main actor, evidently on his side, and used his letter to circumscribe and neutralize all possible dissent in his Province. This he also tried to accomplish by obstructing the circulation of missionaries and their epistolary production. When Nobili asked for permission to come to Cochin to discuss matters with Francisco, he was refused because

> he (Nobili) had no other end in view than to argue and defend his mode of life and, according to his habit, write a new treatise on this subject and send new memoirs to your Paternity, although in your letter you said very clearly that he should persuade himself that you are sufficiently well-informed regarding that affair.[104]

Archbishop Francisco Ros, on the other hand, informed Aquaviva that Francisco not only tried to prevent Nobili from coming (he came anyway!) to Cochin, but he also 'does not let pass through any letter by Father Roberto to me, if in it he speaks of that affair. He even stopped a letter of mine which I had sent to my Christians who were

[102] Francisco, P. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 12 November, 1613, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 204 and 21 November, 1613, ARSI, Goa 51, ff.187–90.

[103] Francisco, P. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 12 November, 1613 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, f. 204.

[104] Francisco, P. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 21 November, 1613 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff.187–90.

expecting the excessive measures of Father Provincial.'[105] By stressing Francisco's tendency to prevent a free flow of information within the Society, Ros was trying to persuade Aquaviva that it was Francisco who was willfully producing the lacunae in knowledge of Indian customs, while Nobili's entire enterprise was based on acquiring it. The lack of information at all levels was his explanation for the whole controversy. Although he did not name the mis-informants who found themselves in the chain of transmission, it is clear that he started with Nicolau Pimenta, who had organized the Consultations in Goa in 1610 'without knowing sufficiently the affairs of Madurai, nor reporting them accurately'.[106] As a result the 'theologians...who are opposed to Father Nobili are all from the Goan Province'.[107] Ros proposed to save everybody's face in this letter, even Bellarmino's in whose 'letters I understood that the affairs of Madurai were not sufficiently explained to you, which does not surprise me much, as I understand that this information was sent to you by men who did not bestow on them the attention they demand.' In his letter to Aquaviva, Ros offered no face-saving solutions to the opponents.

> From what I see, I hold it for certain that had our Portuguese Fathers started the Madurai mission, it would not have so many adversaries, and if some of the Italian Fathers follow the opinion of the Father Provincial after having shared the views of Fr. Alberto (Laerzio), these same fathers, on the arrival of a new Provincial, will say what he says.[108]

It follows that the Portuguese Jesuits were envious and some Italian Fathers, he had one in mind, Andrea Buccerio, were sycophants.

Actually, Ros was in a delicate position himself. According to Pero Francisco, there was a moment of doubt in which Ros almost switched sides. When Francisco gave him Aquaviva's letter concerning Nobili's method to read, Ros

> approved everything your Paternity said in that letter, and told me that it was all true, and that he had recommended to Father Roberto to be very careful, and first of all not to make innovations because later on he would have to change many things. He also told me that there were other things which he

[105] Archbishop of Cranganore to Aquaviva, C., Cranganore, 19 November, 1613, ARSI, (Port.), Goa 51, ff. 195–7.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Archbishop of Cranganore to Aquaviva, Cranganore, 19 November, 1613, ARSI, (Port.), Goa 51, ff. 195–7.

regretted. However, afterwards he changed his mind and understood the letter of Your Paternity in the same way as Father Roberto.'[109]

From Inquisitorial Transcription to Ethnographic Translation

It is clear that the interpretation of letters and orders coming from the headquarters of the Society in Rome depended on shifting local alliances among the Jesuits. Actually, in his letter to Bellarmino, Ros stood firmly on the side of the pro-Nobili group and overtly accepted to share with Alberto Laerzio the responsibility for the foundation of the Madurai experiment. The whole system of approvals, permissions and censures in the Society of Jesus was supposed to work according to the principle of obedience from top down, but it very often turned in circles, especially in the missions. In that way, Ros would refer to Laerzio and theologians in Cochin who approved Nobili's work as higher authorities, while Laerzio would refer to Ros. Nobili, who inaugurated the whole experiment in his 1613 letter to Bellarmino, presented himself as only following Laerzio's and Ros' orders: 'In all this affair I did not move by a finger's breadth, as they say, without the orders of the most Reverend Archbishop, who is the ordinary of this mission and my Superior in the Society.'[110] He took on himself 'only' the responsibility for providing correct knowledge: '(Ros and Laerzio) being informed by me, saw from what I showed them that things were evidently quite different from what was generally thought, and that the lack (*defectum*) of knowledge was due to ignorance of the books and customs of Brahmans'.[111]

In a double move Nobili tried both to efface himself from the controversy by claiming that he did nothing on his own except follow the instructions of his superiors, and to become 'a source for the facts and their truthfulness'. These words are from Antonio Vico's letter to Jerónimo (Hyeronimus) Gomes, which he wrote from Madurai at the same time as Nobili wrote to Bellarmino. However, the context in which these words were used was different. These were fragments of an argument against Nobili: '(They say) that our assertions were

[109] Francisco, P. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 12 November, 1613 (Port.), ARSI, Goa, 51, ff. 204.

[110] Nobili, R. to Bellarmino, R., Madurai, 28, November, 1613 (Lat), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 200–1.

[111] Ibid.

gratuitous and our treatises were without any attestation, being based only on the confidence we had in Father Roberto, who was our only source for the facts and their truthfulness'.[112] Nobili's ultimate desire was to disappear as author/actor and become the 'source of truthfulness', that is a saint. For the time being, however, he was obliged to employ native informants in order to prove and corroborate his definitions of Tamil religious practices and their adapted Christian versions. In turn, Nobili's adversaries emulated his 'ethnographic' strategies with the intention of dishonouring him personally and dismissing his ideas.

The native voices incited by the opposing parties were made to speak contradictory truths. The final version of the native 'testimonies', as these voices were called when collected and written down by the Jesuit missionaries, were certainly tailored to substantiate one or another disputed point in the controversy. The method of collecting and authenticating these testimonies resembled both inquisitorial investigation and ethnographic research. The procedure was the following: 1) the respondents were questioned by at least two missionaries, possibly one from each of the opposing sides; 2) a scribe recorded the deposition; 3) the document produced was signed. The moment in which inquisitorial transcription turns into 'testimony' is a moment of translation. A qualified translator, approved as such by the missionaries, had to turn the Tamil text (written on palm leaf strips) into Portuguese and on the paper. This 'turning' of the Tamil statement, not only into another language, but also into a 'testimony' intended to be sent thousands of miles away for the edification and delectation of different audiences, is a proto-ethnographic gesture. However, unlike an ethnographer, a missionary had to authenticate the final document with signatures, for the inquisitorial scene would not be complete without a full, signed confession and the countersignature of the confessor.

When Nobili attached to his treatise *Informatio de quibusdam moribus nationis Indicae* (1615) 108 signatures of various Tamil 'doctors' who approved his eight major propositions concerning Tamil customs, along with the co-signature of Archbishop Francisco Ros, he undermined the meaning of the signature itself.[113] Multiplication

[112] Vico, A. to Gomes, J., Madurai, 28 November, 1613 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 202–4.

[113] Nobili, R., *Informatio de quibusdam moribus nationis indicae*, ARSI, Fondo Gesuitico, 721/II/2 and Fondo Gesuitico, 400/2 ff. 43–83, 85–8. Published by S. Rajamanickam (ed.), *Roberto Nobili on Indian Customs*, Palayamkottai, 1972.

of signatures was a way of distancing himself from these texts, a gesture of detachment which displays his desire for (and hope of) personal sanctification. In addition, Ros' signature in particular helped Nobili prove his claim of complete abnegation and obedience to Jesuit superiors, such as the Archbishop of Cranganore. While only one Jesuit signature, except Nobili's, would seem to have been sufficient to authenticate his treatise, there were 108 Brahman signatures. Were these worth that of one Jesuit? By using this number, Nobili most probably wanted to illustrate that he had much support from the local Indian intelligentsia. On the other hand, his choice of the number—108—came from indigenous ideas as to auspicious numbers. One hundred and eight is considered as a most perfect number.[114] The question remains, nevertheless, as to the extent to which such testimonies were considered valid by the Jesuit authorities. Generally, two preconditions were indispensable for validating a testimony/confession: the signature of the witness and the correct procedure of the inquisitor/confessor. For that reason, Nobili prefixed his own attestation (yet another confession) concerning the procedure for eliciting these 108 Brahman approvals of his treatise.

Finally, I should like to make clear to everybody that these doctors, whose testimonies are transcribed in this document, are neither Christians nor catechumens, nor in any way bound to us by the bonds of friendship or by familiar interaction, but they are all non-Christians (*ethnicos*) and outsiders. In addition, none of them received either from me or from any one else neither money nor any other gift.[115]

Nobili obviously took all the necessary precautions to preclude any objection by his adversaries as to the validity of this Brahman testimony. However, besides the question of validating procedures, the status of 'native', 'ethnic' testimony was very low in itself. In fact, without the Jesuit co-signature attesting their authenticity, they would have been worthless.

[114] This number might have something to do with the Vaiṣṇava 108 holy places, the *divyadeśam*—divine places, celebrated in poems of Vaiṣṇava bhakti saints. In Tamil these holy sites are called *pāṭalperṟa patikaḷ*—places that received the song. Two of them celestial, the Vaikuntam or Viṣṇu's 'paradise' and the Ocean of Milk where he sleeps and 106 are terrestrial geographical locations. See Ramanujan, A.K., *Hymns for the Drowning, Poems for Viṣṇu by Nammāḻvār*, New Jersey, 1981, p. 107.

[115] Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, pp. 157 and 117.

Another document containing testimonies of Nobili's neophytes was written a month or two after the second Consultation in Goa (1610).[116] On 18 August, 1610, Alberto Laerzio and Andrea Buccerio, both Italian Jesuits, arrived in Madurai[117], probably in order to help Nobili prepare the defense of his controversial method of conversion. According to the short note signed by Laerzio which preceded the main document, Andrea Buccerio and Gonçalo Fernandes were appointed by the Provincial to interview Nobili's oldest converts, while Manuel da Cunha, Fernandes's translator, was to record the original depositions 'in Tamil in "*olas*"' before they were translated into Portuguese. The Tamil originals never reached Rome, and all that is found today in the Jesuit Archives is the Portuguese translation. The document itself is a series of statements, each signed either in Tamil characters by the converts who were literate, or by the sign of a cross in case of those who were illiterate.[118] A Tamil signature was definitely not enough to authenticate a letter and whoever wrote the document, therefore, added the transliteration of the converts' Tamil names, as well as their Christian names like Amator, Bonifacio, Fidelis, Aleixo, etc. Moreover, all three recorded names were put under the permanent surveillance of Manuel da Cunha's and Andrea Buccerio's signatures—as if the value of their Tamil signature was only a fraction of a Jesuit signature. Fernandes, who was also ordered by the Provincial, Alberto Laerzio, to participate in the inquiry, left no sign of his presence either in the form of a comment or of a signature. Obviously, obedience to superiors was always a subject of interpretation. The lack of his signature is perhaps a statement that he did not agree with the converts' statements (as they were recorded in the text).

Visually, the document is bursting with different voices, or more precisely, hands. The questions were written on a separate sheet of paper in legible handwriting under the title *Artigos que se hão de preguntar* (Points which should be asked), and they constituted a kind of religious quiz for Nobili's Christians. In fifteen extended questions, every single point or accusation advanced by Gonçalo Fernandes was refuted by each convert's signed confession. While the questions were written in neat handwriting, the answers were almost

[116] *'Artigos que se hão de preguntar'*, ARSI, Goa 51, (three copies) 1st via ff. 39–50, 2nd via 51–62 and 3rd via 63–73. My quotations are from the 2nd via.

[117] Buccerio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Madurai, 3 October, 1610 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 110–15 (1st via), 116–21 (2nd via).

[118] Out of ten witnesses, three were illiterate.

illegible, as if written in haste, and their legibility deteriorated even more towards the end of the document. There were also two or three different qualities of ink used: one for writing questions, one for answers and, perhaps, another for the signatures of Manuel da Cunha and the converts. Buccerio's signature was written in the same ink as were the answers, which probably means that he wrote down and perhaps helped translate these confessions into Portuguese.

In spite of this variety of hands and inks, the answers, those which can be deciphered, were almost identical. This is quite incredible given the differences in age, education and social position of the converts. Furthermore, the arguments employed to justify Nobili's conversion method have the same theological sophistication as the treatise Nobili was to sign two months later under the title *Responsio ad ea quae contra modum quo nova Missio Madurensis utitur ad ethnicos Christo convertendos obiecta sunt.*[119] Therefore, either his converts had already internalized all the categories, like the distinction between political and religious, which had been developed with the help of local knowledge provided by his Brahman teacher Bonifacio Xastri/Śivadharma and amply used by Nobili as a response to his European adversaries, or Buccerio tailored their answers to suit Nobili's categorial apparatus. Did Buccerio also write them in such a terrible scrawl (from his other letters it is clear that his handwriting was quite legible) because he wanted to add further authentication to the 'field inquiry', performed without a table to write on, in haste, etc.? These questions have lost their historical answers, for there are no additional documents to illuminate them.

These supportive '*ethnici*' were not mere puppets in the hands of the warring missionaries. They had their own interests in signing, denouncing and switching sides in the Jesuit dispute. While Buccerio was busy collecting evidence among Nobili's converts in support of his conversion method, four of these Christians, three of whom were Brahmans, accosted Laerzio with a story of Aleixo's and Nobili's illicit relationships with women (*matérias da molheres*).[120] After having investigated the matter and 'even put Father Nobili under oath'[121], Laerzio dismissed these allegation as false and a product of jealousy. Aleixo's privileged position in Nobili's house was obviously resented

[119] ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 125–44. See Dahmen, P., S.J., ed., *Robert de Nobili, L'Apôtre des Brahmes*, Paris, 1931

[120] In the *'Artigos que se hão de preguntar'*, Aleixo is defined as a Badagà (Telugu), twenty years old and baptized in 1607. For his turbulent Christian life see chapter IV.

[121] Laerzio, A. to Vitelleschi, M., 30 November, 1615 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 17, ff. 146–7.

by other Christians. There were no traces of these accusations in Laerzio's annual letters of 1610 and 1611. The reason he decided to bring this matter up in his letter to the General of November 30, 1615, were two new accusations by Bonifacio Xastri and Carnayake Bramane.[122] These rumours and accusations were put into circulation by Fernandes and Buccerio, who had in the meantime switched sides. It seems that the witnesses partly volunteered the information, and partly succumbed to vigorous encouragement by Nobili's adversaries to denounce him. The visit to the Madurai Mission by the Provincial, Pero Francisco, in September 1614, one of Nobili's ardent opponents, probably accelerated events. According to Laerzio, the origin of these denunciations was Francisco's animosity, which he openly showed towards Nobili's converts: 'Seeing that the Provincial was prejudiced against Father Roberto Nobili and very harsh towards him, they slandered the father with a view to driving him out of Madurai'.[123]

It is from the document in which Bonifacio and Carnayake retracted their statements in 1617 that we are able to piece together this episode.[124] These testimonies were not 'simple' translations from palm leaves, as was the case with Buccerio's 1610 questionnaire. They were written down in '*er-form*' by Francesco Oliveyra, Rector of the Jesuit College in Cranganore. Although some vestiges of the dialogues were included in the text in order to illustrate the dramatic tension between the opposing parties, generally these depositions resembled more a police report than a confession. The focus of the investigators was undoubtedly to uncover in detail the plot of the conspiracy against Nobili. The story that comes out of these pages is very different from the one that Vico and Nobili reported in their letters. Vico referred to their new converts as 'saints'. 'I cannot otherwise account', he wrote, 'for their courage, their humility, their tears, their frequent prayers, their inclination to divine things, and their great desire to bring others to God.'[125] In the same letter, Vico

[122] *Testimónio*, 1617, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 261–5 in which Bonifacio Xastri and Carnayake Bramane refute their own charges against Nobili before Francisco Ros, the Archbishop of Cranganore and Francisco de Oliveyra, the rector of the Cranganore College. The two Brahman Christians accused Buccerio of having incited them to lie against Nobili.

[123] Laerzio, A. to Vitelleschi, M., 30 November, 1615 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 17, ff. 146–7.

[124] ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 261–5.

[125] Vico, A. to Laerzio, A., 26 September, 1611, in Laerzio's Report to Aquaviva, C., 25 November, 1611, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 93–129.

praised Bonifacio's decision not to get married in order to avoid 'offering any sacrifice, or performing any of the ceremonies which the Brahmans are wont to practice'.[126] According to Carnayake's and Bonifacio's recantation in 1617, things were not that simple. There was trouble in Nobili's and Vico's little utopia. Their new Christians quarrelled with Nobili and with each other over status and privilege in the mission, and some of them were not hostile to the idea of eliminating the missionaries altogether and administering the mission themselves.

Carnayake explained why Bonifacio Xastri participated in the conspiracy against Nobili. Since he finally got married in his native village, 'on the occasion (...) he offered a sacrifice to the devil (*diabo*)'. Upon his return to Madurai, Nobili expelled him from the church. Furious, Bonifacio, who had helped Nobili 'to extract from Brahman books proofs that the thread and the *korumi* (a tuft of hair) were not signs of some pagan sect (*sinais protestativos de seita algua gentílica*), but were only caste and family insignia (*senão de casta e família*)', went to Buccerio and 'told him that the thread and the *kudumi* (= *korumi*) were insignias of a pagan sect, and gave him (Buccerio) some writings to that effect.'

In Bonifacio's refutation, there is not a word on his ethnographic and epistemological manipulation which furnished Nobili with stock arguments for the justification of his *accommodatio* method. He presented himself as yielding to Buccerio's solicitations after he had fallen into disfavour in Nobili's Mission. Furthermore, as he was facing the expulsion (by Vico and Nobili) from the house which was to be given to another Brahman, Buccerio offered him 15 panams a month and an additional 500 panams if he testified that Nobili had sexual relationships with women.

Solidifying Epistemological Positions and Hectic Epistolary Communication

Part of the reason why Jesuit missionaries extracted contradictory information from their Hindu informants was their questions. For example, when Nobili insisted on finding a textual corroboration that certain Hindu signs and practices belonged to the 'political' and not the 'religious' sphere, his question from the Hindu point of view was

[126] Ibid.

illogical and irrelevant. The division between the political and the religious was a dichotomy produced within the confines of European cultural experience.[127] For Nobili, the dichotomy was a crucial explanatory handle.

In addition to 'wrong' questions, from the very beginning the Jesuits and other missionaries presumed that Hinduism as they found it was a corrupt version of a pan-Indian religion based on a fixed corpus of sacred texts, the Laws (*Leggi*) or Vedas. As we have already seen, the retrieval of these texts was considered a key to the understanding of Hinduism. Although not all Jesuits agreed that these ancient Hindu texts were in one way or another connected to the Bible, most of them affirmed the existence of similarities between Christian and certain Hindu religious texts.

Hindu 'wrong' answers to Jesuit 'wrong' questions formed the basis of knowledge about Indian culture, religion and society. A further welding of these two sources of knowledge took place in disputes among the European religious figures, Jesuits and non-Jesuits. From 1610, the year in which Gonçalo Fernandes started the controversy, until the Goan Conference on 4 February, 1619, both sides generated and solidified their arguments. For that occasion, Nobili wrote another treatise, *Narratio Fundamentorum*,[128] to enlighten the participants. It seems that this text made some of Nobili's adversaries change their opinion. Dom Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa, Archbishop of Goa and primate of India, who spearheaded the group of Nobili's opponents, remained adamant. Although the majority in the Conference decided against the adaptationist method, Nobili managed to lure to his side some important people, for example, the Visitor of India, Fr. André Palmeyro and the Second Inquisitor in India, João Fernando d'Almeyda, both of whom wrote to the Roman Curia defending Nobili's method.[129]

[127] See Verkamp, B. J., *The Indifferent Mean: Adiaphorism and the English Reformation to 1554*, Ohio University Press, 1971.

[128] Dom Francisco Ros, the Archbishop of Cranganore, officially signed the treatise. However, the participants of the Goan Conference (1619) refer to Nobili as its author (Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa to the Pope Paul V, Goa, 22 Feb. 1619). In 1656, António de Proença wrote in Nobili's obituary that *Narratio* was Nobili's work composed for the occasion of the Goan Conference.

[129] Bellarmino responded to their letters on at least two ocassions. 1) Bellarmino to the Inquisitor of Lisbon, 28 May, 1621 in Broderick, J. S. J., *The Life and Work of Blessed Robert Bellarmine*, New York, 1928, vol. 2, p. 322, and 2) Bellarmino to João Fernando d'Almeyda, second Inquisitor of India, in Brodrick, *The Life*, vol. 2, p. 321.

Since all the actors in this controversy knew that the final decision was to come from Rome, a very vigorous correspondence ensued from both camps after the Conference. Nobili wrote a long letter from Goa to the Pope, Paul V, on 15 February, 1619.[130] Besides presenting his theological explanations concerning the adaptationist conversion method and the history of his apostolic works in the Madurai mission, he did his best to belittle his opponents. He hinted at Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa's unexplained ecclesiastical promotion ('from his monastic cell, he had gradually raised himself to the episcopal throne') and denounced him as a person of violent character, ostentatious and prideful and lacking 'in zeal for the conversion of the pagans'.[131] Moreover, he skilfully connected his case with the general problem of the Portuguese *padroado* (patronage) in Asia.

From the beginning of the 17th century, the Roman Church authorities tried to assert direct control over the overseas missions and circumvent, in many respects, the dwindling Portuguese jurisdiction.[132] In 1622, a special *Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith* (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) was established, claiming as its aim the proselytism of the non-Christian world, which the *padroado* was unable to reach. In his letter to the Pope, Nobili indirectly complained about the Portuguese lack of apostolic mission.

> Insofar it is only along the coast of India that the courage of the Portuguese had brought the torch of faith, the rest of the country, the inland provinces, have not been touched, so that it may rightly be said that the Christian faith can be found only where Portuguese arms are respected.[133]

On the same day, Nobili wrote three more letters, to his brother Vincenzo, his mother Clarice Ceoli Nobili and to Cardinal Bellarmino, asking them to use their influence with the Pope and the Jesuit Curia in Rome on his behalf.[134] Five days later he also wrote to his brother Mgr. Sforza Nobili with the same demand. He reminded

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

[131] Ibid.

[132] Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India*, p. 415.

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

[134] Nobili, R. to Nobili, Vincenzo, Goa 15 Feb., 1619, Università Gregoriana, cod. Miscellanea 212, ff. 85–7 (AHSI, 1969, v. 39); Nobili, R. to Ceoli Nobili, Clarice, Goa, 15 February, 1619 (AHSI, 1969, v. 39), Università Gregoriana, cod. Miscellanea 212, ff. 91–2; Nobili, R. to Bellarmino, R., Goa, (15 February, 1619), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 170–1 (172–3, 175–6).

Vincenzo, a lay person, that their family honour was at stake in this controversy. He implored him to use his influence with Cardinals Bellarmine and Borghese. As for his brother Sforza Nobili, who was climbing the ecclesiastical ladder, he gave him a lecture in humility and invoked their saintly uncle Roberto as an *addendum* to his urgent demand to

> dissipate those falsehoods (communicated by the Archbishop of Goa to the King of Portugal) and repel them by letters of recommendation from the Holy Father, Cardinals Sforza and Borghese, Bellarmino and others, to the Catholic King and his Princes and officials, commending to them the Madurai mission, so that the Catholic king may write to the Archbishop of Goa, and command him to stop preventing and delaying conversions in Madurai and slandering me or the Society.[135]

In his humble letter to Bellarmino, Nobili used the same mixture of menace and self-abasement. He asked Bellarmino to thank the second Goan inquisitor d'Almeyda for his support of Nobili's cause and even suggested that he be 'rewarded'.[136] Having thus first placed himself within Bellarmino's patronage network, Nobili then implicated him directly as an accomplice in the controversy:

> I am chiefly assured of its success (the Madurai case) by your Eminence's letter in which you not only bid me to have courage, but give me the most certain hope of victory when you say that although discussions and consultations take place in Goa, everything will ultimately be settled in Rome.[137]

One can say that these four letters took their addressees as hostages.

Francisco Ros, the Archbishop of Cranganore, another Nobili hostage, had much to lose from a negative papal decision as Nobili made him a co-author (of the *Narratio fundamentorum* and) of his conversion method. For that reason, he wrote, on 8 February 1619 to Nuno Mascarenhas, denigrating Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa and suggesting that the Pope 'put a stop to his folly'.[138] Eleven days later, he wrote a similar letter to Cardinal Ascoli and, the next day he added certain clarifications concerning Hindu 'political customs' in another

[135] Nobili, R. to Mgr. Sforza Nobili, Goa, 20 February, 1619, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 295–6.

[136] Nobili asked the same his brother Sforza. (Incidentally, he also stressed d'Almeyda's noble birth).

[137] Nobili, R. to Bellarmin, R., Goa, (15 February 1619), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 170–1 (172–3, 175–6).

[138] Ros, F. to Mascarenhas, N., the Assistant of the Portuguese Province, Goa, 8 February, 1619, ARSI, Goa 17, ff. 249–50.

letter to Mascarenhas, not failing to pepper it with a few deprecating remarks on the Archbishop's account.[139] According to him, when the 'civil laws which prescribe the wearing of *kudumi* (a tuft of hair), thread and ashes ceased to be enforced, as happened in many places in India, even the low castes could buy from the kings the right to wear them'. This picture of the decay of indigenous social institutions in India was, of course, good news for the Christianization and colonization of India. However, Ros appeared to be saying, that as long as missionaries were to work in the missions where these laws were still in force, as 'in Madurai...(where)... men of low caste do not wear the *kudumi* on the head', the adaptationist method of conversion was the only viable stratagem.[140]

In the same batch of letters from Goa, among other letters, testimonies and treatises, the Pope also found a letter dated 21 February, 1619 and written by Dom João Fernando de Almeyda, who switched sides after having read the *Narratio* and having heard Nobili defend his method, as well as two very different letters from the Archbishop of Goa, Dom Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa.[141] The Goan prelate took a firm stand against the pro-Nobili party, although he portrayed himself as an impartial judge who weighed the arguments of both sides. Francisco Ros, however, wrote a month later that Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa 'admitted to me that he had neither seen nor read my exposition of the case'.[142] Perhaps he refused to read the *Narratio* because, as he subtly hinted in his letter, Nobili tried to manipulate the Conference the way he manipulated everybody, even the Archbishop of Cranganore. For that reason, he appealed to the Pope, 'since the Archbishop (of Cranganore) and Father Roberto Nobili have a Procurator in Rome who supports their cause, while I have nobody except Your Holiness'.[143]

[139] Ros, F. to Ascoli, Goa, 19 February, 1619 (Lat), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 293–4; Ros to Mascarenhas, Goa, 20 February, 1619, ARSI, Goa 17, ff. 257–8.

[140] Ros, F. to Mascarenhas, N., Goa, 20 February, 1619, ARSI, Goa 17, ff. 257–8.

[141] Ros to Mascarenhas, Goa, 19 March, 1619, ARSI, Goa 51, f.299. Ros gave a partial inventory of this missionary letter-bag. Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa to the Pope Paul V, Goa 21 February, 1619, Bibl. Nacional, Lisbon, Reservados, Mss., n.8, 396. Almeyda to the Pope Paul V, Goa, 20 February, 1619, Propaganda Fide Archives (hereafter PFA), Rome, Miscellanee Varie 6, 13.

[142] Ros, F. to Mascarenhas, N., Goa, 19 March, 1619, ARSI, Goa 51, f. 299.

[143] Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa to the Pope, Goa, 22 February, 1619, Bibl. Nacional, Lisbon, Reservados, Mss., n.8, 396.

A year later, another mailbag filled with treatises and letters, *pro* and *contra* Nobili's method, was sent to Rome.[144] Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa wrote to the General of the Society of Jesus, Muzio Vitelleschi (1615–45) and openly accused Nobili of 'going native': 'not only did he make himself a Brahman, but also (...) he had embraced their superstitions, for even where it was not necessary he behaved like a Brahman'.[145] The proof he provided was Nobili's behaviour in Goa, since Nobili never ate together with other fathers in the *Casa professa* and he never partook of their food, but instead ate 'the food prepared for him by the Brahmans whom he had with him'.[146] In the finale of this acrimonious letter, de Sá e Lisboa expressed his hopes that Vitelleschi would remove 'the Brahman Fathers' from Madurai, since after the Conference they had gone back to their 'superstition and impiety'.

As the conflict between the two sides grew in proportion and intensity, it also absorbed some other local grievances and controversies. Manuel Barradas collapsed it with the rivalry between Italian and Portuguese Jesuits. Speaking against Nobili's mission, he claimed in his letter to Mascarenhas, meant risking reprisal by the Italians, as Barradas had experienced himself.[147] However, the alliances between different Jesuit factions in India, and their making and unmaking, were much more fluid than Barradas seemed to have suggested. André Palmeyro, the Visitor of the Malabar Province and a Portuguese by birth, decided to approve Nobili's method after the Conference of Goa. This fact did not prevent him from writing to the Jesuit Assistant of Portugal, Mascarenhas, about the strained relationship between Italians and Portuguese. In the guise of neutrality and mild indignation against 'deplorable gossips', he nevertheless managed to uphold the Portuguese side: 'It is generally believed that the Italians write to Rome to complain about the Portuguese for every little trifle (...) and it is said "if you wish to live in peace, venerate the Italians"'.[148]

[144] Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa to Mutius Vitelleschi, Ga, 15 Feb. 1620, ARSI, Goa 18, ff. 7–8. He mentioned also enclosing his own treatises in which he proved that 'the thread cannot in any way be tolerated'.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Barradas, M. to Mascarenhas, N., Goa, 20 January, 1620, (Port.), ARSI, Goa 18, f. 1.

[148] Palmeyro, A. to the Assistant, Mascarenhas, N., Cochin, 15 December, 1619, AHSI, Goa 17, f. 283. See also Nunez, Manoel to Mascarenhas, Cochin, 30 November, 1619, ARSI, Goa 17, f. 276, and Fernandes, Gaspar to Mascarenhas, 3 (or 31) November, 1619, AHSI, Goa 17, ff. 178–9. Both of them refer to the Portuguese–Italian problem and Laerzio's role in it.

When he returned to Cochin after having visited Malabar province in 1620, Palmeyro switched sides again. Having seen how the Madurai mission operated, and in spite of his admiration for Nobili's 'holy' life, he was not able to accept what he saw as anti-Portuguese attitudes:

> We should not mind that they dress like Brahmans, and other similar things which shock some, because by thus doing they will attract them (the Brahmans); nor if they say that they are Brahmans of the King of Spain and Lords of Europe, for in all this they speak the truth, all of which may help them in their purpose. But to deny that they are Portuguese and refuse to treat with them, even if it could be tolerated by virtue of some amphibology, such an opinion or rather dissimulation cannot be maintained or perpetuated.[149]

It is interesting to note Palmeyro's criteria of truth. Obviously, Portuguese 'nationality' was not, according to him, some narrow ethnic category, but designated a transnational community; that is all missionaries regardless of their nationalities were considered Portuguese when in the service of the Portuguese *padroado*. Consequently, the word Portuguese was synonymous with Christian and antonymous to 'pagan'. As long as Nobili did not touch this master category, his linguistic adaptations were acceptable to Palmeyro.

'Political' versus 'Religious'—Intellectual Heritage of the Jesuit Dispute

However, while the Jesuits in India were involved in working out their own solutions regarding their missionary methods and ecclesiastical organization, developments in Europe took their own course. The Inquisitor General of Portugal, Fernão Martins de Mascarenhas, approved the adaptationist method and endorsed Nobili's interpretation of Indian customs and ceremonies as divided into political (social) and religious.[150] In the *Solution of the problem as to whether*

[149] Palmeyro, A. to Mascarenhas, N., Cochin, 20 December, 1620, ARSI, Goa 18, ff. 25–8.

[150] The same text written by Nuno Mascarenhas is available in various other documents. Shenbaganour Archives possess photostats of a letter written on 29 January 1622 (Sh. Arch. 348a): *'Decisio controversiae in India agitatae circa gestationem seu usum lineae, capillamenti et aliorum stemmatum, neophytis permittendum, vel non permittendum, illorum Ethnicorum conversioni non solum perutilis, sed maximo necessaria'*; On the text itself it is marked—Ajuda, Codice 49 V.7, Lisbon. The text is translated in Bertrand, *La mission du Maduré*, vol. 2, pp. 401–6 (text in Latin). The

the Brahmans of the East Indies should be allowed the string, the tuft of hair, and other ceremonies which they used before their conversion, signed by seven Portuguese ecclesiastical authorities, the Inquisitor General of Portugal being one of them, the question of the religious and the political was further elaborated.[151] However, no new theological solutions were introduced since the authors of the *Solution* all agreed with Nobili's reading of the 'gentile' body-signs. The consensus reached was that these were all part of Tamil 'political' equipment. Even if some of them had a 'secondary',[152] that is, religious meaning, the authors maintained that the theologians 'held even today, that Christians are allowed to use these signs when no scandal is feared and a just cause is present'.

By mixing Nobili's ethnographic information with his knowledge of the Church fathers and the 'Ancients' about India, Fernão Martins Mascarenhas, the author of the document, had another point to make:

I also perceive that the thread and other insignia in the East Indies originated as emblems of nobility and learning, as the reasons given by the second opinion (pro-Nobili) prove; it is also apparent from what the Ancients thought of the Brahmans, because they spoke of them in the same way as they spoke of the wise men of Egypt and Persia, as we gather from what St Jerome reports when he praises the diligence of Apollonius of Tyana in his search of the wise men of the world. However, it perhaps happened through usage and the ignorance of succeeding generations that the string became contaminated with some pagan superstitions and was made to distinguish the worshippers of idols[153].

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dossier on Nobili's case used by the Inquisition in Portugal was sent to Rome in 1621 and preserved in PFA, Miscellanee vaire (1631–54), ff. 107–53.

[151] *'Resolutio questionis de permittendo Brachmanibus Indiae Orientalis lineas, coromineum, et caeteras ceremonias quibus ante suam ipsorum conversionem utuntur'*, Lisbon, 18 April, 1621, signed by Episcopus Inquisitor Generalis, D. Ferdinandus Martins Mascarenhas (Bishop of Algarve); Dominus Marcus Texera (Bishop of Brasil); Antonius Dias Cardoso; Franciscus de Gouvea (Bishop of Larga), Dom Frey Thomas de Faria, Dom Hieronimus (Bishop of Funchal), Simon Barreto de Meneses (Inquisitor in Lisbon), PFA, Miscellanee varie (1631–54), ff. 107–53.

[152] Nobili developed this idea in his *Responsio* (1610). Later he changed his mind and declared that the thread and other body signs were not even *secondarily* signs of religion.

[153] Apollonius of Tyana (d.c. 98) was a neopythagorean philosopher.

This proof by origin serves also to establish the golden age theory which was to evolve in many different directions during the later colonial period, and is, as a matter of fact, still a workable cultural concept, invoked or disclaimed by contemporary Indian actors. The proposition that the Brahmans were in a distant past, before superstitious practices 'corroded' their knowledge and customs, analogous to the Greek and Roman '*sapientes*', contained also the idea that the goal of the Jesuit mission was to restore the pristine state of Indian society before adding to it the 'crown' of Christianity.

The Bull issued by Pope Gregory XV, *Romanae Sedis Antistes* (31 January, 1623), gave provisional approval to Nobili's method 'until the matter can be resolved and forever established'.[154] The Holy See permitted the usage of indigenous 'signs of nobility', such as the thread, *kudumi* (a tuft of hair), and sandal paste 'provided that (...) all superstition and all alleged causes for scandal' were removed. Nobili's definition of Tamil culture and religion won, at least for the time being.[155]

Nobili's Adiaphora

Nobili's victory was primarily theological and the most efficient handle in proving his point came from the concept of *adiaphora*. First proposed by the Cynics, elaborated into a philosophical system by the Stoics and then adapted to Christianity by the Church fathers, it became in the 16th century a weapon with which religious reformers fought against the Papacy and Catholic dogmas. While, for example, English reformers used it in order to root out 'superstitions' from the pristine Christian message and actions, Nobili applied it to Indian customs and ceremonies.

Following Thomas Aquinas, Nobili demanded that before condemning 'pagan' actions and emblems, one had to inquire about the *finis* (end, goal), since only human will or intention lends moral form to the act. This is precisely what he claimed he did, and concluded that most Indian actions (ceremonies and customs) and objects used

[154] Latin text printed in the *addendum* to Dahmen, P., S.J., *Robert de Nobili, L'Apôtre des Brahmes, Première apologie (Responsio), 1610*, ed. Pierre Dahmen, SI, Bibliotheque des Missions; Memoires et documents, Paris, 1931. p. 186.

[155] Nobili's reputation, however, never fully recovered and the Madurai mission continued to be understaffed until the middle of the 18th century, when a new controversy called the Malabar Rites controversy brought the reversal of the policy of adaptation.

for performing them were 'indifferent', neither good nor evil, neutral. In his first work on this topic, *Informatio*, Nobili divided 'pagan actions' into two kinds: 1) those tending by their nature or common usage to religious cult, like adoration of false gods, which were bad in themselves; and 2) indifferent actions which tend to be pagan in three ways by force of usage. The first category, being self-explanatory and unproblematic, immediately disappeared from the rest of Nobili's argument, while the second one continued to branch out into subtler subcategories and distinctions. Hence, indifferent actions were 'pagan' because: 1) 'materially' (*materialiter*) the nation that performs them was pagan; 2) certain actions or things served to distinguish 'pagans' from Christians in a purely civil sense, such as the Jewish yellow hat in Rome; and 3) certain actions distinguished believers from unbelievers in a religious sense proper. The third distinction is further divided into: a) those things which have two coexisting ends, such as clothes which serve to protect the body from cold, and which are worn in pagan 'ceremonies'; b) those things having only religious ends, such as sacerdotal ornaments which pagans wear in their sacrifices.

Nobili's analytical exercise was intended to both denude and denounce 'pagan' practices, but if one looks closer into his classificatory scheme and its application to the particular Hindu culture, the effects of his method brought him close to the positions of cultural relativism, semiotic arbitrariness and theological nominalism. The distinction between the civil and the religious ran through each of Nobili's categories. 'A thing (*res*) which among pagans (*apud ethnicos*) had a superstitious end and at the same time a civil use by nature,' was in Nobili's account, 'in itself a medium and was indifferent, even though according to the customs of the country its use designated a sect or religion.'[156] If this were so, and Nobili summoned theologians such as Domingo Báñes and others for his theological witnesses, clothes and other honourific signs used in 'false religion' would always carry civil signification, such as covering the body and designating social rank, and similar.[157] Finally, these signs made things, other than words, ambiguously coded, and doubly or triply 'coated'. Nobili wrote that, according to these theologians, the difference

[156] Nobili, *Responsio*, in Dahmen, p. 101.

[157] Domingo Báñes, *Decisiones de iustitia et iure*, Venice, 1595.

between words and other signs was that 'words conventionally adopted to signify one thing have only one conventional sense' while other signs/things, such as clothing conserved other significations. The exclusive coding of words ensued from human intentionality. For that reason, as Nobili showed when defending the change of Tamil words for Christian concepts and sacramentals, the meaning (*significatio*) of a word could be learnt from its denotation (*vis*) and from its use (*usus*). Etymological analysis combined with discovering the instances (*testimonia*) of a word's occurrence in texts were Nobili's basic linguistic tools. Nonetheless, contrary to what he had claimed earlier, Nobili undid the exclusive coding of words and shifted or supplemented signifiers at will and whenever it suited him,

If things (ashes, thread) which serve as mediums for various meanings (religious and political) are indifferent, then the relationship between phonetic signs and significations is arbitrary. Nobili did not state it as clearly as this, his interests resided elsewhere. His immediate goal was to completely separate, for analytical and conversion purposes, 'religious' from 'political' within Hindu 'pagan' structure. In his work *Narratio Fundamentorum*, he proved by twelve arguments: 1) that the so-called 'sacred' thread and a tuft of hair, kudumi, were purely political/social signs; 2) that when an act had two ends, namely secular and superstitious, a Christian may do it for a legitimate reason since many similar customs were adopted by the Church (proved in six arguments); and 3) that even purely superstitious rites had been converted to Christian use by the Church (illustrated by eight examples). One type of proof consisted in accepted precedence, such as Pope Gregory's instruction to Augustine, the Bishop of England not to destroy 'pagan' temples, but 'that these should be sprinkled with holy water, altars built and holy relics placed in them'.[158] Others were a combination of rather abstract theological and ecclesiastical principles. In his *secundum fundamentum*, Nobili claimed that 'the Church never prohibited the diverse customs and practices observed by different nations' and in *quartum* he derived the authorization for his enterprise from the fact 'that the Sovereign Pontiff has the universal power to change any superstitious rites and customs into rites and customs of the true religion'.[159]

[158] Rajamanickam, S., S.J., (ed.) *Roberto de Nobili on Adaptation*, original and translation of *'Narratio Fundamentorum quibus Madurensis Missionis Institutum (...)'* Palayamkottai, 1971, p. 83.

[159] Nobili, *Narratio*, in Rajamanickam, p. 85.

All signs and actions designating a religion other than Christianity became, in Nobili's view, transformable into signifiers of the 'true religion'. In the last instance, this meant that the name was the problem and not the essence. The ligatures necessary for binding together, *re-ligare*, the new Catholic world order were possible only through compromises in *verba*, not in *res*.[160] It can be further deduced that cultural differences were part of the *verba* as well, and as such, were unessential and could be permitted or, by extension in another direction, they can also be annihilated.

Because the Church projected the cleavage between the sacred and the profane on the non-Christian peoples from the beginning of the colonization of the New world in order to identify and destroy institutions of 'false religion', an effort to reorganize indigenous cultural manifestations around these two poles enhanced the irreconcilable gap between them. Idolatry on the one side, and the radically different way of living on the other, were both distinguished and confused in various historical contexts. For example the *borracheras*, the ritual drinking, fell at times into the category of simple alcoholism and at other times into a 'pagan' ceremony. Nobili presented the performance of ritual ablutions, *lotiones corporis*, as facts of hygiene in the face of contrary arguments advanced by his adversary Gonçalo Fernandes. For Nobili, all Hindu material was partly or entirely civil, woven into the indigenous social structure, forms of government, ranking mechanisms and value systems: for Fernandes, all otherness was idolatry.

The separation of the political and religious spheres initiated a reorganization of the European medieval epistemic grid encompassing India. Nobili problematized the notion of paganism *per se*. It used to be perceived by the Europeans in India as an inseparable whole of practices, rituals and beliefs set in motion by the demonic presence. Having eliminated paganism from the Indian 'political' sphere, Nobili ceded the reclaimed territory to secular, 'scientific' procedures.

Although a proper 'scientific' investigation developed in the 19th century through disciplines such as Indology and ethnography, the

[160] For E. Benveniste's discussion on the etymology of the word religion, as well as its changing significations, see Bernard and Gruzinski, *De l'idolâtrie*, 1988, p. 236. Cicero's *religio* from *legere—cueillir, rassembler, ramener à soi*, bring together, differs from Christian *ligare—lier*, to join.

two categorial poles elaborated by Nobili remained the basic and undisputed axioms. The major product of this initial analytical split was probably the development of theories concerning the caste system. Various Protestant missionaries, from the German Pietists to Lutherans, Baptists, Anglicans, etc., produced their own theories and explanations of the origin of caste, but all of them were already based on the distinction between the social and the religious.[161] With the ascent of scientific approaches to Indian culture and society, the theory of caste which stressed its social origin became predominant. A prominent Indologist, Max Müller, and a sociologist, Max Weber, both agreed that Indian castes referred to social distinctions comparable to similar phenomena in Europe. The problem as to whether the caste system was a particular form of social stratification, or drew its distinctive ideas from Hinduism, culminated in the discussion between F.G. Bailey and Louis Dumont in the 1960s and has been more recently addressed in the work of Nicholas Dirks.[162]

The initial political/religious distinction postulated by Nobili, the contingent archaeology of which I have attemped to trace in this chapter, lies at the root of the genealogical tree of ideas about the caste system, drafted here with rather minimalist strokes. It is important to note that Nobili is not its unique author. This distinction was produced by multiple, overlapping voices of the missionaries and their Tamil informants. However, the final shape of the concept came from the controversy among the Jesuits, which started as a personal dispute between Gonçalo Fernandes and Roberto Nobili over their respective status and rank in the Society of Jesus. The result of this particular Jesuit controversy, which in its various guises continued until the suppression of the Society of Jesus and reappeared with its restitution, was that the distinction between the religious and the political defined the field of enunciability respective of India. This dichotomy still safeguards all possible statements about caste or any other Indian social, cultural or religious institution.

[161] Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*, London, 1980, pp. 1–23.

[162] Bailey, F.G., 'Closed Social Stratification in India', *Archives of European Sociology*, IV, 1963 and Dumont, L., 'Caste, Racism and "Stratificaiton": Reflections of a Social Anthropologist', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, no. 5, 1961. Dirks, N.B., 'Castes of Mind', *Representations*, no. 37, Winter, 1982.

Between Aristocratic Analogies and Demotic Descriptions: The Geo-ethnographic Mode

The geo-ethnographic mode of writing stands at the threshold of a 'scientific discourse' which developed from the 18th century onwards, fostering various Orientalist disciplines. This mode harnessed to texts all that concerned Jesuit 'exterior' and object-oriented experience in overseas missions. It transformed landscapes into descriptions, events into stories and human subjects into ethnographic data. Nobili, in fact, repeated the epistolary gestures of the earlier Jesuits whose narratives were already incorporated into the first official histories of the Society of Jesus.[1] These texts, in a more opaque manner, continued their anonymous careers in various secular books and compendia. The Jesuits were probably among the most quoted and 'plagiarized' writers of the 17th century.

Nevertheless, the geo-ethnographic mode was far from being a monolithic strategy for recording the 'world'. It consisted of two major undercurrents, namely an impulse to describe and to interpret. Most of the time, these two threads were tightly laced so that the imagination supported the eye and the eye flattered the imagination. However, it was during the 17th century that these two strands seem to have drifted apart. The dispute between Roberto Nobili and Gonçalo Fernandes illustrates this separation.

[1] The term 'narrate' is taken here in its general sense of both 'knowing' from the Latin *gnarus* and 'telling' from the Latin *narro* and not just in a sense of 'telling a story'. See White, Hayden, 'The Value of Narrativity in Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1980. Fragments of individual letters were quoted *verbatim* or paraphrased and interpolated into all major historical works on the history of the Society of Jesus. Nobili's first appearance as an actor and a writer takes place in Fernão Guerreiro, *Relação annual das coisas que fizeram os padres da Companhia de Jesus na Índia, e Japão nos anos de 606 e 607, e do processo da conversão, e cristandade daquelas partes*, Lisbon, 1609, new edition by Artur Viegas, Coimbra, 1931, vol. 2, p.328.

Nobili, a Roman aristocrat and a learned theologian, saw the world of 'pagan' Madurai as 'similar' or 'analogous' to the world of the European past. Tamil culture became for him a tree of signs primarily in need of correct interpretation. Fernandes, on the other hand, in response to Nobili's analogical approach tried to promote, prematurely, another perspective. The difference between 'pagan' Tamils and Christians was in his view absolute. He would not have denied that through conversion the first could be transformed into the latter, but he thought that the change had to be total. Nobili's experimental, accommodationist method appeared to Fernandes as a outright dissimulation and geared primarily towards dispossessing him of his seat in the Madurai mission. Older than Nobili and longer in the mission, Fernandes felt threatened and was ready to fight.

Nobili defined the rules of this epistolary battle. He rapidly produced in his treatises and letters explanations and interpretations of Tamil customs. Not only did he select one group of people, the Brahmans, as both representatives of Tamil society as a whole, and as the highest and the most important caste, but he also framed their origins in the idiom of European history. Henceforth, Brahmans were made by Nobili into the descendants of a lost Jewish tribe and their 'sacred books' into fragmentary witnesses of the lost Christian message. Fernandes accepted the challenge and, in 1616, wrote his only treatise on Brahman life-cycle ceremonies.[2] In his effort to transpose into writing the plenitude of differences, his text ends up in enumeration, resembling more a directory of 'foreign' concepts and words. European audiences in the 17th century found Nobili's interpretative, hermeneutic approach more persuasive, and Fernandes's treatise remained little known until the 20th century.

But before the pleasure of telling stories, or even writing ethnographies, one had to face the horror of travelling to the rim of the world of the other.

Travel Writing as Transcendence

Nobili, therefore, opened his life-long correspondence with Rome with the travel narrative. He described his passage from Lisbon to Goa to his friends and relatives and to the General of the Society of Jesus, Claudio Aquaviva. In Europe and Portugal in particular, at

[2] Wicki, *Tratado*, 1973.

least from the time of the 'discovery voyages' of Vasco da Gama and others, maritime travel literature was growing in popularity, from *literatura de cordel*, or short popular pamphlets displayed on a string in bookshops, to national epics such as the *Lusíadas* by Luís de Camões. Besides, the descriptive appeal, most of these narratives had a moral point.[3] In the second part of the 16th century, those who stressed the costs of an outward extension balanced the glorification of the Portuguese overseas discoveries. The ramification of the conflict can be glimpsed in the literary texts of Francisco Sá de Miranda, who extolled Horatian ideas of tranquility and simplicity against the spectacle of expansion and the court. One of the 'string' authors, Henrique Días, a pharmacist who witnessed the shipwreck of the *São Paulo* near Sumatra on 21 January, 1561, had a similar point to make: 'It is better to live ashore and less desirous of riches than to traverse the sea in quest of such transitory and fleeting things'.[4] As the descriptions of maritime disasters became popular, more travellers were busy producing similar shipwreck narratives for the armchair adventurers.[5]

The first letter from Asia by each new Jesuit missionary necessarily included a description, a fragment, or at least a trace of travel narrative. In a letter to Aquaviva, Nobili summed up his dangerous passage from Lisbon to Goa.[6] During the journey which lasted fourteen months, among other episodes, the ship, *São Jacinto*, ran aground on a sandbank and had to be abandoned with all its cargo. The passengers reached Mozambique in a small boat. The missionary was then invited to a Viceroy's ship and thus suffered less than his companions who, because of the lack of space, sailed from Mozambique in a small vessel and were shipwrecked again before disembarking in Mombasa,

[3] On travel literature, see Rubiés, Joan-Pau, 'Instructions for Travellers: Teaching the Eye to See', *History and Anthropology*, vol. 9, nos 2–3, 1996. See also Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, Cambridge, 1997 and Gil, Fernando and Macedo, Helder, *Viagens do Olhar, Retrospecção, Visão and Profecia no Renascimento Português*, Porto, 1998.

[4] Gomes de Brito, B., *História trágico-marítima*, Lisbon, 1904, vol. 3, pp. 1–113. The same event was described by another witness, a Jesuit, Manuel Alvarez who illustrated his manuscript with pen and ink sketches. DI, vol. 5, pp. 440–9; Vasconcelos, Frazão de, *Naufragio da nau 'S. Paulo' em um ilheu próximo de Samatra no ano de 1561.* (Narração inédita, escrita em Goa em 1562 pelo Padre Manuel Alvares S.J.), Lisbon 1948.

[5] It seems that from 1580 to 1610 there were a large number of maritime disasters.

[6] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 January, 1606, ARSI, Goa 51, f. 1.

a Portuguese fortress on the coast of Melinde. For such a dramatic experience, Nobili's description was short. Even in his second letter to the General there were no more details about the passage. There may have been another letter, now lost, with a more comprehensive description of the journey addressed to Aquaviva.[7]

Nevertheless, Nobili, in fact, had a more urgent message to communicate. For the Jesuits, the passage to the East usually meant a one-way journey into the unknown and it was experienced as a rite of passage, a step into a new dimension. The shipwreck, real as it was, when reproduced in Nobili's letter half a year later, became merely one of the elements in the dramaturgy of the missionary encounter with other places and other people. The encounter *per se* was always emplotted as a Romance in which a hero takes possession of his problematic identity in a battle between forces of good and evil by transcending the world of experience. The transcendence is necessary because the hero's position in the world is structurally defined as weak in comparison with that of his nemesis. Besides shipwreck, Nobili introduced in his first letter other motives of his 'heroic' transport. For example, just as he started writing his letter, he had to abandon it: 'Since yesterday I have been laid up with a high fever, that is why I cannot write with my own hand'.[8] His manual weakness was the symptom of the first impulse in his distancing from the familiar. It is a gesture of refusal to repatriate the traces of his new self. While the shipwreck was inscribed in his letter as a geographical rite of passage, illness served as a cultural one. Dramatic as it was, it provided a pause, a threshold at which a temporarily disoriented subject could recompose both his exterior and interior in order to grasp the unfamiliar. Temporarily unable to converse with his superior due to the fatal lack of the right pose/prose, he nevertheless had a vision of a better future which consisted of 'occasions to suffer for Our Lord Jesus Christ' and of providing 'interesting news'.[9]

A brief re-description of the dangerous journey and illness, in his second letter to Aquaviva (1 December, 1607), which underscored his initial weakness, served as a springboard for his first significant triumphs in the Madurai mission. Enthusiastically, Nobili reported that he converted and baptized ten people as soon as he changed his

[7] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C. (Port.), Madurai, 1 December, 1607, ARSI, Goa 51, f. 306.
[8] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 January, 1606, Arshi Goa 51, f. 1.
[9] Ibid.

clothing and adapted himself to the customs of the country. It was a large number compared to his missionary colleague Gonçalo Fernandes, who did not convert a single person in the twelve years of his missionary career in the country of the Nāyaka rulers.

A year and a half after his arrival in India, Nobili presented his passage to India in a more spectacular manner in a letter to his cousin and friend Gregorio Boncompagni. The narrative flows from the crescendos of calm seas and serene skies becoming storms to decrescendos of approaching shipwreck and death, with last minute salvation. Interspersed with maritime trials and tribulations, 'objective', precise information normalized these distant regions into geographical frames.

> From the Cape we sailed to Mozambique, a small island which, if we count all the detours, is situated 4,000 leagues from Portugal and 900 from India. When we were eight leagues from that island, we nearly lost our lives by running onto a sandbank, the worst thing that can happen to a ship. The mast was broken and the rudder torn away so that there was no hope of escape. The horror of a dark night, and the dismal lamentations of the passengers, added to the general anguish. The men began to think about their souls and, according to opportunity and means, tried to make a good confession to secure their eternal salvation. However, by God's mercy, after midnight, the rising tide rescued us from those shallows.[10]

Nobili's description reads like a fragment of 'string literature' based on first-hand information and spectacular visual effects. The authorial position is simultaneously shifted from experiencing to observing and backwards. The writer is both sailing on the boat and watching the scene of his own sailing on a boat from above. Such a reshuffling of perspectives makes the narrative pulsate between the pleasure of seeing/describing and the horror of experiencing. It is an invitation to the reader to see and experience more than the text itself. Just like the passage of people, the passage of narratives from Europe to India and vice versa was exposed to the dangers of perishing in a shipwreck. From Nobili's two letters to his cousin Constanza Sforza Boncompagni, Duchesa of Sora, and his aunt Caterina Nobili Sforza and uncle Cardinal Francesco Sforza, there are hints that in his previous letters they had been 'unfortunate' addressees of

[10] Nobili, R. to Marqus Don Gregorio Boncompagni, (Lat.), Madurai, 3 December, 1607, Fondo Boncompagni E 6, Biblioteca Vaticana; published by J. Wicki in *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* (hereafter AHSI), no. 37, Rome, 1968.

similar shipwreck/ed narratives which probably never reached their destination.[11]

The descriptions by Nobili and other missionaries of their travels through India often assume the scenario of a pilgrimage. Each movement from one place to another, just like each day spent in the mission, was perceived by the missionaries as progress towards the divine. As a part of the wayfaring experience, the missionaries mostly travelled on foot, stopping in each village on the way to preach, baptize, cure, perform miracles and other similar acts. Those who were not able to endure such strains usually did not last long in the mission.

Emmanuel Leitão, the first of Nobili's companions, described his ten-day journey from the Jesuit college *Madre de Deos* in Cochin to Madurai. Leitão's travel narrative is as an exemplary *peregrinatio*.[12] The inaugurating scene is set in Cochin where Leitão meets two of Nobili's converts who have came to receive the sacrament of Confirmation from the Archbishop of Cranganore. These converts functioned as living signs/words of Nobili's missionary activity. Leitão took their arrival as an augury of his own destiny: 'Whenever I thought of it, I could not hold back my tears'. In the Jesuit, and in the general baroque economy of signification, tears are signs of a special divine election. Hence, 'on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul', the Provincial, Alberto Laerzio, ordered Leitão to pack out his things and set on a journey to Madurai. Where there was only one 'Apostle' (Nobili), Laerzio added the second (Leitão). That is at least what both Laerzio and Leitão hoped. The future denouement, however, was quite different.

Assured, in this initial phase, that all the signs were correct, 'and full of confidence in our Lord who called me to these parts,' Leitão separated himself from the familiar and ascended the mountains devoid of human and divine presence. 'Regarding my journey', he

[11] (1)Nobili, R. to Constanza Sforza Boncompagni, Duchesa of Sora (It.), 6 December, 1606), Fondo Boncompagni E 6, Biblioteca Vaticana; publ. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome, 1968. She was the daughter of Caterina Nobili Sforza and the wife of Giacomo Boncompagni, son of Ugo Boncompagni and later Pope Gregory XIII. (2) Nobili, R. to Caterina Nobili Sforza, Contessa di Santa Fiore, Madurai (It.), 7 December, 1606, Fondo Boncompagni E 6, Biblioteca Vaticana, pub. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome 1968. (3) Nobili, R. to Francesco Sforza, (It.), Madurai, 1 December, 1607, ARSI, Goa 51, f. 7–12, publ. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome, 1968.

[12] Leitão, E. to Aquaviva, C., (Port.), Madurai, 24 October, 1609, ARSI, Goa 51, f. 15–16.

wrote, 'all I can say is that God's special mercy preserved my life and strength to bear the bitter cold in those mountains and the great discomforts I suffered from the burning heat of the sun; but the desire of obtaining the treasure I now possess made all the toil light'.[13]

Until this point in his letter, the text adheres to the stereotyped course of the pilgrimage narrative. The biographic and semiotic problems started on the other side of the mountain. In Paleam (Uttamapālaiyam), 'a place three days away from Madurai', Leitão rented a *dolle*.[14] In the letter to the Provincial of the Malabar Province, Alberto Laerzio, he complained that he had had very little sleep on the way 'on account of the inconveniences of the places where I had to spend the night, and the lack of security due to the presence of tigers and elephants which a few days before had killed a man'.[15] Finishing the journey in a dolle and not on foot was a deviation in his peregrination—the missionaries were supposed to travel on foot—and in his narrative. In order to neutralize such an unfavourable beginning of his mission, Leitão introduced a kind of pseudo-death-escape story from the roaming, exotic animals such as tigers and elephants. By this ruse he intended to deflect the attention of the readers away from the signals of his corporeal (possibly also spiritual) weakness. The proof of his feebleness, the dolle, turned into the vehicle responsible for his personal rebirth and a sign of the divine grace. However, his inability to walk was soon paralleled by his linguistic and bodily incompetence. He was neither able to learn proper Tamil nor become accustomed to the Hindu ascetic life and diet. He left the mission shortly after and sailed away to the Moluccas, where he died in 1612.

For Nobili, each travel episode was connected with illness and misfortune. He fell sick as soon as he arrived to Goa on 20 May, 1605. In Cochin he almost succumbed to fever. He finally fully recovered in Madurai and promptly attributed his good health to the vegetarian

[13] Leitão, E. to Laerzio, C, 26 September, 1609, in Laerzio's report to Aquaviva, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa, ff. 17–75.

[14] (Tamil), *tōli*; a covered litter. Portuguese *doli* in Dalgado, *Glossário Luso-Asiático*, p. 367. English *dhooly, doolie* in Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 313—a covered litter carried by two or four men. Less sumptuous than *palankin*. Leitão, E. to Aquaviva, C. (Port.), Madurai, 24 October, 1609, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 15–16.

[15] Leitão, E. to Laerzio, A., 26 September, 1609, in Laerzio's report to Aquaviva, 20 Nov., 1609, ARSI, Goa, ff. 17–75.

food. The travels he undertook later, to Cochin and Goa, although described as perilous and tiring due to contrary winds, rough passages, etc., were also permeated with social dangers. Until about 1623, when his conversion method was officially approved, travelling beyond the Madurai mission into Portuguese territory usually meant for Nobili visiting hostile places. His visit to Goa in 1619 during the meetings of the Conference, staged by Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa, was surely a dangerous undertaking. Travelling through the non-Catholic interior of South India was equally dangerous. However, its dangers were attractive and desirable to any missionary with apostolic pretensions. In a letter to Bellarmino at the end of 1615, Nobili claimed: 'I long most keenly to travel about these vast spaces, staff in hand and to win their innumerable peoples for Christ Our Lord'.[16] Hence, travelling for Nobili was a mode of evangelical and personal conquest and, finally, a sign of grace. He not only survived but lived to be an octogenarian.

Splendid Landscapes and Blind 'Heathens'

Travelling was also a 'pause to wonder' about places and people one met on the way. It was an opening motif for a brief historical and geographical lesson. In a letter to his aunt Caterina Nobili Sforza, Nobili compared the city of Madurai, full of idolaters, with pre-Christian Rome.[17] Having thus telescoped and adjusted a distant town into the analogical historical frame, he positioned himself and another Jesuit, his future enemy Gonçalo Fernandes, amidst one hundred local Catholics. The static, untroubled group portrait was, however, immediately overturned by his statement that everybody else treats them as 'mad men'.

In his letter to Constanza Sforza Boncompagni, he repeated the same and added more descriptive elements.[18] After a six-month Tamil language 'course' on the Fishery coast, he was finally in

[16] Nobili, R. to Bellarmino, R., Cochin, 27 December, 1615, (typewritten translation in English, no Mss. number), Shembaganur Archives.

[17] Nobili, R. to Caterina Nobili Sforza, Contessa di Santa Fiore, Madurai, (It.), 7 December, 1606, Fondo Boncompagni E 6, Biblioteca Vaticana, publ. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome 1968.

[18] Nobili, R. to Constanza Sforza Boncompagni, Duchesa of Sora, (It.), 6 December, 1606), Fondo Boncompagni E 6, Biblioteca Vaticana, publ. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome, 1968.

Madurai, 'a beautiful and rich city', the capital of the kingdom. From bird's-eye view of the city, Nobili directed his gaze farther down into the streets and palaces in order to highlight the presence of a king who was powerful and kept a large permanent army with three hundred elephants. In a double censure of the seen and of the written, he annihilated all those apparent riches and splendour worthy of admiration. He did this by stigmatizing the inhabitants of the city, the king included, as blind heathens adoring things that, out of decency he refrained from relating. The same strategy of highlighting and undermining is found in a letter to Boncompagni.[19] After extolling Madurai, the capital of the Nāyaka king, its wealth and military defense, Nobili disclaimed all laudatory epithets by stating that it was 'utterly deprived of the knowledge of God'. The excellence of things seen flowing easily into admiration was thus undercut by the manipulation of the stage-light—as if a detailed representation of 'paganism' itself was too dangerous for the eyes of the European layperson. His missionary project of conversion was thus caught up in a tug-of-war with representation.

A year later, Nobili futher developed the analogy between ancient Rome and Madurai, anchoring it not only in his visual but also in his textual competence. 'Although most of the people recognize that there is only one God, still they go on worshipping idols and demons and telling stories about them like those told by Ovid in the Metamorphosis'.[20] His improved knowledge of the regional geo-politics can also be seen in the statement that the king of Madurai, a town located seven degrees north of the Equator, is actually a Captain of the *Rayar*, 'a most powerful ruler' (king of Vijayanagara), who receives a million gold pieces in annual tribute. On the same day, but in another letter, Nobili gives Aquaviva even more precise factual information.[21] The geographical location of the kingdom of Madurai

[19] Nobili, R. to Don Gregorio Boncompagni, (Lat.), Madurai, 3 December, 1607, Fondo Boncompagni E 6, Biblioteca Vaticana, publ. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome, 1968.

[20] Nobili, R. to Francesco Sforza, (It.), Madurai, December, 1, 1607, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 7–12, publ. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome, 1968.

[21] Aquaviva was already informed about the Madurai mission. See Pimenta, N. to Aquaviva, C. (Port.), Madurai, 2 December, 1599, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 3–6 in which Madurai was described as being of no less importance than Senji and Tanjavur. The beautiful church constructed by G. Fernandes is mentioned. The structure inspired devotion, although it was 'neither superb nor sumptuous like the towers and gilded pinnacles adoring the temples of the idols'.

is defined as the land spreading 'from Cape Comorin to the shallows of Ramanacore (Rameswaram) and northward, a distance of several days journey from the coast'. He also further dethroned the king of Madurai who became a simple Captain of the king of Bisnagar (Vijayanagara). The Nāyaka of Madurai was again stripped of legitimacy by the fact that he had usurped the land of the local kings only seventy years earlier. 'The sons of the soil as well as the Badagas who conquered them are pagans and divided into various sects.' There was a hidden political agenda in Nobili's, at first sight, pure description of the regions's geographical and social composition. He seemed to be hinting at the fact that both the secular and religious authorities in Madurai were illegitimate.

To Constanza Sforza Boncompagni, Nobili furnished additional details about local geography. Thus, Madurai was located 'to the west of the coast and seven degrees north of the Equator and 200 miles from Cochin and 70 miles from the Fishery coast'. Moreover, he delivered a short lesson on the Catholic topography of the region, something he did not have to repeat to his Superiors in Rome: that the headquarters of the southern Province were in Cochin, together with a college numbering more than 60 men and the residence of the Provincial; that he went to the Fishery coast where there were '60,000 Christians who belong to the first mission established by the B. Francis Xavier'.[22] A few years later, in 1609, in a letter to his relative and patron in the Neapolitan college, Fabio de Fabiis (Lat. Fabius de Fabii), Nobili expressed his unrestrained admiration for Madurai: 'a very noble and rich city (*città molto nobile e ricca*)' and 'the residence of the king of this mighty kingdom'.[23] The complexities of his apostolic activities in Madurai, as he was in the midst of his adaptationist experiments, and his marginality among numerous and powerful non-Catholic religious specialists, eroded his political confidence and his social identity. Thus, the king of Madurai was no more a mere Captain and his kingdom was mighty. The city was '*nobile*', just like Nobili's Roman lineage and his own name.

After 1609, descriptions of Nobili's journeys from Goa to Madurai and the brief panoptic information about his residence became rare before completely disappearing. In a letter to brother Vincenzo, he

[22] Nobili, R. to Constanza Sforza Boncompagni, Duchesa of Sora, (It.), 6 December, 1606), Fondo Boncompagni E 6, Biblioteca Vaticana, publ. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome, 1968.

[23] Nobili, R. to Fabiis, F. de (It.), Madurai, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 13–14.

mentioned in passing that he had stayed on the Fishery coast and then come to Madurai. For any further information, he was referred to their uncle Sforza, as well as to Father Vitelleschi (a future General of the Society of Jesus), who was to show him the Annual Letter in which success and progress of the 'new vineyard' in India was described.[24] Nobili was hinting at the fact that his first missionary steps functioned already as collective and public Jesuit texts and were no more his private property. Even when he responded to Aquaviva, who complained about receiving no letter from him, Nobili briefly communicated the fact that he had been sent to Madurai by the Provincial, 'a very beautiful and populous city where the studies of these blind gentiles are flourishing'.[25] For more general information Nobili referred him to the reports written by the Provincial. Nevertheless, in his eight-page letter he presented his own version of the events in his 'new' Madurai mission, and attached a list of indulgences requested by the neophytes.

Madurai Mission as a Field of Contestation

Information concerning the geography of South India, and the Madurai mission in particular, did not constitute contestable knowledge. On the other hand, Nobili's ethno-historical representation of the region never ceased to provoke opposition, and it is through contestation that Nobili developed his Tamil ethnology. Nobili's aristocratic perspective predisposed him to interpret the culture as a top-down circulation of goods and ideas. Faced with the hierarchically stratified Tamil society, he was immediately attracted to two local models of authority: one belonging to the military rulers, the other to the religious specialists. Both corresponded to his own familial models. He saw these two social groups as the primary targets of his apostolic travails. Moreover, given his social origins and current profession, he saw himself as their equal. What he did not (or did not want) to see, at least in the beginning, was that the rules governing the membership to these two social categories, when compared to the analogous European categories, were not the same. When he proclaimed on the *ole* (*ōlai*) or palm-leaf strip, attached to the tree in front of his church in 1609: 'I came from Rome; my family in Rome

[24] Nobili, R. to Nobili, Vincenzo (It.), Madurai, 17 October, 1609, Università Gregoriana, cod. Miscellanea 212, ff. 84r-93r, in AHSI, 37, Rome, 1968.

[25] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C. (Port.), Madurai, 25 October, 1609, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 18–26.

corresponds to that of good Rajas in this land. When I was young I became a *sannyāsi* and a man of religion', he was on the right track, emulating a possible choice of behaviour as a member of the warrior community.[26] However, when, in 1612, Pero Francisco denounced Nobili and his faithful companion, Antonio Vico, as dressing and behaving like '*Bramanes Saniases*' (Brahman sannyāsis), Nobili developed a theory about the origin of the Brahmans.[27] With the use of etymologies, he proved that the Brahmans were nothing but learned men (*sapientes*) or doctors, since the *Brachman* comes from the Sanskrit root *Bruhum*, to know. What Nobili played down by stressing that children of the Brahmans were not automatically accepted as members of the Brahman community, but had to go through the *upanayana* ceremony (the investiture of the sacred thread), was the fact that one cannot become a Brahman, but has to be born as one.

Besides being an aristocrat, Nobili was Italian. His nationality situated him immediately in two intertwined and ongoing controversies. The first involved the antagonism between the Jesuits of different nationalities, in particular between the Portuguese and Italians.[28] The second, with much larger political ramifications, was the conflict between the Holy See and the Portuguese padroado (patronage). At the heart of the conflict was the inability of the Portuguese (and Spanish) crown to administer efficiently its overseas missionary enterprises, and Rome's effort to reclaim for itself the jurisdiction over the distant missions. This controversy, however, is a symptom of an even more important struggle between the Papacy and the rising nation-states.

Hence, Nobili's refusal to identify himself as a frangui, the name usually attributed to the Portuguese in Madurai, but also to all otherwise unidentified foreigners, provoked an outcry among the Portuguese Jesuits and other religious figures. Therefore, the description and interpretation of Tamil culture was from the beginning a result of

[26] *Ōlai* (Tamil) is a palm leaf used for writing. Vico, A. to Laerzio, A., 27 May, 1611, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin (It.), 25 November, 1611, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 93–129.

[27] Francisco, P. to Aquaviva, C. (Port.), Cochin, 4 November, 1612, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 181–182; Nobili's *Responsio* to Buccerio (Lat.), Cranganore, 29 December, 1615, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 213–18.

[28] Barradas, M. to Mascarenhas, N. (Assistant), (Port.), Goa, 20 January, 1620. A similar controversy raged at times between Portuguese and Spanish Jesuit missionaries.

polemics and contestation which forced Nobili to both sharpen his ideas and couch them in etymologies and casuistry. For that reason, his larger treatises are organized around particular objections of his opponents and his explanations are constructed on analogies and comparisons with European epistemological positions. Until Fernandes's denunciation, Nobili's reflections on local society were rather vague. His access to the written literature in Tamil, and after 1609 in Sanskrit and Telugu, directed his interests to Hindu 'theology'. In a letter to Laerzio (17 March, 1607), he attacked theological postulates—*padi, pasu, pasam* (*padi, pacu, pācam*)—and the transmigration of souls as taught by the 'pagan' teacher otherwise recruited to teach basic Tamil literacy in the Christian parish school in Madurai. From the refutation, it is clear that Nobili had a glimpse into Śaiva Siddhānta theology and learnt even more when the schoolteacher converted and received baptism (twenty days later) and a new name—Alberto. Alberto Laerzio became his spiritual godfather.[29]

Nobili found with admiration 'in the books and on the lips of these pagans that God is one and triune'. They explained, however, the threefoldness in terms of God's various operations—creating, preserving and punishing, and 'not according to the differences in persons'. He also discovered that some Hindus taught that God did not exist and that he was merely a composition of four elements. Yet others taught that he was a soul and that he '(was) playing under the images of various objects'.[30] At this point, Nobili had no intention of representing Hindu theology, neither in detail nor as a total system, to his European audience. His only intention was to forge tools for the efficient refutation of its principal tenets. Therefore, he asked his uncle Sforza to send him some books 'on the eternity of the pains of hell and against the doctrine of transmigration defended by Pythagoras'. The Hindu theological texts struck Nobili as defective Catholicism.

By December 1608, Nobili was told by the most learned of the country that there were many sects within the three Vedas or Laws (*leggi*), 'the Laws of Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra' and each one of them was taught by a particular Brahman master, and that the fourth

[29] Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and ff. 17–75.

[30] Nobili, R. to Sforza, F. (It.), Madurai, 1 December, 1607, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 7–12, publ. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome, 1968.

law was no longer extant. As pertains to salvation, all these Laws appeared to be in disharmony: 'some conclude that there is no such thing as salvation and others again that there is no other life beyond the present one'.[31] Hence, Nobili proclaimed that he was the teacher of the fourth, lost Veda which deals with the question of salvation. His knowledge of the Vedas was still weak since he was only a beginner in Sanskrit and his Brahman Sanskrit teacher, Śivadharma, still a catechumen, had not yet started transcribing the 'sacred texts' for him.[32] Four months later, Nobili was completely immersed in the study of the three laws. Śivadharma was 'no longer held back by scruples', that is, by the interdiction on writing down the Vedas, the 'most grievous sin' for the Tamils. The Roman missionary was finally able to 'read the ridiculous legends and stories of these poor people'.[33] Although he had no admiration for the fabulative substratum of the Hindu texts, he appreciated their speculative content:

> We imagine that these people are ignorant, but I assure you they are not. I am actually reading one of their books in which I learn philosophy anew almost in the same terms as I studied it in Rome, though of course, their philosophy is fundamentally different from ours.[34]

Nobili privileged textual knowledge as 'true knowledge' and constituted it as a ground for his authorial/authoritative voice. In this respect, he directly opposed the possibility of 'true' visual knowledge as proposed by Gonçalo Fernandes in his letter dated 7 May, 1610.[35] According to Gonçalo Fernandes, the social and religious situation in Madurai was more complex than Nobili appeared to think. In his everyday observation and in his more or less successful interaction since 1595 with various inhabitants of the town, he saw their outward differences and took them for substances. He believed in the truthfulness of direct perception and its propensity to constitute true knowledge. Thus, Fernandes saw classifiable diversity where Nobili saw basic uniformity.

[31] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 24 December, 1608, in Laerzio to Aquaviva (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and 17–75.

[32] Śivadharma—or later, after his conversion to Christianity, Bonifacio Xastri—was first mentioned as Nobili's Sanskrit and Telugu teacher in his letter to Laerzio, 15 January, 1609.

[33] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 22 April, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and 17–75.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Fernandes, G. to Pimenta, N. (Port.), Madurai, 7 May, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 29–31.

On the other hand, Nobili retired into solitude shortly after his arrival at the mission in order to learn the languages he considered necessary for general conversion, and to re-wardrobe his persona and lifestyle according to the model of a native priest and teacher. From his 'high-caste' retreat he focused on only two dominant and opposing categories—Christianity and 'paganism'. With the help of his theological apparatus, he temporarily bracketed both of them in a form of experimental appearance in order to grasp the origin of their mutual 'fundamental difference' and then expurgate it as demonic illusion. While acknowledging the difference, therefore, Nobili almost boastfully affirmed his ability to capture it within his epistemic system with his scholarly tools. Furthermore, Nobili clearly privileged written texts, 'books', regardless of their 'pagan' authors, one of whom was Aristotle, as the only vessels for preserving 'true knowledge'. Although false doctrines and 'ridiculous stories' were found in abundance in the texts he read, Nobili believed that with a proper procedure of hermeneutic discernment all 'dangerous material' could be weeded out. Nobili's theological baggage lead him to search for substances of objects graspable only by intellect. Sensory perception, although never in error, reflected only the domain of accidents.

The everyday, surface, tactile existence of the heterogeneous social body inhabiting Madurai did not appear problematic or deep-structured to an ex-soldier such as Gonçalo Fernandes who, after entering the Society of Jesus[36], may have worked in Goa as an infirmarian[37] and a manual worker. The Madurai mission in which he ministered to the spiritual needs of his Christian flock (the Paravas) and occasional Portuguese horse traders was for Fernandes in no way different from other Jesuit missions in India. It was perhaps more difficult because of its location in the heart of the native kingdom, but the local ruler, the Nāyaka of Madurai, Krishnappa Nāyaka II, proved to be favourable to the establishment of the mission.[38]

[36] DI, vol. 5, pp, 269, 309 and 689.

[37] DI, vol. 8, pp. 424 and 645. See also Humbert, 'Hindu Ceremonial of 1616'. Wicki thinks that Gonçalo Fernandes who worked as an infirmarian in Goa is not the same as the one in question. Nevertheless, we know that one of the most important activities Fernandes had in Madurai was 'medical' assistance.

[38] See Sathyanatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madura*, p. 61. In 1595, with the Nāyaka's permission, Fernandes built the church, presbytery, school and dispensary in the city of Madurai.

The Madurai mission was no work of imagination for Fernandes; in order to know it, one had to be there and look at it, as he repeated over and over in his letters. Nobili, on the other hand, 'saw' it with the eyes of the soul even before he came to India. Not the Madurai mission, of course, but his mission somewhere in the East waiting for his arrival. He dreamt of becoming a missionary in India or, it seems only briefly, in Japan, while still in the Neapolitan Jesuit College. His studious preparation and training in the Collegio Romano to refute and defeat 'paganism' with arguments derived from the humanistic Catholic repertory[39] made him even more certain of a special, 'exemplary' mission which would turn his life into material for exemplary biographies.

Emplotted as Romance, such biographies are closed systems which begin with a premonition or prophecy and culminate in a final epiphany. For that reason, Nobili fashioned his life as a 'correct' reading of the divine signs. If there were some minor discrepancies with the original projection, one just had to change the perspective: 'Our life may at first sight appear miserable, as it truly is if we look at it with the eyes of the body, yet I would not exchange it for the richest treasure in Europe'.[40] What Nobili saw with the eyes of the soul, other Jesuits inspired by his example would also want to see. In his letter to Laerzio in 1609, Emmanuel Leitão, Nobili's first companion, reaffirmed that the founding moment of the Madurai mission was primarily in the domain of the imaginary and desired:

> I did not know where I was, nor what I was doing; I was beside myself with joy and consolation, seeing with my own eyes and touching with my own hands what had been for such a long time the object of my most ardent desires'.[41]

The topos of the Madurai mission as an object/site of desire was a given opening motif used by every new Jesuit missionary upon arrival at the mission. However, some of the missionaries, Leitão being the first, declined to participate in Nobili's master narrative. The 'true' representation of Tamil society and culture thus remained constantly threatened, a field of contestation.

[39] See Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, p. 100.

[40] Nobili, R. to Constanza Sforza Boncompagni, Duchesa of Sora (It.), 6 December, 1606, Fondo Boncompagni E 6, Biblioteca Vaticana, publ. by J. Wicki in AHSI, no. 37, Rome, 1968.

[41] Leitão, E. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 26 September, 1609, in Laerzio to Aquaviva (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and 17–75.

Forging Analogical Tools—The Aristocratic Perspective

In the course of the controversy, then, Nobili and Fernandes pushed each other into assuming two radically opposed epistemological and textual positions. In a letter to his cousin Constanza even before the eruption of the conflict, Nobili, in a double gesture of distancing ('we live like pilgrims in a strange land') and telescoping ('like [...] the first Christians in Europe'), proposed and solved the problem of the representation of Tamil alterity.[42] For him, an analogy with the European past was the solution. In the form of the larger treatise answering Fernandes's accusations, he tried to prove that the local Hindu rites and customs he incorporated into Christianity were justifiable within the tenets of European theology. In order to prove the basic sameness and adaptability of Hindu institutions to the Catholic idiom, Nobili decontextualized them with the help of two theological concepts: *voluntas* and *finis*. Paraphrasing St Thomas Aquinas (1a 2ae, qu 20a, art. Ius), Nobili postulates that 'all action or exterior act, or sign, is not in itself good or evil, unless by an extrinsic denomination which comes from the will'.[43] Since, according to St. Augustine, free will naturally chooses goodness, that is, God, the 'pagans' have no free will. When refuting the tenets of Hinduism in his Tamil works, Nobili especially underscored the lack of free will (*cuvātantiriya palam*) as one of its basic defects.[44] Nobili's second point, reserved only for his European audience, was that one should not condemn the external acts, actions and signs of the pagans without knowing their 'purpose' (*finis*), and that those purposes were not to be found in the texts of St Thomas or any other scholastic, but only in 'pagan' works. Nobili claimed for himself the authority to discern the purposes, on account of his linguistic and theological expertise.

Nobili, therefore, juxtaposed Catholic canonical documents and the 'new facts'[45] derived from the 'pagan' texts by temporarily according them equally worthy positions. This he did in order to debunk

[42] Nobili, R. to Constanza, Madurai, 6 December, 1606, Fondo Boncompagni, E6, Biblioteca Vaticana, AHSI, 37, Rome, 1968.

[43] Nobili, *Responsio*, in Dahmen, p. 90.

[44] Especially in his Tamil work *āttuma nirṇayam*, ed. by S. Rajamanickam, Tuttukudi, 1967), p. 87.

[45] Anthony Pagden, '*Ius et Factum*: Text and Experience in the Writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas', in *Representations*, 33, Winter 1991.

Fernandes's nontextual, experiential proofs, as well as to fortify his authorial position by alluding to his exclusive competence for reading 'paganism'. At the same time, while quoting 'pagan' authors and invoking the authoritative opinions of certain learned Brahmans, Nobili created a supplementary context as a ground for his assault on Fernandes and other suspicious Europeans, as well as for countering his Tamil political and theological adversaries. His subversive textual strategy can clearly be seen at work in the first chapter of his *Responsio ad ea quae contra modum quo nova Missio Madurensis utitur ad ethnicos Christo convertendos obiecta sunt*, written in October of 1610 as a counter-attack on Fernandes's denunciatory letter addressed to the Visitor, Nicoalu Pimenta, on 7 May, 1610. Nobili cited Fernandes's accusations, point by point and *verbatim*, and in a cut-and-paste play of quotations he developed a critique of Fernandes's understanding of Tamil rites and customs and laid the epistemic foundations for his own method of accommodation. He dissected Fernandes's letter into small pieces and wedged them between his repartees. The distance, social and intellectual, between the two antagonists immediately stood out in their choice of language: Fernandes's casual Portuguese appeared incompetent compared with Nobili's polished Latin. Having thus subtly underscored Fernandes's inability to write in Latin, Nobili engrafted another disqualifying point: ignorance of the 'Latin of the country', the 'Grantham', the language that the Brahmans use for writing their sacred books.[46] Moreover, in his text he further enhances his competence by writing both Grantha and Tamil characters followed by transliteration and, finally, translation into Latin.

The question of language was always present in Nobili's justifications or attacks. By assuming the position of a translator, inherently unstable, Nobili saw himself as a linguistic hermeneut/Hermes, moving quickly across the boundaries of language and simultaneously engaging in multiple interpretations. He used philological and etymological methods in order to find the exact relationship between words and meanings in each language. Although this project seemed to be endlessly protracted as long as his Brahman informants provided or promised him newer or more correct updates, Nobili's ultimate goal was to uncover a language God had previously distributed across the face of the earth. This language was inscribed everywhere

[46] Sanskrit (*Grantham* or *kirantam*).

and had to be deciphered with the help of other texts and theological speculation. Seeing 'with the eyes of the body', as did Fernandes, was not enough for that purpose. Answering Fernandes's accusations, which took account only of appearances—'He is dressed as Guru and Sannyāsi and wears the thread in a manner of the Brahmans and Rajus'—, Nobili unhinged Fernandes's visual proposition, which basically alluded to Nobili 'going native', by re-clothing it with the etymological explanation, found in a Sanskrit text:

> Let us also explain the meaning of *Guru* and *Sanias* (*sannyāsi*) lest those who are ignorant of Sanskrit suspect a heathen error. *Guru* in our language formally means doctor or teacher, not of a particular science or sect but in general (...). Thus, we can find in Brahman literature in the commentary of the book called *Amarasinga*, in the part which is called *Brumma*, the following definition *guru artha suggenath Guru*, which means that *Guru* is the one who clarifies through his explanations, pertaining to wisdom, religion or to other things and disciplines. [47]

He continued in the same vein as regards the word sannyāsi, which he successively defined with the help of quotations from a Sanskrit treatise and from Tamil poetry as meaning 'a renouncer'. With this move, Nobili dislodged Fernandes's categories of guru and sannyāsi, conceptualized in terms of a specific local religious practice, and recontextualized them in the polysemic discursive field of the Tamil literati. Having thus outmanoeuvred a narrow definition by which he was accused of having converted to paganism, Nobili plunged into the world of floating signifiers, privileging for himself the gesture of affixing them to the chosen references. Nobili would later prove that the word Brahman means 'a learned man, *doctus*' and not 'a priest', as his opponents claimed. However, Nobili's experiments with signifiers and significations always coheres around the diametrically opposed categories of low and high. Indeed, his appreciation of Tamil culture and society lay in what he saw as a sign of an ordered society: hierarchy. His self-perception as an apostolic missionary implied a ritual abasement, but it also implied a ritual elevation and public visibility. To obtain this he, like many colonial and post-colonial actors after him, ended up espousing Brahmanical ideology.

It is the mixture of his European aristocratic and Brahmanical perspective which spoke through his answers to Fernandes's accusations. Unwittingly Fernandes himself had raised this point. Nobili's basic

[47] Nobili, *Responsio*, in Dahmen, pp. 58–9. Amarasimha is the author of Amarakośa.

stand that Hinduism had much in common with Christianity can be mirrored against Fernandes's statement in his treatise written in 1616: 'The Brahmans are obliged to defend their law, but in such a manner that it may not discredit other laws, because they say that all other laws have something of their own law'.[48] Fernandes was probably one of the first Europeans to notice this basic feature of Hinduism, that is, its ability to harness by incorporation all other religious movements. Nobili was not aware then, but probably understood later in his career, that he was also caught up in the same process when advised by a friendly paṇṭāram[49], that,

> if the father's (Nobili's) object was only to save his own soul, he could go about dressed as he pleases, but if he wanted to be a master among these people, he should teach them the spiritual law, and gather a large number of disciples; he must as far as he could, adapt himself to the manners, customs and ideas of this country'.[50]

However, the paṇṭāram's advice could have been equally given to Nobili through Valignano's or even Loyola's' voice. Manuals on Renaissance self-fashioning are replete with such recommendations for dissimulation and assimilation.

However, while Nobili undertook to assimilate a Hindu interior, Fernandes's target was the exterior. Therefore, all of Nobili's treatises were organized along a paradigmatic line. He disconnected a specific concept such as, for example, the use of sandal paste, and then wove it into contexts he had already reorganized, only to force out a workable analogy with European knowledge. In chapter nine of *Informatio de quibusdam moribus Nationis Indicae*, written in 1615, entitled '*De usu sandali*', he started with the definition of sandalwood:

> Sandalwood is a kind of scented wood most pleasant to the smell and, as the physicians of this locality maintain, health-giving and very beneficial to bodily well-being; it is an offspring of India, but fairly well known in Europe and described by Ruellius.'[51]

[48] Wicki, *Tratado*, p. 115.

[49] Paṇṭāram is a polysemic category in Tamil culture. It can refer to a caste as well as to a profession—a Śaivite non-Brahman priest. Diehl, Carl Gustav, *Instrument and Purpose: Studies on Rites and Rituals in South India* Lundt, 1956, p. 18; and Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, vol. 6, pp. 45–52.

[50] Laerzio, R. to Aquaviva, C. (Ital.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54, ff. 2–16 and ff. 17–75.

[51] Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, p. 108.

In this statement, a mixture of botanical, medical and historical authority, this particular Indian object is already normalized into a European order of things. It is a hint to the readers that there would be no surprises to come. From sandalwood, he narrowed down his report to sandal paste. There is a description of how to prepare it 'by mixing it with musk, turmeric (*crocum*), camphor, *zebithum* (musk from the civet cat) and other aromatic substances' and how to use it 'to anoint the body, and (it) is valued by our Indians in the same way as unguents of various sorts are valued in Europe'. Then he gave a few tips about where to obtain it (in the Melaka kingdom) and what were the best kinds. Having thus transformed sandal paste into a commodity, he came to his principal point: 'One thing is certain and beyond all doubt, namely, that the use of sandal paste as an ointment rubbed over the body smacks of no superstitious belief, but serves solely to lend a glossy and pleasing appearance to the body'.[52] This was a direct answer to Fernandes, who did not question the polysemic usage of sandal paste, but trusted his eyes when he saw that

> the sandal is blessed by him (Nobili) on Sunday before Mass and then distributed [...]. Rubbing sandal on the forehead is a ceremony practiced by the pagans when they offer their *puja* (worship)[...]. On such occasions he who celebrates and his assistants do hardly anything else except wash themselves and rub ashes on their foreheads.[53]

However, the strength of Nobili's systematic exposition and his rigorous control of the argument were such that they left little doubt as to the veracity of his statements. As soon as he proclaimed that sandal paste had a purely social meaning, he proved it by quoting from Sanskrit and Tamil sources. He quoted *verbatim*, although none of his European readers had any understanding of Sanskrit and very few in Indian missions, if any, could have understood classical Tamil verses. The common ground Nobili tried to establish between himself and his European audience was not located in the semantic domain, but rather on the level of the code itself, that is, in the presupposition that all readers shared his respect for the written word and ancient authors.

Nobili also introduced examples relevant to 'pagan' customs from European texts. He started with a question: 'Is it becoming of a preacher of the Gospel to use such perfumery in which these heathen

[52] Ibid.

[53] Fernandes, G. to Pimenta, N. (Port.), Madurai, 7 May, 161, ARSI, Goa 51, Pp.29–31.

men have taken such delight?' However, in the next phrase the idea of the body 'odoriferous' suddenly metamorphosed into the body 'ornamented' and 'splendiferous'.

> For just as it becomes a preacher of the Gospel to appear mean and poor when such an appearance is conducive to the greater glory of God and to the salvation of souls, so does it become the preacher to appear with his ornaments and splendidness, when this is thought necessary for the praise and glory of God and for the welfare of souls.[54]

With one more semantic mutation Nobili's aristocratic bias is ever more visible. He gave three additional examples as European precedents. The first was St Paul who when necessary, extolled the splendour of his family, of his birthplace and of his qualities. At this point, Nobili's argument was already far removed from his initial definition of sandalwood and the use of sandalwood paste, but it is striking that his search for Indian customs and rites brought into relief the signs of superior social status. In two other examples, therefore, he briefly mentioned that St James wore a golden ribbon around his head as a sign of royal splendour, and that St John the Evangelist adopted the same usage. Starting with the Apostles and early Christian saints, Nobili constituted himself a missionary lineage that ended with the China mission and Francis Xavier, who did not hesitate to copy the same usage, 'when he saw that the glory of God demanded it. Thus in Japan he removed his customary humble dress and assumed robes of silk and various ornaments.'[55] At this point, sandalwood paste was on its way to disappearing from the text, since it had lost its role as a signifier. The place at which it was suddenly submerged is the place where Christ the supreme signifier appeared.

In Christ, all conflicts are harmonized. Balms and scents are permitted by Christ, who knew well that pleasure was not their only purpose, but that 'some heathen (...) turned their use to objectionable purposes, even to the extent of dedicating them to false gods.'[56] What Christ knew about the Jews and the 'heathen' was the same as what Nobili found among the Tamils. This ultimate similitude brought the first part of Nobili's exposition to an apogee, at which point he was able to resume his own voice: 'This practice of applying sandal paste,

[54] Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, p. 110.
[55] Ibid., p. 111.
[56] Ibid., 111–112.

which I consider to be a necessity for us, is not sought for the sake of display or of pleasure, but to serve as a distinctive sign of the rank of teacher or doctor in any science.'[57] After having developed the semiological field organized around the Tamil usage of sandal paste, in a double turn he thus destabilized it by disclosing its necessity as an element of missionary strategy, and at the same time reconfirmed it by adding to it another referent—the rank of the teacher.

However, in the following section of his exposition, it becomes clear that he was not talking about just any sandal paste but about a particular sandal mark applied on the forehead, the *tilakam*. In the paragraph *'De Sandalo in fronte'*, Nobili proceeds along the same paradigmatic line as before. According to him, this mark had different forms. Although primarily used for embellishing the forehead for purely social purposes, it degenerated through practice into the sign which various idolatrous sects used in order to distinguish themselves from one another. The second part of his proposition was certainly confirmed by Fernandes, who described each symbol according to the material of which it was made and included a little drawing and its local name.[58] Nobili did not think it necessary to provide a similar catalogue of these various marks because his representation of Tamil society operated in a register quite different from that of Fernandes. He sought analogies among European institutions and customs, abolishing all differences by virtue of this assimilationist drive.

> This [...] peculiar practice [...] has certainly been introduced among the people out here in much the same way as the prevalent custom among the people in Europe, where the habit of dressing up the body, a universal habit originally intended for the preservation of life and with a view to marking some social distinction, has led religious orders to adopt a special color and a distinctive form of dress so as to distinguish their particular Order and founder from other Orders and founders.[59]

Anchored in the domain of the Same, the cultural specificity of the tilakam is then further decomposed by Nobili in a parallel procedure which over-determined his subject.[60] First, he removed the human presence in order to confirm the tilakam as a material referent. It was

[57] Ibid., p. 112.

[58] Wicki, *Tratado*, p. 115.

[59] Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, p.113.

[60] Fabricius, *Tamil and English Dictionary*, p. 527—*'tilakam*—vermilion; a spot or point of sandal and vermilion on the forehead of Śaivas, etc.'

made of different substances: 'Musk, *zebithum*, turmeric, camphor, the so-called *Xani* (prepared from a powder, black in color) and sandal'.[61] However, even among the materials there was a hierarchy ('of all the unguent used for decoration of the forehead, the first and most highly prized variety is sandal paste') which immediately brought the presence of a human body back into the text, since 'the luster of the forehead comes from the sandal paste put on it.' For Nobili, the naked body was just like a culture without signs—a non-presence. But in his semiological constellation, all the signs indicated a specific rank from low to high. Furthermore, the sign for the body beautiful was by analogy collapsible into the body noble, and from there into the body learned. It becomes clear that Nobili imposed his own body as the measure, the origin and the subject of his text. In addition, his body was not like any other (especially not Fernandes's)—his was the body adaptable. Since the bare forehead signified, according to Nobili's ethnographic understanding of Tamil customs, a non-person, an untouchable, a missionary was able to gain visibility/touchability only by applying sandalwood paste. In this sense, Nobili crossed the threshold into Tamil culture, in keeping with Loyola's apostolic precept—to enter by the door of the others in order to make them come out.

The thirteen quotations from Tamil and Sanskrit texts out of the six hundred Nobili claimed to have gathered, and another six hundred which he could have gathered in order to prove his point, display only traces of his foraging through indigenous texts. Fernandes, who did not smear his forehead with sandal paste and was in effect culturally naked, had no direct access to the written texts. The body covered with the right signs was the only passport into the world of the other. Yet, the text strewn with quotations was also a sign of the difficulty in grasping its context. Nobili's wearing of the thread and then removing it, dressing up as a rājā sannyāsi and then as a Brahman sannyāsi, demonstrate this problem clearly. To capture local signs was therefore not to discover, but to impose a context. And Nobili's primary context was his learned and noble European one, which thus became a universal context for any exterior sign:

> The square-shaped mark on the forehead (called) *Viddeivartanam* and its import in the Brahman's mentality exactly accords with our conception of the Doctor's cap, or that of a gown and gloves, and with the meaning attached to

[61] Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, p. 113.

the fan in the Chinese Empire and to other emblems prescribed there as symbols of various offices.[62]

Once such a fixed context was established, Nobili could string his analogies from Indian to European texts and practices. Among analogical strategies, the most important were etymology and translation. Tamil or Sanskrit words were pinned down, as in an entomological display, in strange characters, empty signs of an unknown referent, constituting a negative space, a hole in the text in which all the meanings were possible. Nobili thus became the principal agent in the process of selection and attribution of meanings. But the hole remained; the characters were translated but they had not changed their shapes and they studded Nobili's texts as resistant secrets, partly divine and partly demonic. Transcription and finally translation then mitigated this graphic suspense. Obviously, Nobili's goal was to control every single chain in the production of significations which were to be attributed to Tamil culture and society. His honour and status were at stake.

Against the Demotic Perspective—Disjointing the Description

No doubt Fernandes, who was older than Nobili and had been in the Madurai mission longer, felt increasingly threatened and degraded by his younger colleague's epistemological offensive. Although he was not as learned and had no direct access to Sanskrit texts, he had his own informants. And sometimes they were the same as Nobili's, who often accused Fernandes of buying their information. Nevertheless, Fernandes responded to Nobili's challenge and started gathering bits and pieces of Tamil and Sanskrit texts in order to contradict Nobili's contentions.

Imitating Nobili, Fernandes also tried to cite verses or fragments of Hindu texts in order to squeeze out appropriate meanings. But Nobili was quick to delegitimize his efforts by combining the rhetoric and textual authority usually associated with the Indianist/Orientalist

[62] *Viddeivartanam*—Nobili defined this sign as meaning imbued with knowledge. '*Vardah* = to increase'; '*viddei*=knowledge'. Gonçalo Fernandes represented it pictorially and called it '*copuram* (*kōpuram*)', a temple tower. Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, p. 117.

disciplines which were to emerge in the 18th century[63]. The most important prerequisite for the true understanding of Indian culture became an 'original', 'authentic' text, that is, a text presumably old and written on a palm leaf in appropriate characters, or a text written from memory by a learned and 'honest' Brahman.[64] If these preliminary conditions were met, the scholar-Indianist could use his linguistic knowledge to translate the text and interpret it. However, every sequence was potentially threatened with subversion. Three of Fernandes's fragments, according to Nobili, were a case in point. The first one: *'lalate tilakam drstva nirasam pitaro gatah'*, Fernandes attributed to Manu 'son of the sun'. According to Nobili, this claim was dubious because there was no precise information as to which Manu Fernandes referred to. According to Nobili, Manu, the son of the god mentioned in *'Ragu Vamxiam'*, was a character and not a writer.[65] Or was it another Manu 'who published the first book or volume of the *'Smruti'*, which indeed commands the highest authority'?[66] As for the second Manu, Nobili claimed that he could not have been the

[63] The Asiatic Society of Bengal founded by William Jones (1746–95) in 1784 is considered as the first Indological institution; in the years to come it financed and promoted translations of 'ancient' Sanskrit texts. The members of the society such as Charles Wilkins and H. Th. Colebrooke, called 'Orientalists', generally advocated the view, somewhat similar to Nobili's, that the religious and philosophical traditions of India were ancient and pristine, and shared a common ancestor with the Greeco-Roman culture. As opposed to those British servants like the utilitarian writer James Mill (1773–1836), commonly known as 'Anglicists', Orientalists showed admiration and a certain tolerance with respect to contemporary Hindu customs. For bibliographical reference see, Kopf, David, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernisation, 1773–1835* (Berkeley, 1969); Halbfass, Wilhelm, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (transl. from German) (New York, 1988); For a critique of 'Orientalism' in India see Inden, Ronald, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990). See also Breckenridge, C.A. and Veer, Peter van der (ed.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia, 1993.

[64] See Colas, G., 'Les manuscrits envoyés de l'Inde par les jésuites français entre 1729–1735', in *Scribes et manuscrits du Moyen-Orient*, eds. Déroche, F., and Richard, F., Paris, 1997.

[65] *Raghuvamśa* (Raghu's Lineage) is Kalidasa's (fourth- or fifth-century) second epic after *Kumārasambhava*. It is a history of the solar dynasty of the kings of Ayodhya. Radoslav Katičić *Stara Indijska Književnost*, Zagreb, 1973, p. 251. Manu became associated with Sūrya (the Sun) in the Purānas. Klostermaier, Klaus K, *A Survey of Hinduism*, New York, 1989.

[66] *Mānavadharmaśāstra* or *Manusmṛti* is attributed to Manu. It is also called *Manu's Code of Law*. It was written between the second century BC and the second century AD.

author of the fragment in question because there was no such verse in his text, which Nobili knew by heart. Finally, the Brahman who served as Fernandes's informant 'is not a doctor'. After having completely debunked the authenticity of the fragment, Nobili finally displayed his own power over it. He re-authenticated it, that is found the text to which it belonged—another '*Smruti*' book, the '*Ciandrica*'.[67] The mistaken quotation stood at the two extreme poles of the origin and the deathbed of authority, as Nobili knew very well, since his opponents took his adaptationist method of conversion as an extended cultural misquotation.[68]

Nobili's translation of the 'correct' text is: '*Si tilacam in fronte mortui parentes aspexerint cum tristitia abibunt* (If the deceased parents see the *tilacam* on the forehead, they will depart in sorrow)'. It is not entirely clear how Fernandes interpreted this fragment, except that it was against Nobili's claim that tilakam was a purely social sign. According to Nobili, Fernandes's Brahman informant misunderstood the word *niracam*:

> Ignorant as he was of the true meaning of that word, he suspected that it conveyed a different meaning which militated against the use of the *tilakam* from a Christian viewpoint. However, that Sanskrit word is absolutely clear and beyond question, for it means 'without pleasure' or 'with sorrow' from the word '*nir*' meaning without, and the word '*asa*', that is, pleasure, desire, joy.[69]

It is probable that Fernandes's informant read nirasam, not as *nirācai* (without desire) as Nobili did, but as *nirācāram*, which means impurity, want of ceremonial purity[70]. If this is so, Fernandes's reconstructed translation should have been something like this: 'If the dead parents see the *tilakam* on the forehead, they leave with impurity'.

[67] Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, p. 120. *Smṛtićandrika* was written by Devannabhatta around 1200. *Smṛti* means 'that which has been remembered', as opposed to *Śruti*, 'that which has been heard'. *Śrutis* have the highest theological value and are considered as revelation. *Smṛtis* are later commentaries on *Śruti*.

[68] Nobili and his missionary followers were accused of both misrepresenting Tamil culture to the Europeans and Catholicism to Tamils. As one 19th century British historian put it: ' There is no more pregnant chapter in the whole history of human imposture, than that which embraces the astonishing narrative of the Jesuits' Missions in South India', in John Kaye, *Christianity in India*, p. 37.

[69] Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, p.121.

[70] *Tamil Lexicon*, vol. 4, p. 2267.

In any case, a word-by-word translation, whether Nobili's or Fernandes's version, would have remained completely obscure to European readers without additional ethnographic information. Nobili's explanation is as follows:

> It is a question here of the merchant class when they perform the funeral rite in honour of their deceased parents. If on such an occasion they present themselves conspicuously bedecked with mundane ornaments, the first and most prized being the *tilakam*, the deceased parent (...) will be deeply grieved, seeing that his surviving children, at a time for mourning, go in for signs of joy such as the *tilakam*, so little in keeping with feelings of bereavement and sorrow.[71]

This statement was derived neither from the logic of the argument, nor from a plausible etymology or other translation, but it sounds extremely persuasive. There is, however, no visible proof that it was true, since the evidence has a *deus ex machina* quality about it and does not appear to refer to experience, but rather to another text. Nobili certainly had not seen what he described happen before his eyes. Who could have invited him for a funeral where this kind of transgression would have occurred? The quoted fragment stands, if anything, for the universality of morals. It bids for deep sympathy with a world that denigrates cultural delinquents such as children who do not respect their parents. However exotic the dress requirements for the funeral occasion, the meaning of that social performance was the same as in Europe. A skilfully inscribed cultural analogy produces in Nobili's text an effect of authority and 'science'.

Another fragment in Sanskrit, but written in Tamil script, which Fernandes used against Nobili was denounced as a 'forgery' because it did not belong to any '*Smrutis*' and because Nobili's Brahman neophyte, 'a doctor eminently versed in the sciences of this country', was not able to locate it in any of the known texts. Also, when Nobili tried to question Fernandes's informant, the latter ran away. Further proof that the fragment was falsified, according to Nobili, was the fact that 'it contains many errors regarding the language, the quantity and order of syllables'.[72] Although the authenticity of the text was thus completely destroyed, Nobili proceeded, armed with etymologies and analogies, with his own interpretation.

[71] Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, pp. 120–1.
[72] Ibid., p. 122.

The Quest for Knowledge, or Daemonomachia

Misinformation, misquotation, ignorance and forgery are as much the building blocks of discourses as are 'authentic' texts. The very concept of an authentic text is incessantly disputed and elusive in the dispute between Nobili and Fernandes. The Brahman conspiracy theory was an answer to the early Jesuit efforts at discovering the 'original texts'. What they were looking for was the Bible of the Hindus, the 'book' that could explain the origins of their religion. Various texts—both written and oral—which the Jesuits managed to obtain were seemingly all issues from a single originary source, but still fundamentally contradicted each other in details. When comparing their discoveries, the missionaries also found that there were not only regional variations of the same or similar stories or concepts, but that each subregion or even caste might have had its own version. Partly because he felt threatened by Fernandes and partly because he was certain that he had discovered—if not the text itself—the language of the Hindu Law, Nobili vehemently fought back by denying any credibility to his opponent. This 'negative' and negating procedure seems to be built into the general 'grammar' of Orientalist and Indological discourses. New information apparently always contradicts and undermines old concepts. The knowledge of Hinduism, in particular, progressed by a rejection of former notions, depending on the different perspectives and agendas of both the European actors and of their local informers.

Thus, Nobili denounced Fernandes for misrepresenting Hindu religion and society and his local informants for downright dishonesty and perfidiousness. The Portuguese prelates in Goa were equally misinformed, according to Nobili, by the Goan Brahmans, who were simply ignorant:

> The so-called Brahmans who reside in Goa and in the island of Salsette are mostly Congonis (Konkanis), Comotis (Komatis), Sinais (Shennoys) and the like, men who, as I said before, are not genuine Brahmans, that is, members of the first order who exclusively pursue learning and are versed in the books, but are merchants belonging to the third order of citizens, inferior in rank to the rajas and the Royal families.[73]

The acquisition of knowledge about India was tantamount to balancing on a tight-rope between truth and falsehood.

[73] Ibid., p. 146.

The quest for knowledge in an Indian context was, in Nobili's view, a *daemonomachia.* His basic presumption was that what was at the origin of India was also at the origin of Europe—an act of the divine. The problem with India was the fact that it had been reconquered by the devil:

> For there is not a single thing, be its purpose to maintain human life, to serve as a sign of social distinction, or to serve as bodily embellishment, no single thing either graciously bestowed on mortal man by Divine Providence or discovered by the ingenuity of mortal men, that is not made foul in India by an accursed superstition through the artifice of the demon.[74]

The presence of the demon 'blinds', hence the expression 'blind idolaters' he frequently uses to refer to Indians. But, could this concentration of the demonic in India also affect the vision of the missionaries? Although Fernandes never actually verbalized such a proposition, he must have considered Nobili's church as a demonic delusion, while Nobili saw Fernandes as one of the obstacles the demon had sent him in his quest for knowledge. As the controversy intensified, Fernandes's descriptions highlighted the fact that Nobili's life-style in Madurai appeared ever more 'pagan'.

By the end of his life in the Fishery coast mission, Fernandes accused Nobili of carnal sin and 'still worse, it is not proper that the Father be at the altar while his son plays about in the church, and the mother of the child is considered as such by all who come to hear the Mass.'[75] The Primate of Goa, Dom Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa, Nobili's ardent opponent, went as far as to accuse him of making himself

> a living idol, like those despisers of the world who are called *sannyāsis*, among whom Fr. Roberto places himself, in order to be adored and venerated by all, not like St Peter and St John whom the Jews wanted to adore, but like an idol, to which an homage of adoration is rendered, which is not due to it, but to God alone.[76]

These accusations were serious. Therefore, Nobili took extreme measures to counteract them. In a desperate letter to his brother Mgr. Sforza Nobili, the missionary hinted at the demonic complot orchestrated in India against him personally and against the honour of his family. The 'shameful stain of infidelity and ignominy' had to be washed away, he implored his brother. And he added further that,

[74] Ibid., p. 140.

[75] Fernandes, G. to Mascarenhas, N. (Port.), Cochin, 20 December, 1619, ARSI, Goa 51, f. 307.

[76] Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa to Vitelleschi, M. (Port.), 15 February, 1620, ARSI, Goa 18, ff. 7–8.

the devil of jealousy, tried to delay, by means which were least expected, the work whose beginning was full of promises. He enlists and turns against me those very soldiers who were particularly bound to defend my cause. Your Illustrious Lordship can see all my personal affairs taking an unfavourable turn, full of sadness, difficulties and danger; bitterness, opposition, calumnies, obstacles to good work and mischief, are everywhere.[77]

India was a place where things turned topsy-turvey, a land of false religion and a land of discord among the missionaries. In order to expurgate the demon from India, the creator of these delusions, one had to reconstruct the shreds of the divinely bestowed truth from degenerated, local texts and practices. The 'golden age' myth had thus begun to take shape, a pristine originary moment which the missionaries would place in post-deluge time. Later Hindu revivalists and nationalists would try to recover, that is recreate, the past prior to Biblical time in order to show that the first foundations of Hinduism precede by far Christianity.

Nobili's discovery of the fundamental adulteration of Indian religion and practices was a pretext for his project of regeneration. In his Tamil texts, he tried to reconstitute a Christian language out of the indigenous categories and concepts which appeared to him to contain traces of the divine message. On the other hand, in his texts destined for the European audience, his ethnographic representations of Tamil society and religion resemble the world of European Antiquity of pre-Christian period. His texts, as well as his missionary activity, endeavoured to incorporate the 'eternal present' inhabited by the Tamils into the progressive and teleological movement towards Christianity and the ultimate Day of Judgement.

Nobili's Latin treatises and manuals, in fact, provide instructions as to how to change, move, purify, that is, Christianize, Tamil society. In a word, they provide prescriptions for 'social engineering'. For that reason, descriptive representation is always subsumed under analogical interpretation and wedged between similitude, hermeneutics and normative injunctions. Michel Foucault's distinction between the Renaissance emphasis on reading and interpretation and the 17th-century project of seeing and representing, can partly, though not entirely, provide a handle for delimiting differences between Nobili's and Fernandes's texts.

[77] Nobili, R. to Mgr. Sforza Nobili (Lat.), Goa, 20 February, 1619, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 195–196.

Description as Recopying the World: The Constitution of Difference

While Nobili was interested in interpreting texts and representing significant human actions, such as miracles and conversions, in which he himself was the main author/actor, Fernandes had rather a mapping impulse to describe the world he saw and heard about while effacing himself from within the frame. There are no documents to tell us how Fernandes perceived the Tamils in the Madurai mission before Nobili's arrival. All we know about his ideas arose through the controversy with his younger colleague, probably because he had never thought there was anything special to be said about them. He had his flock of about a hundred Parava Christians and a few ambulant Portuguese merchants, and lived among non-Christians who appeared to him as essentially 'blind idolaters'. The mission itself was not something he would have particularly chosen. It was a matter of chance that the Paravas had migrated inland from the Fishery coast. In any case, his experience as a soldier in the Portuguese army connected him much more than Nobili with the Portuguese colonial enterprise.

The Portuguese colonial and evangelizing project was a forceful assimilation, particularly in Goa during the Counter-Reformation phase, and coincided with the arrival of the first Jesuits in 1542. At that time, all the temples in Goa were destroyed, Hindu ceremonies were forbidden, and according to Pearson, 'orphans were kidnapped and converted, 'rice' Christianity flourished, Hindus were discriminated against by the government in a multitude of ways'.[78] In Madurai, however, the political situation was clearly not conducive to such slash-and-burn evangelization. Fernandes had no choice but to keep a low profile in anticipation of possible radical changes brought about by Portuguese military action. Moreover, since he was completely untrained in the Jesuit art of conversion as rehearsed in the Collegio Romano, he was incapable of understanding Nobili's apostolic experiments. Where Nobili saw deeper, theological meanings and found casuistic arguments, Fernandes saw dissimulation, deception, and manipulation.

Unschooled in learned grandiloquence, Fernandes retells Nobili's story from the perspective of an 'outraged' outside observer. His two

[78] Pearson, M.N., *The Portuguese in India*, Cambridge 1987, p. 117.

basic complaints were that Nobili divided the church of Christ, spatially by building a new, different church, and symbolically by refusing to communicate with Fernandes and his Christians, except furtively at night, and that he dressed and behaved like a 'gentile'. What Fernandes saw was true for him. He refused to compare Nobili's additional explanation, based on theological arguments and quotations from other Jesuit writers, or even on the fact that Matteo Ricci and other Jesuits in China espoused the same method, to anything other than the non-Christian rites and ceremonies in vogue in Madurai.

Without any comparative frame, Fernandes's letters were structured like gossip. The fragments of what he saw or heard follow one after another, devoid of any logically developed argument, but they are very vivid, even picturesque. He described the manner in which Nobili built his church and also included a drawing of it in an effort to authenticate his claim.

> When digging the foundations they had recourse to the customary ceremonies in their edifices, that is, breaking coconuts to the gods of the foundations, offering them at the same time plantains and other things on which the foundations and the first stone are placed.[79]

It is not clear whether Fernandes saw this ceremony performed himself or heard about it. What he did see was that Nobili's building looked like a Hindu *maṭam*[80] rather than a Catholic Church. Because Fernandes enclosed the drawing, he did not think it necessary to describe the edifice in words, like some other missionaries favourable to Nobili; it was as if he trusted the immediacy of the pictorial representation to vouch for his statements, more efficiently then his rather clumsy Portuguese prose. The picture, which we no longer possess, signalled his difficulty with written objectivity and his belief in the truthfulness and innocence of the eye/I.

Structured by enumeration, Fernandes's descriptions always looked as if they were shaved at the edges or could be extended beyond the scope of the text. One can sense his effort to transpose the plenitude of life around him into the written word. This is especially obvious in the only treatise he was to write in 1616, having been forced to respond in a more systematic way to Nobili's war of texts.

[79] Fernandes, G. to Mascarenhas, N. (Port.), Cochin, 12 December, 1618, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 278 (in between is inserted another letter), ff. 283–4.

[80] *Maṭam*—a college or school for religious instruction, Fabricius, *Tamil and English Dictionary*, p. 766.

Unable to ground his authority in the European theological arguments, Fernandes tried to parry Nobili with his knowledge of Hindu texts and practices. In the introduction, we can see the order in which he presents his competence:

> Having resided for 20 years by order of holy obedience at Madurai, I have applied myself with diligence to the study, among other things, of the mode of behaviour of the Gentiles in these parts, especially of the Brahmans, because all the others are considered incapable of any meritorious work to obtain salvation and reach the glory of Heaven.[81]

His long stay in Madurai is the first argument against Nobili, who started producing texts upon his arrival and who wrote his first major treatise four years later.

The second part of his statement was already a subtle critique of Nobili's method and his Brahman apostolate. Nobili's refusal to communicate with castes which were neither Brahman, nor ruling nor rich, appeared reprehensible to Fernandes. In a following story, he paraphrased a fable from the *Suta-samhita* which became a parable of the missionary situation in Madurai.[82] A king saw a penitent who had for a long time performed penance with his head on the ground and his legs in the air. When the king heard that the penitent was not Brahman, he 'gave the order to have his head cut off, because only Brahmans are allowed to enter Heaven and no one else. Therefore the Brahmans are the only ones well-versed in Hindu law and keep it sedulously'.[83] According to Fernandes, his apostolate among the poor and lowly was denigrated by the onslaught of the noble and rich Nobili. The king who chopped off the head of an old penitent who had stayed in the same topsy-turvy position/mission for twenty years was a protector of the Brahmans. And, because the Brahmans are protected, they keep their laws in secrecy[84]. Fernandes was evidently

[81] Wicki, *Tratado*, p.5.

[82] Kane, Pandurang Vaman, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. II (Poona 1930–62), pp. 98–9.

[83] Wicki, *Tratado*, p. 6.

[84] The relationship between Kings and Brahmans, that is, between secular power and religious authority and its ramification in the theories of 'Indian' statehood is one of the most extensively studied and the most controversial subfield of Indian studies. See Inden, Ronald, 'Divine Kingship, the Hindu Type of Government', in *Imagining India*, p. 162–212; For the relationship between the king, the Brahman and the renouncer, see Heesterman, J.C., 'Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer', in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, Chicago, 1985, p. 26–45; and Joanne Punzo Waghorne, 'From Robber Baron to Royal Servant of God? Gaining a Divine Body in South India', in Hiltebeitel,

referring to his own symbolic decapitation in the Madurai mission by Nobili. He saw himself as violated both by Nobili the king, who tried to expel him from Madurai, and Nobili the Brahman, who kept his secrets to himself.

It was about these secret laws and 'authentic stories by important authors' that Fernandes proposed to write in his treatise. In a way, Nobili provided him with the model of how to write about Tamil religion and society, that is, contextually. Accordingly, Fernandes felt obliged to stress that all the information came from the 'most authentic Brahman books, translated from Sanskrit in which they are written into Tamil by very learned, trustful people, and from Tamil to Portuguese' by himself.[85] Furthermore, he apologized for some 'obscure places' in his Portuguese translation due to his unwillingness to 'change the words (...) not only because they kill and the meaning gives life, but because one or another thing equally kills'.[86] In this passage, itself rather 'obscure', Fernandes was pointing to the fact that translating Hindu texts was extremely difficult and that both literal translation and overreading could be equally dangerous, a slippage into paganism or demonic. Reading between the lines, we have an apology that his own writing was not very polished and clear because of the difficulty of the task. With the help of this rhetorical bid for sympathy, a *captatio benevolentiae*, he tried to finesse what must have been rather obvious to his readers at the very sight of Fernandes's erratic Portuguese orthography.

Like Nobili, Fernandes used fragments of Sanskrit and Tamil texts, although without quotations from the original language, in order to prove his point that all the ceremonies and rites used by the Brahmans were superstitious acts. But unlike Nobili, who centred his narrative on certain arguments and tried to interpret them in the light of theological categories, Fernandes was not discursively positioned. The thirty-six chapters of the first part of his treatise were variously focused on a minute description of the Brahman life-cycle

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Alf, ed., *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees*, New York, 1989; for the connection between individuality, leadership and renunciation in contemporary South India, see Mines, Mattison and Gourishankar, Vijayalakshmi, 'Leadership and Individuality in South Asia: The Case of the South Indian Big-Man' in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 49:4, Berkeley, 1990, p. 762.

[85] Wicki, *Tratado*, p. 219.

[86] Wicki, *Tratado*, p. 219. Las Casas called it '*peligrosa materia*' in Pagden, 'Ius and Factum', p. 154.

ceremonies (e.g., 'Cap. 2. The ceremonies performed upon the birth of a baby which they call *Xadacarmão*, are as follows')[87], and an exposition of opinions held about them by various Hindu authors ('Cap. 6. What various authors said in the treatise which they call *Estimurdis xandrigue*, in our Portuguese meaning 'The Clarity of *Estemurdis*; as follows').[88] The second part of his treatise consisted of eight chapters dealing with punishments prescribed for Brahmans who transgress the norms of their caste, and a postscript entitled 'ceremonies without which one cannot be called Brahman'.[89]

Fernandes's goal was to recopy the world and reestablish a taxonomy (and particularity) of things and events which he saw completely deranged by Nobili's texts. Very often in his letters he complained that the witnesses of the Madurai affair were thousands of miles away from Rome, where all the decisions were made. He was persuaded that coming and seeing Nobili's dissemblance would have sufficed to destroy the legitimacy of his enterprise. Two missionaries, a Portuguese, Emmanuel Leitão and an Italian, Andrea Buccerio, had both rushed to Madurai enthusiastic about Nobili's method and then changed their minds completely.

The problem was that the 'correct' view had to be transmitted from the missionary periphery to the centre of the Society of Jesus. Once transmitted, it had to be attractive enough to persuade its audience. Although Fernandes's text provided the allure of 'curious' ceremonies and different customs for the European readers' imagination, we know that it was more or less discarded as unlearned and of dubious authenticity. This was partly because Nobili's connections and support in Rome won the battle and made sure that the opposition was silenced, and partly because of invidious comparisons between Fernandes's texts and Nobili's. The learned audience in Rome was not yet ready for a crudely recorded 'reality' verging on illegibility. There are even two derogatory comments in Latin added in Rome to Fernandes's manuscript by two different hands. The first one, which serves as a brief introduction to the author and his subject: '*Huius operis Autor est P. Gundizalus Fernandez, P. Roberti Nobilibus adversarius.—Homo rerum indicarum scientissimus, sed minime theologus.*

[87] Wicki, *Tratado*, p. 11. *Jātakarma*, birth ceremony, is one of the *Samskāras* or life-cycle ceremonies performed in South India by Brahmans, though some of them may be performed by other castes as well.

[88] Ibid. p.33.

[89] Ibid. p. 293.

Coadiutor spiritualis' (The author of this work is P. Gonçalo Fernandes, P. Roberto Nobili's opponent.—Well-versed in Indian matters, but not in the least theologian. Spiritual coadjutor). Behind a seemingly objective and neutral statement, the gulf between Nobili and Fernandes and the authority of their respective texts widened. Nobili was not only learned in Indian matters but also an excellent theologian and had the status of a professed father.[90] The second note was an unmitigated disavowal of Fernandes's text on the ground of his linguistic ignorance.

The most serious problem Fernandes's text posed to his cultivated audience, however, was an absence of similitudes. On very few occasions, such as comparing the learned Brahmans to '*os doutores da Igreja*' (Church doctors)[91], or comparing Hindu emblems such as the thread, *corumbi*, to the Jewish cap and '*toca e cabaio*' (*toque* and tunic) of the Muslims[92], Fernandes projected his descriptions into the domain of the known world. The society and religion he described were not comparable to any other. They were unique and different. Virtually nothing from Indian culture could be assimilated into Christianity.

The effect of difference was compounded by numerous Tamil or Sanskrit words in very confusing transcriptions and spellings. Unlike Nobili who always tried to translate or give an etymology for every word, Fernandes used Tamil or Sanskrit words as indivisible units standing for explainable but essentially untranslatable concepts or things. In an almost mannerist style, he clustered details one after another as a kind of curiosity display, a lexical *Wunderkammer.*

> They will summon all the Brahmans of the place and he (the husband) will ask them to do *aservadão* for (his) the wife; after they have done that, he will bring fire; he then spreads the *nanel* rushes to the four points of the compass, along with other objects such as unripe *nelle*, a porcupine quill, more *nelle* and dried cow dung, a new piece of cloth, an earthen lamp they call *agual*, a pat of butter.[93]

Fernandes's way of syncopating his statement with indigenous words points to the fact that his native Portuguese linguistic identity

[90] He professed the four vows of obedience in November 1611.
[91] Wicki, *Tratado*, p. 7.
[92] Wicki, *Tratado*, p. 219.
[93] Ibid. p. 9.

was already punctured by his 'missionary' language. The words like *nanel* and *nelle* must have been words so frequently used by Fernandes that he did not think that they needed explanation.[94] On the other hand, although the absence of Tamil words for the porcupine quill or cow dung hints at Fernandes's effort to cut down on 'exotic' words, their textual position renders them equally weird and outlandish. Sandwiched between Tamil words, the two 'translated' objects are de-territorialized from their ordinary significations and forced into denoting witchcraft. The names of the ritual actions, *aservadão* and *omão*[95], were not explained and their meaning in the text can be derived only from cross-references and context. In this way, his textual strategy kept the world of his representation apart from the world, which provided the language of representation.

The language of Tamil 'idolatry' and 'superstition' was thus constituted as an absolute other with a distinct logic. The passage quoted at the beginning of the Chapter 1 describing a ceremony which took place 'in the fourth or sixth month after the wife is with child' was in itself an introduction to the description of the ceremony. Having initiated, through enumeration, a process of lexical distanciation, Fernandes provoked a final rupture with the familiar world:

> Having put all these together, the *omão* will begin in this way: this is the *mandirão* (mantra) said while throwing four times into the fire in honour of Brama: 'Thou Brama, who is the Lord of this world, satisfied with this *omão*, give me all I desire', and 'Let that Brama (Brahma), since he created the world, give me sons', and 'That Brama who is the master of all the sciences, let him grant me wisdom', and 'Brama who is the master of all the riches, give me many'.[96]

All the things collected by the Brahmans, like the words collected by Fernandes, were thrown into the sacrificial fire—the disappearance of things and signs. With the disappearance of the sacrificial materials, or rather with the melting away of the products of 'nature', the human voice appeared. It was a simulacrum of the Tamil voice that

[94] *Tamil Lexicon*, p. 2213 or Fabricius, *Tamil and English Dictionary*, p. 598: *nāṇal*: kaus, a large and coarse grass; *Saccharum spontaneum:* penreed-grass; *Saccharum arundinaceum:* bulrush; Fabricius, *Tamil and English Dictionary*, 632, *Nel* or *nellu*: paddy, unhusked rice; Fabricius, p. 2, *akal*: a small earthen lamp.

[95] Fabricius, *Tamil and English Dictionary*, p. 50, *ācīrvādam*: blessing, congratulation; Fabricius, p. 169, *ōmam* or *hōnam* 1) burnt offering, casting of ghee, grain etc. into the sacred fire; 2) sacrifice. See also Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. 2, p. 1308.

[96] Wicki, *Tratado*, p. 10.

had lost its original native tongue. It is not clear whether the invocation was pronounced in Sanskrit, Tamil or some other language. It is not clear, either, whether it was a prescribed formula, repeated on a particular ritual occasion such as an endeavour to determine the sex of the unborn child, or a transcription of a singular event witnessed by Fernandes. However, there is a clue at the beginning which somehow fades away by the end of the passage, that the action was habitually repeated in an ahistorical time-space—that is, the future tense of the verb '*comesar*' accompanied by the reflexive pronoun '*se*'. The future tense is actually holding together the textual construction of Fernandes's description of Brahman rituals. It is an articulation between narrative sequences and produces an effect of objectivity and fixed perspective. Intermittently combined with the infinitive form such as '*se á-de fazer*' (it will be or should be done)[97], the grammatical future makes the text cohere by redoubling it into the representation of the Brahman prescriptive order, and into the prescriptive order itself. What Brahmans appeared to be forced to do according to their texts, they were now forced to do in the Portuguese text.

On the other hand, in Fernandes's construction of the voice, an official pre-scriptural prescriptive Brahman voice, the diversification of the verb tenses and modes produces ritual utterances as simultaneously cultural repertory and individual practice. It is precisely in the ambiguous interspace created by the movement of his description from the ritually prescribed and individually performed actions that his text surveys a panoramic manscape characterized, paradoxically, by the absence of individual human beings, who exist as different blotches of paint deriving their form and meaning only from the context of the whole tableau, which is bound to be incomplete. The painter of this panorama never assumes a fixed visual angle but, in a mannerist way, plays with the fragmented perspectives of the Hindu authors he has quoted. For example, in Chapter 6, 'What various authors said in the treatise which they call *Estimurdis xandrigue*, in our Portuguese meaning 'The Clarity of *Estemurdis*', is as follows'; or, in other chapters where Fernandes enumerated various opinions one after another, always preceding them by '*Dis que...*' (He says that...) and using the margin of the page to indicate the names of his sources.

[97] *Começar*—to begin, to start; *se á-de-fazer*—designates habitual, future, and also prescribed action.

By appropriating their voices in the neutral, third person singular, he inscribed, however, his own general perspective which was diametrically opposed to Nobili's. For Fernandes, the religion and customs of the Brahmans incorrigibly belonged to an idolatrous system, a '*máquina do Bramanismo*'. By the 16th century, the term *máquina*, meaning primarily an invention and a tool, also meant a fabricated object, generally complex and used for transforming energy, a system. It was also used in ready-made expressions such as a 'war machine'. It was probably all of these meanings—an invention, a fabrication (in a pejorative sense also), a system and a war machine—which Fernandes, an ex-soldier, was hinting at. In the context of the Indian mission, the religion of the Brahmans was seen both as an invention, like Jacomo (Jacobo) Fenicio's '*ingénio tão diabólico*' (a diabolic device)[98], and as the territory of the enemy, attacked in numerous public encounters and disputations between the Jesuits and the Brahmans. Fernandes's 'mechanical' description of Hinduism confirmed a complete separation between subject and object. Unlike Nobili who, through interpretation, comes into the picture together with his own object and his tools, Fernandes was an invisible painter who objectified without participating.

This position is close to something one might term a proto-positivism constituted in opposition to Nobili's proto-participant observation. Two centuries later, some of Fernandes's textual strategies can be seen fully developed in official ethnographic texts and histories of India which came in vogue with the British colonial administration. The stress on 'empirical realism' was, according to Ronald Inden, one of the hegemonic scholarly views in Indology, often utilitarian and secularist in outlook.[99] To these mainstream, ruling colonial ideas, Inden opposed a 'minority position' of Romantic idealists, such as German philosophers and Sanskritists who found most Indian customs, ascetic practices, cosmologies and visual art forms intellectually engaging and worthy of admiration. Their hermeneutic strategies, employed to uncover conscious intentions and meanings of Hindu texts and culture, have many affinities with Nobili's interpre-

[98] Jacobo Fenicio's (1558–1632) manuscript written before 1595, a narrative of Hindu cosmology and religion and their refutation from the Catholic point of view, served as a basis for some famous 17th and 18th century treatises and compilations concerning Indian religion. Charpentier, *The Livro da Seita dos Indios Orientais*, p. 1.

[99] Inden, *Imagining India*, p. 51–74.

tations. What Italian missionaries in the 17th century and German scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries certainly had in common is that they did not feel directly involved in Portuguese or in British colonial enterprises.

It would be too ambitious to trace the tangled lineage of the colonial and post-colonial discursive practices and attempt unequivocally to connect the early Jesuit controversy between Nobili and Fernandes to the constitution of European 'scientific' discourses.[100] What is important to understand is to what extent social, educational, and cultural differences, as well as national and political affiliations produced and directed discursive choices of Jesuit and later, colonial writers. Then again, looking closely into the constitution of Nobili's and Fernandes's opposing arguments, we may discern innumerable Tamil voices imposing their own horizon of interpretation by providing what the two warring Jesuits seemed eager to solicit—the true 'information', 'facts', secret knowledge. Both Nobili and Fernandes set up their own teams of local informants, who in turn generated the data, the 'thick descriptions', which fit into the European framework of the Jesuits.

Both 'allographic' positions, articulated by Nobili and Fernandes respectively, were the effect of a pre-scientific effort to represent Indian society and religion. Although the formation of these somewhat opposing, if not utterly contradictory, perspectives was initially due to the contingencies of a clash of personalities and experience, they were also played out within the larger context of a democratization of knowledge which, at least in the beginning of the 17th century, gave voice to lower, already literate or semi-literate, orders of European society and made even them discursively engaged in the colonial enterprise. Fernandes, too, collected cultural material which was already interpreted for him by high-caste literati, And yet, although he probably never dreamed of challenging their pre-eminent authority, long exposure to cultural difference and the institutional support provided by the Society of Jesus encouraged him to consider himself both different from, and superior to, any learned Brahman. European actors with inferior social pedigrees found the colonial setting a

[100] One of the most popular ethnographic texts, used and trusted by the British was Abbé J.A. Dubois' *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (1817), recently unmasked as a work of a plagiator who had collected his information *verbatim* from an unpublished manuscript of a Jesuit missionary, G.-L. Coeurdoux. See, Murr, Sylvia, *L'Inde philosophique entre Bossuet et Voltaire.*

fertile ground for this kind of psychological, if not always official, promotion. At the same time, these European underlings found the alterity, of which they themselves were often accused, unbearably threatening. Sensitive to charges of inferiority, they were even more prone to point a finger at each new kind of alterity and to locate it beneath themselves. When assigned to write reports on the local society, from police records to administrative descriptions, European subaltern agents consistently took up a proto-etic approach, firmly positioned outside the object of study. Those like Nobili, secure in their social position and burning with missionary zeal and intellectual curiosity, could afford to play down the difference and defend a more diversified concept of assimilation.

If Nobili's approach can be defined as proto-emic, should a claim be made that only aristocratic or high-class colonial actors ever espoused such a perspective? Interestingly enough, as European encounters with the peoples of the New World tend to confirm, those who considered themselves socially superior do seem to have shown greater sensitivity in detecting and acknowledging their non-European analogues. But even if nobility of blood and learning could cut across racial and cultural boundaries, this was not necessarily an impediment to the destruction or even enslavement of an adversary, however knowledgeable or noble. The effort and the will to explore and inhabit the world of the other, to see with her/his eyes, may license both epistemic condescension, intellectual curiosity and destructive violence.

Analogical and descriptive allographic positions correspond, according to Michel Foucault, to the epistemic modalities which defined two epochs of Western cultural history.[101] The first, beginning in the late Middle Ages and lasting until the late 16th century, privileged similitude in the representation of 'reality'. 17th- and 18th-century observers, on the other hand, rejected the paradigm of resemblance and proposed to solve the problem of differentness by measurement and descriptive serial arrangement, conceived principally in spatial terms. Foucault identified these historical epistemes as mutually disjointed and discontinuous constellations of knowledge, but the controversy between Nobili and Fernandes shows how larger, seemingly discrete discourses depended on innumerable local negotiations and dialogues and evolved through ruptures, temporary

[101] Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*.

redefinition, dissociation, adaptation, imposed silences, and oblivion. And, as we have seen, it was not only scholars who produced and defended the epistemological and ideological alternatives.

What Fernandes discovered through his dispute with Nobili as his own diagnosis of the nature of Brahmanism, or paganism in general, was understood by some Jesuit missionaries in India and elsewhere. His supporters included a few prominent theologians and a few Italians, some of them possibly of noble birth. Nevertheless, social, educational and national differences tended to play a decisive role in the controversy because the personal status of both Nobili and Fernandes, and of their supporters, was at stake. In effect, the contingent historical moment in which class, national rivalries, rhetorical competence and psychological differences exploded in a series of letters and documents is also a moment in which tools, practices and representations, associated today with ethnology/anthropology and colonial and post-colonial discourses in general, emerged as a problem for all actors involved, then and now. Moreover—and this once again seems familiar enough—various local informants who actively participated in the controversy, at times joining one or the other missionary camp, always seemed to have guarded their own interests. As a result, some local social groups were able to imprint their definition of Indian 'reality' more forcefully than others. Both Nobili and Fernandes, although disagreeing on the interpretation, took the Brahmans as the key group for understanding Indian religion and society, and found all too many informants willing to corroborate their arguments.

In the Madurai mission in the early 17th century, Nobili, Fernandes, and their Brahman informants were all involved in important redefinitions of Indian social and cultural topography, but it was not until the relationships of power drastically changed with the advent of British imperialism that the anthropological and Indological overdetermination of Indian cultural and social 'essences' took shape in unfolding colonial discourses.

Conversion Scenarios: Discussions, Miracles and Encounters: The Theatrical Mode

In 1557, the rector of the Jesuit College of Billon praised the theatrical spectacles because they were able 'to move the souls' and bring 'spiritual fruit' more efficiently then a sermon.[1] The theatrical 'actions', rooted as a genre in medieval 'mysteries' and Spanish *autos sacramentales*, came into being in the Jesuit classroom as a part of rhetorical exercises such as recitations and public disputes.[2] Allowed two times a year, during the prize distribution and a major Catholic festival, Christmas or Easter, these spectacles were one of the most important links between the colleges and the surrounding world.[3] By the 17th century, the secularization of Jesuit drama accelerated as the performances moved out of the church into the *area aut aula* of the college and began to include comedic interludes and ballets.

In fact, the 'little Company's' extraordinary public visibility was grounded in the skilful management of the theatrical effects in its artistic and literary production, as well as in educational and missionary practice.[4] Since the principle of mobility was at the heart of Jesuit

[1] Dainville, *L'éducation des jésuites*, p. 476.

[2] Filippi, B., *La scène jésuite: Théatre scolaire au Collège Romain au XVIIe siècle*, doctoral thesis, EHESS, Paris, 1994, unpublished.

[3] McCabe, W. H., S.J., *An Introduction to the Jesuit Theater*, St. Louis, 1983, p. 11.

[4] Of the virulent and multiple charges levelled against the Jesuits by various opponents, the *theatrical* effects that they used in their roles as confessors of kings, educators and missionaries were the first to be denounced. Protestants, French *philosophes* (and later British Victorians), many of whom studied in Jesuit colleges, branded as obscurantism and dissimulation Jesuit 'staging' of political *coups*, school dramas and experimenting with adaptationist methods of conversion. François de Dainville shows

theatrical prowess, the social and psychological energy generated by the interior (spiritual) and exterior (geographical, political) movements, geared simultaneously at oneself and at the other, marked the culminating point of the Renaissance experience of identity.

The Jesuit role-modelling strategy was part of the larger process of the Catholic 'civilizing' mission. Loyola's precept—to enter through the door of the other in order to make him come out—epitomizes the principle of Jesuit psycho-social engineering. *Spiritual Exercises*, both as a practice and as a text, taught the members to shift seamlessly back and forth from seeing oneself while looking at others, seeing others while looking at oneself, 'being' other while 'being' oneself.[5] The balance between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* was, hence, to be found in learning to maintain a critical spiritual distance, not just a 'mental reservation', while being completely immersed in the world, an 'asceticism of asceticism'.[6] In addition, the Jesuit ideals of 'indifference' and 'obedience' conceived as the pillars of Jesuit ascetic discipline, indicate the needs of a time in which a dense social life and close dependence among people had to gradually adjust to an enlarged, manifold, heterogeneous polity.[7]

In the distant missions, Jesuit 'proselytizing' and 'civilizing' were necessarily coupled with the description, interpretation and classification of the phenomena, spaces and peoples whose mere existence

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(in *L'éducation des Jésuites, XVIe–XVIIIe siècle*) to what extent the literary style of writers such as Voltaire and Diderot, both of whom were educated in Jesuit colleges, but turned out to be staunch critiques of the Society, was shaped by their Jesuit training.

[5] It could be called a 'mobile sensibility', 'empathy', 'improvisation'—'the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario'. Greenblatt, S., 'The Improvisation of Power', *Renaissance Self-fashioning*, Chicago, 1980, p. 7.

[6] Pierre-Antoine Fabre, personal communication. See also his *Loyola, le lieu de l'image*, Paris, 1991.

[7] Giard, Luce, 'Introduction' (to 'Lettres et instructions') in Loyola, *Écrits*, p. 625. The Jesuit model of a harmonious social and individual body developed symmetrically with the formation of the absolutist state. In spite of its apparent resistance to secular authority, Jesuit efforts to re-tailor the existing social bonds and dismantle the family in order to control individual members, facilitated and complemented the unifying and 'civilizing' efforts of the absolutist monarchies. The process of 'turning collective Christians into individual ones' ultimately backfired and opened the way to the secularization and dechristianization of Europe. Bossy, J., 'The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe', *Past and Present*, no. 47, 1970, pp. 51–70 and Delumeau, *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire*, pp. 303–40

presented disconcerting theological, sociological and political problems. Conversion methods ranged from the total extirpation of all vestiges of non-Christian religious practices, the so-called *tabula rasa*, which was applied to the 'stateless', 'illiterate barbarians', to various degrees of adaptation to the advanced civilizations of Mexico, Peru, China, Japan and India, and bear witness to the uneasy process of selecting appropriate strategies and missionary role models for the grafting of the Christian message, culture, and government.

In the 17th century what, at times, appeared as *ad hoc* improvisations and theatrical effects, the missionary *sprezzatura*, was partly the result of careful preparation in the Jesuit colleges, branching out from Loyola's founding principles concerning Jesuit spirituality and social practice, and tested and refined by previous missionary generations. The bureaucratization, in its primitive form of an office, a secretariat for the incoming and outgoing mail, helped further the process of accumulation, selection and distribution of the Jesuit experience. Acting in the world and writing about it became inseparable in the missionary conversion theatre because 'reality' never ceased to evoke past experiences, as if the scenarios had already been written in, for example, the Bible or in the Acts of saints and martyrs. However, it was less the confusion between fiction and fact than the failure of analogical epistemology which rekindled incessant disputes within the Society about the nature of the foreign and the methods of its containment. One way of tying together in a text or a letter the ethnographic, fictional and experiential, was to recreate for one's audience the exemplary 'dramas' of missionary life.

The conversion theatre set up and described by Roberto Nobili and Antonio Vico during the first half of 17th century in the Madurai mission reveals itself as a model of Jesuit cultural experimentation. Shrouded in the Indian ascetic *cavi* (*kāvi*) dress, and observing Brahmanical purity and pollution rules, from vegetarian diet to avoidance of contact with the impure castes, Nobili and Vico were involved in a life-long 'theatrical' and 'dramatic' controversy with other Jesuits, ecclesiastical authorities in Rome and Portuguese colonial officials in Goa, over the method of accommodation.

Located deep in non-Christian territory and depending directly on the approval of the local political grandees, this 'difficult' mission developed its own '*maneira de proceder*', its own scenarios for effective missionary performance. The unresolved cultural ambiguities and the suspicion of 'going native' rendered the indigenous models of

piousness which the Jesuit missionaries 'discovered', 'reinvented' and revamped for their own use, a continuous work-in-progress. Since the mask—of a Hindu 'doctor', sannyāsi, paṇṭāracāmi—never perfectly fit, it required unending additional adjustments, careful rehearsals; moreover, each alteration was necessarily accompanied with a new gloss. A Brahman thread, therefore, would be adopted by the Jesuits with an elabourate elucidation of the pragmatic reasons for such usage, only to be rejected later with a new explanation. Hundreds of letters and treatises on the thread—*de linea*—were exchanged between Jesuit officials and Portuguese administrators in Goa and European authorities in Rome and Lisbon.

Nobili's and Vico's apostolic experience was structured as a series of theatrical events, some carefully prepared and solicited, such as discussions with Brahman 'theologians', others improvisational, such as miraculous healing or defence against persecutions. Exits and entrances to the scene were minutely controlled, the backstage was carefully hidden, bodily expressions were managed and adapted to local codes and expectations. With its daily enactments, a sacred theatre in such a dangerous mission as Madurai was an integral part of the larger Jesuit task of combating the demonic forces preventing the redemption and salvation of souls. Every day a missionary had to alternate between different roles—St Paul among the Jews or St Augustine among the English, or Christ, the miracle worker, or St Ignatius in his many guises as mystic in Manresa, a crusader in Jerusalem, a student in St Barbe in Paris. As 'red' martyrdom was a real possibility and considered to be a highlight of an apostolic career, one had to be prepared at every moment to play the finale of this part with the dignity of a future saint. All these roles played by the Jesuits alone and for real in the missions contained curious mixtures of their European education invested with a crusading zeal and self-righteousness, individual traumas, national and class aspirations which, in case of Nobili and Vico, were grafted on to Tamil cultural material.

The traces of this live theatre extant today, are the 'scenarios' of face-to-face dialogues or silent encounters between Tamils and Jesuits. These were captured in Vico's and Nobili's letters and fall under three categories of theatrical events: theological discussions with the local religious specialists; miraculous conversions and healing; persecutions and encounters between missionaries and kings. In the otherwise narrative configuration of a Jesuit letter, each theatrical scene

stands as a witness of the transformation of contingent fieldwork events into 'ideal' missionary scenarios.

In Jesuit correspondence, the theatrical mode of writing marks out a textual site which contains exemplary and hagiographic material. Nevertheless, these textual sites or fragments are in themselves complete stories, developing carefully from inaugural and transitional, to terminal motives. Imbued with strong emotions and telling of exceptional deeds by brave, humble and pious actors, these fragments, which stand out as textual folds or reliefs are comparable to the subjunctive mode of *Acta Sanctorum*. Individual or collective action is the subject of these embedded epistolary dramas, while the tension between persuasion and death is their enunciative origin. Therefore, action/conversion is reframed as conversation, a conversation ultimately resulting either in conversion or in martyrdom. Jesuit missionary texts, therefore, produced theatrical fragments (or reliefs) which were easily detachable from the original sites. Dis/authorized and cut out from their con/texts, they became 'free-floating', edifying material for young Jesuit novices and the larger European audience. Their inherent theatricality found its natural expression in theater. Theatre performances in Jesuit colleges privileged these fragments and turned them into spectacles, thus closing the circle: event (action)—text (letter)—event (theatrical 'action'/performance).

The theatrical situation in its epistolary space is the focus of this chapter, as it produces relatively homogenized figures/roles of both Jesuits and their missionary targets. The figures of the South Indian individuals who came into close contact with the Jesuits emerge in these theatrical fragments as 'speaking' subjects—speaking by themselves, of themselves—following, of course, the modalities of the European heterological tradition in which 'the discourse about the other is a means of constructing a discourse authorized by the other'.[8] The rhetorical alchemy which shores up the representation of those who did not have direct access to European speech and whose 'voices' were allowed only as theatrical effects relied principally on repetition.[9] In the narrative of a letter, in addition, the repetition is

[8] Certeau, M. de., 'Montaigne's "Of Cannibals"', in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, Minneapolis, 1986, p. 68

[9] The passage from the event to the written with an inherent labour of the redoubling indicated by the prefix 're-'also implies a loss and absence at its very centre. On the power of representation (image) resulting from the absence of the founding body (the body of Christ), see Marin, L., *Des pouvoirs de l'image: Gloses*, Paris, 1993.

legitimized by its very ability to transform distant into close, oral into written, actors into authors and vice versa. Thus, Tamils and other ethnic and social groups in Madurai would endlessly repeat themselves in Jesuit letters. Their 'figures' will emerge as constantly re-enacting persecutions, treacheries, devotion, credulity and wisdom.

Simultaneously with the emergence of 'native' figures, the 'missionary' role took shape with all its equivocal cultural trappings. Vico's and Nobili's missionary scenarios repose on Biblical conversion emplotment, and by this fundamental move of the imitation/repetition of the historically accomplished apostolic models, the two missionaries appropriated the heroic time of a Christian past as the authorial context of their own action and writing. Their proselytizing posture was, therefore, constructed on a skilful replay of the Apostolic role model in order to make it immediately credible by way of resemblance, while at the same time enabling the emergence of new missionary role models such as Nobili's sannyāsi and paṇṭāracāmi.[10]

The success of the missionary role model came to be measured by its propensity to accommodate and multiply new actors and by its instant usefulness in different cultural contexts. With this in mind, we can read all dialogical situations reported in the Jesuit letters as scenarios written in a particular theatrical mode prefiguring future missionary performances both, in the 'real' theatre and in the apostolic 'field'.

From Theological Discussion to 'Native' Apology

The locus of collective Christian memory, created *ex nihilo* in the Madurai mission by the first Jesuit missionaries, evokes an ideal classroom situation. Professors lecture (*praelegere*), students listen to the lectures (*praelectiones audire*) first, and then exercise their memory in repetition and revision.[11] Besides the ultimate goals of the educational/theatrical framework, which were 'the glory of God and the

[10] In China, a few decades earlier, Matteo Ricci devised Christian *bonze* (Buddhist) and *mandarin* models. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, p.114.

[11] '*Exercitatio memoriae*' was one of the pedagogical principles of the '*modus Parisiensis*' adopted by the Society of Jesus as against the Italian model lacking in order and in method. See Codina, *Aux sources de la pédagogie des jésuites: le 'modus parisiensis'*.

good of the soul', a more immediate and practical interest was the acquisition of oratorical skills—'*ad perfectam eloquentiam pervenire*'. Similarly, in the missionary context, teaching eloquence was aimed at empowering the newly converted Christians to argue against their former religious affinities and affiliations. The gradual procedure of this social and cultural alchemy can be traced in two theatrical 'classroom actions' reported by Nobili.

Nobili's first and successful debate crowned with conversion relied mainly on *praelectio*. It was inaugurated with the 'great desire to save his soul' shown by a high-caste schoolteacher.[12] The discussion went on for twenty days, from two in the afternoon to eight in the evening, starting 'on the occasion of the solar eclipse of 25th February' with the discussion of 'certain points of his (teacher's) religion and (thereby) showing him some of his errors'. However, the simulated equality of the face-to-face interaction introduced at the beginning with the pronoun 'we (discussed)', in the second sentence and continued until the end of the communication, split into 'I' and 'he', creating a didactic situation with unequal status and power of speech between interlocutors. Having thus established the division between the speaking 'I' and spoken about 'he', Nobili proceeded in the manner of a Socratic dialogue[13], the principal goal of which is to reveal the truth through a dialogical, swaying rhythm: a step forward and a step backward; subversion of the serious through irony; degradation of lofty language and ideas through references to the commonsensical world.[14] Formally, Nobili's discussion with the schoolteacher and with other learned Tamils follows more or less closely the poetics of the Socratic dialogue. However, in the missionary context, certain transformations take place when this typically European rhetorical tool is

[12] Nobili related this story in a letter dated 17 March, 1607 and addressed it to the Jesuit Provincial of Malabar, Alberto Laerzio; consequently there is no autograph of this letter as it was inserted into Laerzio's 1609 Annual Report, possibly with some alterations. Laerzio, R. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff.2–16 and ff.17–75.

[13] According to Bakhtin, the Socratic dialogue 'arises as *apomnemoneumata*, that is, as a genre of the memoir type, as transcripts based on personal memories of real conversations among contemporaries. Characteristic, also, is the fact that a speaking and conversing man is the central image of the genre.' Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 21–6.

[14] See also Kristeva, Julia, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel'.

applied. The Socratic dialogue is mono-cultural and the source of its powerful social critique is based on a conflict of ideas/ideologies within the same cultural context. It addresses two audiences inscribed in two different temporal spaces separated in the centre by the authorial writing time. The first audience participates in the 'real' dialogical situation and belongs to the past, the 'recollection/memory' time, while the second (anticipated) reader/audience is in a 'virtual', future time. Although these two audiences are temporally and spatially distant, they are connected, nevertheless, by their common cultural lineage. In terms of parentage, the first audience consists of those still unenlightened ancestors who are perceived by the second reader/audience as belonging to the European collective past.

In the colonial, missionary or multicultural situation, the difference (linguistic, cultural and social) between the Europeans and the 'natives' was not readily contained by a kinship relation. It is precisely by using the Socratic dialogue that Nobili imposed the definition of Tamil society as belonging to the large family of European 'distant' relatives. Therefore, frozen in the European past, the Tamil mental and social world appeared easily translatable into European idiom. One important feature of the Socratic dialogue, however, is completely absent from the missionary context, while closely connected with the project of annihilating differences—ironic laughter. The reason for this absence lies in the proper missionary pose, which can never play at carnival which feeds on self-irony. Moreover, socially and culturally auto-centric, a carnival cannot comprehend a distant 'other'. Global proselytizing endeavours, such as those of the Jesuits, foster necessarily a feeling of being 'on top', 'above' even 'beyond' any culturally stigmatizing context and, thus, cannot establish a firm ground for self-parody.

There is another reason for the absence of any irony, comic relief or grotesque. Nobili used Socratic dialogue to divert attention from his rather unorthodox apostolic methods and actions. It was in his interest to play down the differences between Catholicism and Hinduism and to exclude any possible critique of his conversion method. This he achieved by shaping a particular 'apostolic' authorial position. If we substitute St Paul for Socrates, the result is a hybrid dialogue which in terms of literary genre, is the closest to what Nobili calls 'discussion' or 'disputation' with the Indian wise men. The

introduction of St Paul, or rather the disappearance of Socrates, has important repercussions. It establishes faith and Church authorities as the limit of the logical argument.

Hence, according to Nobili, the Tamil learned men accepted the 'ancient error of (our) philosophers' that nothing could be created out of nothing. According to Nobili, the Tamils held this opinion 'as an article of faith'. His perspective on Tamils as being stubborn in their religion is a negative, in the photographic sense, of his own image. Furthermore, having thus defined Tamil ideas (one of them!) of the creation/beginning of the world as a pre-Christian topos, he was able to introduce new, 'local' concepts as a kind of anachronism:

> This is why they admit three general principles of all things: *padi, pasu* and *pasam*. They call God *padi*, and *pasu* is the matter out of which God makes souls, while *pasam* is the matter out of which He makes bodies, whether simple or composite.[15] Against this, I argued that whoever exists owes his being either to himself or to another. Therefore, *pasu* received its being either from God or from itself. He (the Hindu teacher) replied that *pasu* was not created by God. Then, said I, it is self-existent. This he conceded readily. Therefore, I concluded that *pasu* is God, to which he did not know what to answer.[16]

Nobili's version of the basic tenets of the Śaiva Siddhānta doctrine is based on the simplifications of multiple translations and is, anyway, not directed towards grasping its meaning, but towards an ostentatious display of Nobili's Thomistic/scholastic theological tools and his ability to corner his interlocutor into silence. His basic idea, expressed in more detail in his Tamil works, is that the Tamil concept of the supreme divine is defective, lacking perfection and ontological independence. The non-dual, i.e. *advaita*, relationship between God and soul seems to have especially put off the Jesuit missionaries. A hundred years later, a French Jesuit, Father Pons, would denounce Advaita Vedānta's identification of the self with the absolute as a sign of Lucifer's hubris.[17]

Another perennial thorn in the side of the missionary intellectual edifice in India, *metempsychosis*, was the topic of Nobili's second day

[15] *Pati, pacu, pācam* are fundamental philosophical/theological concepts of Śaiva Siddhānta. See Devasenapathi, V.A., *Śaiva Siddhānta, As Expounded in the Sivajñana-Siddhiyar and its Six Commentaries*, Madras, 1966.

[16] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, March 1607, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff.2–16 and ff.17–75.

[17] See Halbfass, Wilhelm, *India and Europe*, p. 44.

discussion. It was nothing but an 'ancient dream of Pythagoras', according to Nobili, which the Tamils use in order to explain human diversity arranged on the social scale from the highest to the lowest—from kings and Brahmans to slaves and Paraiyans. At this point, however, instead of a direct explanation, aware of his interlocutor's 'Platonic' penchant in arguing, Nobili focused on a gradual, inductive procedure in order to guide the other from Platonism to the Christian theological and categorial grid. To the argument that, 'the soul was not the form of the body, but rather like a bird in a cage', which obviously grounds its validity in metaphor, Nobili responded with the typical Socratic degradation strategy, that is, by transposing the metaphor into the lower sphere of life in which it loses its tropical meaning and becomes common sense or nonsense:

> The cage, I said, does not grow while the bird is in it, but the body grows while it is united with the soul. The bird can beget other birds even when out of the cage, but the soul cannot beget children without the body. Therefore, the soul is not in the body as the bird in a cage. Then I explained that it was there as the form of life of the body and that the two combined to make the one being we call Man.[18]

Obviously, his pseudo-syllogism is constructed as an argument *ad absurdum*, which starts from the very proposition he wanted to contradict. The first equivalence (soul/body= bird/cage) was supposed to lead to further equivalencies (such as: child/soul/body= nestling/bird/cage) which Nobili ably chose and underlined in order to prove that they are not consistent with the first one and that, therefore, soul/body= bird/cage did not hold true (QED). Then he went on to prove that man was composed of a soul and a body and that it would not be just to punish the soul by sending it to a different body.

> I showed him that if a man died in a state of sin, which has an infinite malice, his sin must be punished by an infinite and everlasting punishment. Now sin would not be adequately punished if the soul were simply to remain, as they say, in the body of a dog, for the punishment would not last longer then the dog.

In this critique of a Hindu economy of the divine punishment, which is also based on his degradation strategy, Nobili did not directly oppose as 'absurd' the transmigration of the souls, but rather proposed a better solution in the form of a consistent equivalence:

[18] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, March 1607, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff.2–16 and ff.17–75.

infinite malice = infinite punishment. Neither did Nobili straightforwardly introduce Christian categories such as Hell, Purgatory or Paradise, for he counted on the 'natural light' (of reason) to lead his conversant to the right conclusions.[19] He presumed that the natural illumination would work in an equal measure on European and Tamil literati and would provide a basis for their mutual understanding and, finally, for the conversion from the lower pagan (Tamil) to the higher Catholic (European) wisdom. In a letter to his cousin Constanza, Nobili openly stated that Tamils cannot answer the arguments, 'which I take from their own books',[20] and that although many come to talk to him only a few were converted. However, after twenty days of discussion with Nobili, the teacher became Christian and entered into Jesuit history under his new Christian name, Alberto. The teacher's new identity was thus reinforced by the choice of a name of Nobili's direct superior Alberto Laerzio.

The discussions with friendly listeners such as Alberto were soon to be eclipsed by Nobili's representation of hostile encounters with the local religious specialists, Brahmans and paṇṭārams. When on January 14, one of Nobili's high-caste converts, Visuvasam, brought 'certain persons of quality to attend the catechism', Brahmans sneaked in so as to jeer at Nobili.[21] In the report, which Nobili sent to Laerzio to be included in the annual letter, he related the discussion in the usual indirect dialogue form, based on openings such as 'I said...they replied', which empowers the writer to control the movements of the argument. When the Brahmans opened the discussion with the question of how to attain eternal bliss, Nobili answered, 'that in their religion and ceremonies they could not find bliss, which seemed to satisfy them'. To their solicitation to explain the origin of human diversity, Nobili used a simile, equally known in Europe and in India, comparing a well-organized society with the healthy body.[22]

[19] Nobili, *Informatio*, in Rajamanickam, pp. 12–9.

[20] Nobili, R. to Duchesa de Sora, Constanza (It.), Madurai, 3 December, 1607, Fondo Boncompagni E6, Biblioteca Vatican, published in AHSI, Rome, 1968, no. 37, pp. 132–4. See also Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 24 December, 1608, in Laerzio's Report to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a.

[21] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, C. (It.), Madurai, 15 January, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 20 Nov. 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and ff. 17–75.

[22] See Duby, G. *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme*, Paris, 1978; Kantorowicz, E. H., *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton, 1957.

The problem with this simile is that, for Nobili, the head of the body corresponded to kings, whereas in the *Ṛgveda*, Brahmans issued from the mouth of the primeval man, *purusha*, while his arms were made into kings, the *kshatriyas*, his thighs into *vaishyas* (the people), while his feet became the *shudras* (the servants).

A more complex theological question—'if God is everywhere, why don't we all follow the same religion'—was also solved with a simile. God is like a sun which, although shining brightly, cannot be seen when one is locked up in a dark house with all the windows closed. In spite of the fact that the analogy between God and sun is a cross-cultural universal, Nobili's statement points to his exposure to the religious imaging proper to Śaiva Siddhānta, which privileges the play of light and darkness in establishing its theological ground. In the third sutra of the Śiva-Ñāna-Bōdham, Meykaṇṭar Dēvar, one of the most important 13th-century writers, proclaimed that: 'Because He(God) is omnipresent (...) He is like sun and sunshine'.[23] And in the tenth sutra a further metaphorical instruction is given as to how to know God: 'Though the sun be there, it is dark except for those with sight'.[24] In Nobili's answer to the question concerning the relationship between God and the soul, although opposed to Śaiva Siddhānta's non-duality (*advaita*) predicament, that is, that the goal of the soul is to become one with Śiva 'where there is no rebirth', he did not directly contradict it, but slightly twisted the argument in order to introduce Christian ideas of grace as human participation in the divine.[25]

> I answered that God is in us in several ways, by his power, his presence and his essence. Moreover, through his holy religion, he is present in some by his grace, and they can only know that they possess God, but they cannot see him in any other way.[26]

The last, soteriological, discussion about the importance of good works for salvation brought Nobili to the key theological argument used, in a different context a year and a half later, in his treatise '*Responsio*'. His main point is that the quality of the action depends on the intention/free will of the actor. Hence, he explained to his

[23] Matthews, G. (translator), *The Śiva-Ñāna-Bōdham: A Manuel of Śaiva Religious Doctrine*, Oxford, 1948, p. 11.

[24] Ibid. p. 26.

[25] Ibid., p. 29.

[26] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 15 January, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff.2–16 and ff. 17–75.

Brahman discussants, 'there are morally good actions, which, however, do not merit heaven, such as actions of those who do not know the true God'.[27] On the other hand, addressing his European audience, he explained that actions which appear idolatrous, like rubbing the forehead with sandal paste, can be taken as good when performed with the intention of honouring the 'true' Christian God. In his discussions with Tamil learned men, Nobili sharpened his arguments not only to refute 'paganism', but also to silence his European adversaries. As an actor trying to play simultaneously on multiple stages, he was always in danger of mistaking his Tamil audience for the European one, and *vice versa*.

Hence, the transfer of apologetic eloquence from the missionary to his converts became necessary. Once Christian arguments have been interiorized through continuous *repetitio* in Nobili's theological drill of his 'learned' converts, they were ready to reproduce them at any time and place. However, the epistolary idiom forcefully introduces multiple distortions and betrayals of an ideal situation. Such is the ventriloquist presentation of Nobili's Brahman Sanskrit teacher, Śivadharma, defending Christian religion before an assembly of 800 Brahmans.[28] The Brahman meeting was framed as an inquisitorial scene. The threat of having one's (Nobili's and Śivadharma's) eyes plucked out loomed large over the outcome of the defense. The voice of accusation was given to one of the missionary enemies:

> Be it known to you, O Brahmans, that we have here a man who calls himself a *sannyāsi*, which means a chaste man, but he is more vile than a *Frangui*, as even a child can find out by merely looking at him, for he is white, which is the color of the *Frangui*. But leaving aside his color, I now come to the blasphemous statements he made about me, and about the other Brahmans, and about his very master who was present there.[29]

[27] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 15 January, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff.2–16 and ff. 17–75.

[28] Nobili's original spelling of this name varies from Cioaudarma to Xivadarma, the meaning of which he claimed was equivalent to Diodato. Obviously, Nobili interprets Śiva as a generic name of God in Tamil while he takes dharma, one of the most difficult terms to translate (denoting religious path, law, ethics, virtue, duty, etc.), in its relatively 'secular' meaning of charity. Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, June 7, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 29 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff.2–16 and ff.17–75; Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 20 February, 1609 in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff.2–16 and ff.17–75.

[29] Nobili to Laerzio, Madurai, February, 20, 1609 in Laerzio to Aquaviva (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff.2–16 and ff.17–75.

With this reversal monologue, Nobili's epistolary audience is confronted with the antipodal world of the other in which all the values were topsy-turvy. Hence, from the outset, the code for reading the following fragment is defined as a negation of the stated. The fact that the Brahman prosecutor interpreted Nobili's apparent whiteness as a sign of intrinsic moral deficiency, an attack against all 'whites', produced a dramatic tension which could only be resolved with the restitution of the 'correct' order of values.

The opening motif of the dramatic plot is a question about Nobili's opaque identity. Is he a holy man/sannyāsi or a fraud/Frangui, Indian or European, chaste or vile? The Brahman then gave a catalogue of Nobili's 'blasphemous statements' against Brahman religion: that it was a 'tissue of lies'; that giving alms to the Brahmans and taking sacred baths in Rameswaram or in the Ganges did not bring eternal bliss; that kings were higher in nobility than the Brahmans; and that nobody in the Tamil country knew the true God and, therefore, nobody could be saved. At this point, Nobili's European audience unmistakably reads these accusations as a missionary critique of Hinduism and its religious specialists.

With Śivadharma's monologue responding to the accusations against Nobili, the negation code is reversed back to the 'normal', literal reading. There were no more coded messages for the European audience. Actually, by using Śivadharma's voice, Nobili delivered a lecture on cultural relativism to both the Brahman assembly and his European readers. In an *ad hominem* argument, the speaker proved that different skin colour had nothing to do with social rank:

> With the same argument I can prove to him (the prosecutor) that he is a Paraiyar and of a low birth. Since men of high or low birth, Brahmans and Paraiyars of the country, are all of the same color, cannot the same be true of men living in other countries.

If that was an important point Nobili wanted to pass primarily to the Brahmans, in the following sequence of Śivadharma's monologue, he addressed both his audiences, each with a different message. The doubling of the message is coterminous with the doubling, even tripling of the voice. Śivadharma, who was already a resonator of Nobili's ideas, rammed into his monologue, like a flashback, traces of the previous dialogue between Nobili and the Brahman prosecutor.

> These Brahmans came to ask my Aiyer (Nobili) whether a man living according to their mode of life would acquire bliss.[30] My Aiyer replied that there

[30] The Tamil dictionary witnesses the transformation of this name-title—*Ayer-* in

were two kinds of lives, one of which consisted only in ceremonies, baths, anointing, pilgrimages, and such like things, and this mode of life he declared to be of no use to obtain salvation. The other kind of life consisted in knowing, loving and serving God, and this, my Aiyer said, is the only way to attain glory. Our accuser then asked what would happen to a man who, without knowing God made pilgrimages to *Ganga* and to *Ramanacor*. He will not acquire glory in this way, answered my Aiyer. It follows, therefore, replied the Brahman, that our religion is false. The law which maintains that a man can be saved without knowing God is certainly false, replied my Aiyer, and in this he spoke truly, for in our law there is nothing contrary to it.

The scene, which was inaugurated as a monologue reporting a dialogue, forgot itself and turned into a dialogue at the point of a direct sotereological confrontation between the two interlocutors. At stake was a problem of salvation and since Śivadharma, although sympathetic to Christianity, was not yet baptized, Nobili reserved the answer to this question for himself. Śivadharma reappeared and restored his 'authorial' voice at the very end, declaring that there was no law in the Brahman books sanctifying salvation without knowledge of God. With this move, Śivadharma located Nobili's theological ideas in Hinduism and expelled the Brahman prosecutor from the discussion about salvation.

Therefore, the message to the Brahmans was that Nobili operated within the local religious system and that his contempt of rites and ceremonies was a product of his following a particular devotional/bhakti tradition based on privileging knowledge, *ñānam* as a way of approaching and understanding the transcendent. His European readers were supposed to understand through this passage that the Brahman notion of God, as it was preserved in their sacred books, was a fragmented version of Christian ideas and that only those who were ignorant about their own religion indulged in idolatry and were Nobili's most dangerous opponents.

In the closing sequence of Śivadharma's monologue, he briefly refuted two more accusations of the Brahman prosecutor. The first one was Nobili's alleged statement that Brahmans were inferior to kings, *Rajus*, and the second one that nobody in Tamil country knew God and thus could not be saved. In refuting the first point, Śivadharma was very brief and elusive:

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which the Jesuits played an important role by adding to its initial historical amalgamation, meaning a master, king, Śaiva Brahman, that of a priest, father, superior. Fabricius, *Tamil and English Dictionary*, p. 156

He (Nobili) simply said that all men were as one body, composed of many members, of which the kings were the head, not by reason of higher nobility, but being the head they ruled and governed the other members, and all of us, though we be Brahmans, are under their protection and government.

Nobili's analogy between the head and the king, was clearly revisionist from the point of view of the orthodox Brahmanical ritual stratification such as expressed in the *Ṛgveda*. Nobili's European aristocratic and intellectual bias predisposed him to see both the Brahmans and the rajas, that is, the local princely families, as nobles. However, it is possible that in 1608, at the time he wrote the letter to Laerzio reporting Śivadharma's defense, he had not yet realized the exclusiveness of the Ṛgvedic analogy between the body and normative ritual stratification.[31] Furthermore, connecting kings and hands must have appeared to Nobili as quite inappropriate. Whatever the case, in his Tamil work *Āttuma Nirṇayam* written after 1641, Nobili found a middle ground between Brahmanical and European body analogy. He still maintained that the kings were like the head, but the wise and learned men such as *piramanars* (Brahmans) became the eyes of the body, 'gurus who teach ignorant people the way of subsistence, namely, good conduct' were its mouth, and 'disciples who listen to their preaching are like ears'; farmers and people who perform countless jobs were like hands, etc.[32]

In the transitional one-phrase passage between Śivadharma's last word and the acquitting judgement of the Brahman assembly, Nobili already eroded the dramatic tension by puncturing the temporal continuity of the text: 'He (Śivadharma) told me later that he was himself astonished at the boldness with which he spoke, for he is naturally very shy'. The temporary displacement of Śivadharma from the time of his monologue into Nobili's narrative time has a particular function. It served as a subtle hint towards another, miraculous voice which might have spoken instead of, or through, Śivadharma—the voice of God. Therefore, Nobili invited his readers to interpret

[31] Nobili knew very well that according to the Ṛgvedic analogy, the Brahmans were made out from the head of the divine person since a few months later, Leitão, who joined Nobili briefly in the mission, describing how Nobili refuted the 'erroneous' Hindu opinion concerning merit and transmigration, mentioned as absurd the idea that the Brahmans were created out of God's head. In Leitão to Laerzio, Madurai, 26 September, 1609, in Laerzio to Aquaviva, Cochin (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75.

[32] Nobili, R., (alias Tattuva Pōtakar in Tamil), *Āttuma Nirṇayam*, ed. Rajamanickam, Tuttukkudi, 1967, p. 288.

Śivadharma's defense of Christian theology as a product of divine inspiration.[33]

As in the biography of a saint, in which each trial was one more success in the harnessing of opposing forces, the discussions of Nobili or his disciples mark the progress of the Christian faith and have in general a comedic, conciliatory finale.[34] Hence, like a Greek chorus, all the Brahmans in unison approved of Nobili's true sannyāsi persona and of his theology, and the whole scene finally closed with Nobili blessing his protectors and a direct invocation of God to pour more light into the hearts of the Tamils. The conversation with the 'heathen' was the first step towards conversion. It was equally as important to speak to Tamils, as it was to make them speak and act as Christians. In a sense, speaking out, producing pagan utterances under the surveillance of healing missionary voice, was an action of linguistic exorcism. Only when such heathen vocabulary had been evacuated, could a missionary in the Madurai mission start to build up a proper Christian language. However, beating the devil out of Tamil speech involved not only discussing, turning the mind of those who were learned, but also liberating the body of those who were inarticulate, such as women, old people, the sick, etc., from demonic influence. Hence, miracles and healing belong to the same theatre of conversion as the discussions and are based on a dialogue, far from Socratic though, between the missionary and the forces of Hell.

Miracles, Healing and the Devil

According to Jesuit reports, the point of encounter between the demonic and the Christian in the Madurai mission was located in the body of the 'Gentile'. The devil, the main actor in idolatry and superstition, spoke through the gentile body, emitting 'lies' and 'slanders' against the missionaries, and/or took possession and inflicted pain on to it. These statements are witnesses of the fact that the missionaries took advantage of the moments in which individuals, groups, and

[33] At the end of this chain of hints, signals and discursive winking, there stood Nobili's firm belief that his own life was nothing less than the biography of a saint, basking in the light of the divine grace.

[34] Comedic in a sense of reconciliation of the forces at play. See Hayden White's discussion of Northrop Frye's four modes of emplotment (Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, Satire) in the *Anatomy of Criticism*. White, Hayden, *Metahistory, Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, 1973, p. 7.

even entire castes went through identity crises in order to compete with the local religious and healing specialists. The missionaries endeavoured to prove to the Tamils that the religion they professed and the objects they held as sacred were the most effective and powerful. The miracle stories, in particular, open the life drama with the dysfunction of the body, which is in most cases connected with the loss of speech, and on fewer occasions with the loss of consciousness. Therefore, those dispossessed from their 'normal' selves were more prone to become vehicles of the 'demonic', but inversely were also susceptible to Christian conversion and baptism.[35]

In general, the laboratory of miracles did not produce the strongest Christians. For example, as part of the missionary project of 'harvesting souls', all mortally ill babies brought to the missionaries were baptized on the spot so that their souls might reach heaven as angels. Antonio Vico mentioned in one of his letters that according to the local ideas, the Hindus regarded baptism as an efficient remedy of the last resort. One of the local 'physicians' actually became Christian after having been persuaded that the Christian baptismal formula was more successful in healing than his own.

> A five-day old pagan child was about to die (...). The Christian physician was called in and as he saw that the time for medicine had passed, he sent for water and baptized the child who suddenly opened his eyes, drank milk and was completely cured. All the bystanders were amazed and the doctor more than all of them. However, as the baptized child remained in the hands of his gentile parents, he had recourse to the Aiyer (Nobili) for advice. God our Lord in his mercy was pleased to give that child his grace as well as life.[36]

While the physician probably went even further in experimenting with his new healing methods, it is not clear what it meant for the child to have received the divine grace. Was he to become a Christian? There were also cases in which non-Christian parents made a vow that if their child survived, they would raise him or her as a Christian. Furthermore, as can be seen, although the miraculous healing astonished and impressed viewers, they did not hasten to join the

[35] When explaining Amerindian idolatry as resulting from difficulties of cognition, Las Casas similarly contends that the demons paint illusions and phantasms in the imagination of impressionable individuals such as the sick, children and young virgins. MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes*, p. 224.

[36] Vico, A. to Laerzio, 27 May, 1611, in Laerzio's report to Aquaviva, C., 25 November, 1611 (It.), ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 93–129.

Catholic Church. Finally, miracles were performed by many gods and Tamils must have taken the one advertised by the Jesuits as one among others.

The competition between indigenous and Jesuit remedies is obvious in another example of Nobili's successful healing. Although a child who was very ill—'due as they said to some spell'—recovered, his parents made 'an offering to the demon' and he had a relapse. It was only when Nobili baptized him that the child recovered at once and was given 'the name of Felix'.[37] However, when another sick child who appeared to have recovered after baptism through the daily consumption of the holy water administered to him by his father, finally died, Nobili had nothing else to say but that 'after the Lord called him to himself, (it was) a great consolation to me'. The baptism or conversion *in articulo mortis*, although acceptable, was certainly not the main goal of the missionaries inhabiting the New residence in Madurai. When Nobili started experimenting with his adaptationist method of conversion in 1607, he used the example of Gonçalo Fernandes's three or four conversions *in articulo mortis* in twelve years as a negative illustration of such a missionary approach.[38]

Baptism and conversion based on miracles were story- rather than life-oriented. Whether the subjects survived or not was less important than the survival of the story. For the European audience the stories were preserved in writing while for the Tamils they were orally transmitted and inscribed in the collective memory of the new Christians. These stories, both told by word of mouth and reprinted from one collection of Jesuit letters to another, become virtual dialogic bridges between Tamil oral and Jesuit written history.

To the extent that Nobili anticipated his own sanctification in the Madurai Mission, he intentionally privileged his status as an actor rather than as a narrator. He was, in fact, unwilling to provide more details about the miracles in his own letters. In a letter to his cousin Constanza Sforza Boncompagni, he excused himself for not writing more about his miraculous deeds. The fact that he used his ill health and asthma (his favourite textual evasion technique) as a pretext for his incapacity to write, meant that the expectations of his readers for

[37] Nobili, R. to Vico, A., Madurai, 17 June, 1610, in Laerzio's report ot Aquaviva, C., 8 December, 1610 (It.), ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 76–92.

[38] Nobili, R. to Boncompagni, G. (Lat.), Madurai, 3 Dec. 1607, Fondo Boncompagni, E6, Biblioteca Vaticana, AHSI, 1968, no. 37, pp. 134–7.

an abundance of miracles were quite pronounced. Moreover, most of the miracles performed by Nobili were either retold by Laerzio in the annual reports or copied *verbatim* from letters written by the missionary to the superior. None of them contain Nobili's autograph. As a rule, Nobili preferred to recount his successes in bringing about 'a change in their badly prejudiced minds', although he did see around himself the workings of the divine and providential grace. Most of the miracles with which he was involved were related to illnesses, while very few were occasioned during the important Hindu festivals. The latter were liable to ambiguous interpretations and required further theological and commonsensical explanations.

Two of Nobili's healing miracles concern women. Married to Christian men, both of them were still 'pagan'. The first woman had a difficult confinement and when her relatives suggested that 'an offering to the demon' was necessary for her survival, her husband 'answered that even if his wife and child were to die, he would never consent to do a thing contrary to the law of God'. Even when the wife broke down and complained to him, 'that he was killing her', he remained unmoved in his decision and, 'began to recite a prayer to Our Lady, which he had composed for that occasion'.[39] At that moment, 'God our Lord was so pleased with it and as soon as he had recited it the woman gave birth to a son without the least difficulty, to the astonishment of all'. Reciting a prayer for the purpose of healing is unique among the standard items of missionary pharmacopoeia. On the one hand, it could be interpreted as the Christian convert's complete independence from the Church, since he communicated with God directly, through his own word and without priestly mediation, which smacks of 'heretical' or Protestant, notions. On the other hand, such independence could be interpreted as a 'ripening' of the Christian word in the Tamil language. The ambiguity inherent in the interpretation of this story makes it more powerful than a one-way signification. What was probably not transparent to European readers was that the Christian convert's action could also be interpreted in a third way, that is in terms of the indigenous religious or bhakti practices. The responsive God who takes a personal interest and can be pleased and propitiated by a beautiful song resembles Śiva more then a Catholic divinity.

[39] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 24 December, 1608, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75.

Similarly, the determination of a Christian husband and the vacillation of his either Christian or 'pagan' wife is presented in the second healing miracle. A husband refused to resort to 'idolatrous practices' to cure his wife's ailment. Instead, he 'exhorted her to commend herself to the True God, as he would himself recommend her. By God's help that very night the patient was cured, to the great consolation of both, and the faith of the Christian husband was thereby greatly strengthened.'[40] The woman, like the one in the preceding story, served as temptress testing her husband's firmness of faith. Therefore, the purpose of the healing miracle was not simply to heal, but to persuade. The choice between love for a woman and love for God, which is the same as the choice between indulging in earthly pleasures and becoming a renouncer and ascetic, was as much a staple topos in European as in Indian religious imaginary. Brahman ideology, at least in theory, contained this tension between asceticism and this-worldliness in the four stages of life, or *āśramas*, in which the practice of asceticism comes at the end of one's life. Nevertheless, each new counter-Brahmanical movement (Buddhism, Jainism, bhakti, etc.) focused its social critique on this problematic solution. Nobili's insistence on continence and asceticism as an integral part of Christian life was, therefore, the point at which his adaptation to local customs and strict adherence to Catholic ideals were, for once, in perfect harmony.

Besides 'serious' miracle scenes, Nobili presented with a patronizing smile two miracles which occurred during the local ceremony of *poṅkal*.[41] Embedded furtively in the preliminary description of the festival is Nobili's adaptationist method:

At the beginning of each year the gentiles are wont to celebrate a very solemn festival (*pongal*), offering the new rice to the gods. It consists in cooking before an idol with great ceremony the rice mixed with milk. According to them, it is a disgrace not to celebrate that festival. I allow our Christians to cook the rice and boil the milk at the foot of a cross which they plant for that

[40] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 15 January, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75.

[41] *Tamil Lexicon*, vol. 5, p. 2910–11., *poṅkal*: Boiling; bubbling; A preparation of boiled rice seasoned with salt, pepper, cumin seeds and ghee; Solar festival when *poṅkal* is prepared as an offering.

purpose, and, to their great satisfaction, I myself bless the new rice which is to be used in that ceremony and then distribute it among them.[42]

This passage is divided into two parts: the non-Christian and the 'Christian' one. The dividing line cuts through the obscure land of disgrace, loss of honour, through the wastelands of the social landscape. At this point, a reader can tell that Nobili had only two choices, equally unbecoming, either to fall into 'paganism', or to walk on the edge of the Tamil social system. The third choice, itself a product of Nobili's Jesuit alchemy, of turning a 'pagan' ceremony into a Christian ceremony, appears immediately as the only viable solution. Nobili's gesture in practice and in language of allowing, blessing and distributing, stole the sacred from the Hindu gods and captured it for Christianity. The adaptation of this ceremony was facilitated by the fact that it is a *paṇṭikai*, a household festival, which is not officiated by any local religious specialist, unlike for example, *tiruviḻa*, a temple festival which would have been impossible to translate into Christianity, not because of its ritual content but because it was the 'property' of the temple priests. Another adaptable trait of *poṅkal* is that it is a cooking and eating ceremony, which in semiotic terms means that the referent can be left intact, since the action of eating is culturally universal, and only the signifier brings the weight of change to the signified, from the label 'Hinduism' to the label 'Christianity'.[43]

Having thus turned poṅkal into a Christian festival, Nobili proceeded with the miraculous scene: 'On that occasion the mother of Visuvasam and Aleixo had forgotten to plant the cross, and although she stirred the fire, her rice would not boil, which according to the superstitious ideas of the pagans is a very bad omen.'[44] Discerning where Christianity begins and where Hinduism ends in this passage is entirely opaque. The woman who was herself almost Christian performed two superstitious actions. The first one, due to her 'forgetfulness', is celebrating poṅkal in a Hindu manner and the second one, according to Nobili, was by espousing the superstitious ideas that poṅkal rice which does not boil is a bad omen. The logic of this utterance has a tendency to contradict Nobili's claim that there is nothing superstitious about poṅkal as performed by the Christians. What

[42] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 15 January, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75.

[43] In a process of more complicated cultural adaptation, at times, the referent also had to be changed or invented.

[44] Ibid.

Nobili does to cancel such an interpretation consists in a double move. First, he undervalues any Hindu religious ceremony: 'Then noticing her omission she hastened to repair it, and immediately, to her great joy, the rice started boiling, for as Your Reverence knows very well, God adapts himself to their capacity'. And second, Nobili attributed to God the effort of adapting himself to Hindu customs, which makes Nobili a simple vessel of the higher will and the question as to what is superstitious and what is Christian ceases to be an issue which can be resolved in a 'this-worldly' context, and has become a matter of divine discernment.

Another Christian, Dadamurti, who had already been a protagonist in one of the miraculous healing scenes, also had a problem with the preparation of the poṅkal rice. For three consecutive years his rice would not boil and he decided that year, 'not to take part in that feast or banquet, as they call it. But having been informed of this, I ordered him to plant the cross and do like the others'.[45] In this scene, the miracle is solicited by Nobili in order to prove the omnipotence of his religion. Although he clearly stated before that it was a superstitious idea to think that the poṅkal rice failure to boil was a sign of ill-luck, he still encouraged Dadamurti to do so under the protection of the cross.

> He obeyed as a good Christian and his rice boiled all right and his joy was so great that his children ran up to me to announce the news and receive my congratulations on that happy event, as if it were a great favour from God. I see that your Reverence will tell me that these things are childish, but you ordered me to write to you everything in detail and I do that the more willingly as these trifles are very big things in the eyes of these neophytes, and are of great importance since they serve to bind them to our religion, strengthen their faith and prepare them to bear the persecutions which God will send them, and which perhaps will not be long in coming.[46]

It is obvious that, from Nobili's point of view, the fundamental relationship between Nobili and the Tamils is that between the father and his children. What is permitted children such as Tamils, who still hold on to their superstitions, would not have been permitted to grown-ups. His message is—let them play Christianity for a while, for soon through persecutions they will 'grow up'.

[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

In addition, the status of miracle scenes is ambiguous because it reflects a double Jesuit programme—edification and spectacularization. Since miracles generally function as mediators between truth and justice, and life and death, in the context of unequal power distribution (divine vs. human power; conqueror vs. the subjugated), they can be taken as political, social and cultural strategies for redressing an unfavourable balance of power. In this way, it was necessary for every Jesuit missionary to learn how to detect and use miracles in a given situation. The accounts of miraculous healing involving natural and supernatural remedies oriented future missionaries towards using those which proved to be the most effective. In the Madurai Mission, the standard healing repertory consisted of the cross, holy water, reliquaries and relics supplemented by performing the sign of the holy cross, prayer, baptism and Mass. Less frequent, but qualified as powerful, were also the holy books, *bezoar* stone and the stone of St Paul, as well as confession and extreme unction. Besides being used for passing on missionary know-how, these miracle stories undoubtedly inspired the curiosity and admiration of young novices who found the connection with the supernatural rare in Europe. Also, these stories privilege an individual, not in a modern liberal, but in the mythico-cosmic sense, and stand in contrast to the growing social anonymity.

When trying to lure Antonio Vico to join the Madurai mission, Nobili wrote him a letter which contained ten miracle stories, ranging from exorcism to healing.[47] It was a propagandist letter intended to persuade Vico of the 'supernatural grace' bestowed on the mission, and of spiritual 'profits' to any missionary joining in. Nobili obviously thought it more expedient to describe the miraculous theatre of conversion, rather than resorting to theological or practical explanations. It was as if Nobili were hinting to Vico that he would be able to experience similar marvellous events and tell similar miraculous stories. And, he did.

The way in which the miraculous stories are embedded in Vico's and Nobili's letters betrays a certain distancing pose, a loss of context. In four of Vico's letters which were included in Laerzio's report, there are about twenty miracle stories. Although they follow one after another, their chronological order and spatial frame are not

[47] Nobili, R. to Vico, A., Madurai, 17 June, 1610, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., 8 December, 1610 (It.), ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 76–92.

defined. Most of the actors have a shallow impersonal name-tag: a young man, a Brahman cook, a Hindu woman, etc. The stories are not mutually connected, except, though rarely, by the presence of the same actor. What is repeated from one story to the next is a tripartite dramatic structure: lost-miracle-found. The monotony of structure plus the vagueness of context is punctuated by more or less unexpected monologues, dialogues and picturesque details. These picturesque details, which did not necessarily contain edifying information, but played on excesses or 'spectacular' curiosities were able to capture the attention of a wider audience.

The curiosities in the miracle scenes function in a different way than in ethnographic narratives. While the ethnographic narrative contains curiosities in a double move of telescoping the strange into the familiar, and then re-alienating it as a 'familiar' strange, the miracle scene takes on a familiar aspect and scans it's strangeness in order to dismiss it as familiar. Vico recounted in detail a story of the illness and cure of a staunch local Christian, Amator.[48] He fell ill and suffered terrible pain.

> When natural remedies proved useless, supernatural means were used. But the Lord, who wished to prove and try the virtue of his servant, permitted that neither holy water nor the holy relics which were applied did any good, though at times they brought him some relief, but only for a short time.

Vico, who tried to assert full control over the scenario, transformed an ordinary illness into a divine trial in which all human efforts were inadequate, except—as we learn from the development of the plot and what Amator as a good Christian knew already—the faith and patience. With his prophetic powers, Nobili predicted that the illness would last long, but that Amator was ultimately to recover. However, in the meantime, ever since God deserted Amator, 'the demon tried to overcome him by external means', that is, by sending his relatives to dissuade him from his new religious beliefs. Even his Christian wife 'like another Job's wife (Job 2; 9) would come in and cry out angrily, "I know why you dismiss our relatives, it is because you did not want to hear the truth and you are so obstinate in your perverse simplicity that you will cause the death of us all by refusing to give up this God of yours." Amator would answer: "Now you come and say all you like, for I must always have a demon by my side to tempt me".'

[48] Vico, A. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 31 August, 1611, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., 25 November, 1611 (It.), ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 93–129.

Finally, he prepared himself for death and Nobili came, heard his confession and gave him the extreme unction. At the peak of the dramatic tension, a strange, tragic illness turned into a farce. 'God permitted the nature of his illness to be discovered'. It became clear to both the Jesuit fathers (Vico and Nobili) and to others involved in the affair that the source of Amator's ailment was kidney stones. Nevertheless, the missionaries were 'distressed, for we realized what a triumph that death would be for the demon and his followers who were blaspheming God, and the gentiles who were gloating over the apostasy of those Christians.' Fortunately, Amator passed the stone after a couple of days of extreme pain and was cured, permitting Vico to conclude:

> This sufficed to confound the gentiles, for they saw clearly that it was not a question of sorcery, nor a punishment from their gods, but a natural infirmity, which by God's permission had not been identified and cured, so that his servants might be put to the test, as the Aiyer had said.

The origin of Amator's problem was rendered strange by Vico through his narrative suspension of information before resolution in the domain of the familiar, which appeared simultaneously as both banal, the passing of the stone, and as divine, God's trial.

Another particular characteristic of the miracle scene, as opposed to ethnographic narrative, is its fictional valency. In the first place, it is dependent on the elaboration of a plot which, in the dramaturgy of the miraculous, is always in the subjunctive mood[49]. The chain of motivation underlining the story is shot through with supernatural operations, both demonic and divine, making the story unpredictable. Semiotically, the miracle scenes represent everything they stand against. They become the space of the highest concentration of unearthly forces, in spite of their goal to silence the demonic oracles and strangle the voice of the devil. The fictionalization of the miracle scene is also achieved by doubling, even tripling the stage(s) of representation. The main antagonist, the devil, never appears in the space, which is directly accessible to the missionaries. His stage is 'paganism', and because it has been corroded by missionary activity, he

[49] The two categories—subjunctive mood/indicative mood—are borrowed from Van Gennep's discussion of ritual. I use them in a broader sense. Subjunctive mood becomes a fiction within non-fiction (indicative mood). Similarly, for Todorov the narrative surface may contain distinctive verbal moods, for example—love-passion being an optative of sexual intercourse while renunciation its negative optative. See Todorov, Tzvetan, *Grammaire du Décaméron*, The Hague, 1969, pp. 46–50.

takes the offensive against the intruders through the local new Christians and non-Christians. In a sense, his story encroaches on missionary history, as fiction encroaches on non-fiction, or as a lie violates the truth. However, the devil is seen as a force doomed to disappear with the conquest of Christianity, and his status as a vanishing agent turns him into a fictional character, existing only in texts.

Ironically, of course, the voice of the devil when decoded and recorded for the reader is auto-destructively prophetic, concealing Jesuit ventriloquist efforts. The devil speaks about his own disappearance. In one of his reports, based on Nobili's information, Laerzio tells the story of a Muslim who in Alberto's[50] presence suddenly saw an apparition of the devil 'in human form'. When Alberto tried to chase him away with the sign of a cross, 'the devil told Mohamedan angrily: "The weapon given to you by that man protects you, but I shall have my revenge in some other way". When Mohamedan asked what that weapon was, the devil replied that it was the weapon of Almighty God, the Creator of them both, and with that he disappeared'.[51] The dialogue between the Muslim and the devil, taking place on the interior stage, invisible to everybody except to the actual interlocutors, was reported by Alberto to Nobili, who reported it to Laerzio, who in turn wrote it down for his European readers. The plethora of gazes directed towards an invisible theatre of the soul, in which the audience is as important as the performance, is a typical baroque choreography.[52] The truth forced out of the devil dissolves his voice in the text, in the plot of the story, in the scene, and in 'paganism'. Christianity begins with the silencing of the devil.

Noble Encounters and Ignoble Persecutions

In order to extirpate the demons from the Madurai mission or, as Vico put it, to 'scour the country', a missionary, besides engaging in numerous disputations with learned men and performing miracles, had to tame and cultivate his relations with the local political authorities. The Jesuit 'political' involvement in the Madurai mission is, just

[50] Alberto was Nobili's first convert and his Christian name appears to have been chosen for him as Nobili's homage to Alberto Laerzio.

[51] Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75.

[52] St Teresa's ecstatic drama, immemorialized by Bernini in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, is flanked by an equally immemorialized audience overlooking the scene.

like disputations and miracles, prefigured by the theatrical mode. The interaction between the Jesuits and the greater or lesser Tamil chieftains stands out in the texts as dramatic relief, partly because of its dialogical features and partly because of its political content. However, the dramas of encounters with the local grandees, whom the missionaries perceived as corresponding to European 'kings' and 'courtiers', were the result of political ruses rather than demons or theological argumentation.

The first problem with which the Jesuits were confronted was what they saw as the fluidity and inconstancy of local 'kingly' power. Their typically Jesuit strategy of locating and aiming at the power-centre, both religious and secular, found itself at a loss in the Tamil political arena. Their efforts to attach themselves to the Tamil or Telugu 'nobles' and 'courtiers' in order to ultimately get at the Nāyaka of Madurai bore some fruit, but not as quickly and as firmly as the Jesuits initially thought possible. The texture of local politics, woven out of gossip and rumours, switching allegiances, symbolic and violent intimidation, appeared quite annoying to the Jesuit mission The behaviour of Nobili's first and major protector from his early days in Madurai, Herencheti Naiche (Erumaichetti Nāyaka), illustrates, from the Jesuit point of view, the capriciousness of local nobles.

According to Laerzio's annual report, Herencheti Naiche was a younger brother of the deceased Nagaicheti, a rich 'noble', and Nobili's first benefactor in Madurai.[53] The encounter between Nobili and Herencheti Naiche promised a long-term relationship between the two, based on Nobili's moral and theological superiority and Herencheti Naiche's growing political influence. The young Telugu chieftain was, at that point, going through a 'career' crisis. In order to secure the succession to his brother's estate, he had to pay '70,000 *scudi* as investiture fee to the Nāyaka, who added other lands to those which that young man has inherited from his brother.' Herencheti Naiche broke into 'loud sobs and shed an abundance of tears' when Nobili spoke to him about the punishment of Hell that his older brother had to endure for having failed to follow 'the law of God and the way of salvation'. The young noble expressed the desire to embrace Nobili's way of salvation as soon as he cleared up the matter of succession.

Nobili described Herencheti Naiche as a 'fine looking man' and very strong, so 'that he can with one hand lift a big calf, and to

[53] Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75.

preserve his physical vigor he keeps only one wife, which will make the matter of his conversion much easier.'[54] Although the Jesuits were ready to adapt Christianity to local customs and usages, their emphasis on monogamous marriages was unconditional. The concern over their convert's sexuality appeared to have been one of their missionary priorities, and they never failed to emphasize that 'bizarre' marriage customs presented serious obstacles to the spread of Catholicism. As one of the sacraments of the Church, monogamous marriage when confronted with polygamy, became by analogy equated with monotheism encountering polytheism. Herencheti Naiche's matrimonial restraint, which Laerzio explained as an indigenous strategy of body-control, equating sexual abstinence with mental and physical power, was seen by the Jesuits as resembling Catholic ideas of celibacy and was grasped immediately as a useful handle in the missionaries' conversion efforts.

Once his social position stabilized, Herencheti Naiche forgot all about Nobili's soteriological exhortations and joined a gallery of Nobili's 'almost-converted' nobles, whose friendship or animosity depended on the volatile local political alliances. Consequently, the relationship between the missionary and the Telugu 'noble' was marked by ups and downs, until 1620 when Herencheti Naiche simply faded from Nobili's and Vico's letters.

The scene Nobili presented to his readers in 1608 can be taken as a case in point. The whole affair was based on rumours. A *caniachi* (*kāṇiyāṭci*), who was the head of the temple of 'Ciocanada', declared that Nobili's teaching was responsible for provoking the drought.[55] The council of Brahmans then persuaded the 'great Cheti' to inform Nāyaka about Nobili's 'deeds', and another enemy of Christianity, in the person of a '*maesto zoppo*' went to speak to Nāyaka's private secretary, himself a pious devotee of Cokkanātan[56]. Although they all promised to speak to Nāyaka, it seemed that kāṇiyāṭci decided to go himself to the palace and waited until midnight for an audience. The

[54] This extraordinary strength was at the origin of his name—*erumai* meaning buffalo in Tamil. Chetti—a title associated with the merchant community.

[55] *Kāṇiyāṭci*, a holder of hereditary right to land, estate, offices. See Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess*.

[56] '*Maestro zoppo*' or a lame teacher appears in a few letters. His name was also recorded as '*Mundivatriar*' (*noṇṭivāttiyār*) in certain reports. Cokkanātan (Skt. Sundareshwara) is one of the names of Śiva and the principal male deity in the temple of Madurai.

uncle of Nobili's Brahman master also happened to be there and found out about the complot against Nobili and the accusations which were going to be made against him. Anticipating that the punishment meant having their eyes gouged and their kudumi cut off, Nobili's Brahman cooks, Tirumalai and Anen, fled.

The circulation of rumours in this scene is parallel to the circulation of power. There are no overt moves or threats of intimidation, no physical violence used, and as the rumour moves from the lower stage to the higher, each new actor appears to be fiercer than the previous one. Nobili's dramaturgy feeds on the negative energy directed towards his own destruction, both as a missionary and as an epistolary correspondent. However, precisely from within such a threatening configuration, Nobili emerges as omnipresent, even if only as a topic of gossip, in the land of the Tamils. Having thus insinuated into the presentation of his own case the analogy with Christ's confrontation with the secular authorities, his story breaks away from its reference and follows the plot line of a stereotyped legend recounting the life of a martyr.

At the height of the mounting persecution, Nobili was advised by his friends and enemies to flee for his life, as most of his servants did or were about to do. Gradually, he was deserted and forsaken by most of his followers. Within the dynamic of the conventional martyrdom scene, although somewhat differently, terrestrial experience also took shape. Nobili sent two messengers to Herencheti Naiche, asking for help. George, his 'faithful' servant also fled to Vaippār, after having been dishonoured by Herencheti Naiche who called him 'a Turk and a slave of the Portuguese'.[57] When the circle of negative opinions seemed to have tightened around Nobili, Gonçalo Fernandes, probably one of the worst enemies of the 'new' Madurai residence, visited Nobili at night and advised him to leave. The second messenger, a Christian named Aleixo Naiche, himself of 'noble' origin, had more success with Herencheti Naiche who, with his military entourage, came to speak to Nobili late at night. In a face to face encounter between Nobili and Herencheti Naiche, the tragic emplotment turned comic. After receiving a present from Nobili, a pair of European spectacles, Herencheti Naiche's surprised gaze fell on

[57] Vaippār was an important Parava Christian town on the Fishery coast, north of Tuttukudi. Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., 31 December, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin (It.), 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75.

Nobili's emaciated body, prompting Nobili to complain about, 'ill treatment meted out to me by the Brahmans', and added that 'even those who prepared my food had fled and that I had been obliged to send away even my messenger.' Having heard this, Herencheti Naiche cursed all those who deserted Nobili and reassured him of his protection and 'asked Aleixo to come to him on the next day, when he would call the Brahman from the temple of Cokkanātan and make him throw himself down at my (Nobili's) feet to ask pardon.'

The scene that Nobili reenacted for his European audience walks the thin line between myth and autobiography. Nobili, as the main character of the scene, writes of his 'apostolic' life as the place of his own disappearance. His missionary project was partly based on the fading away of his profane, human self and the gaining of a saintly persona. The hide-and-seek Nobili played with the Brahmans and the secular authorities left its traces in texts as a constant interplay between denying and affirming his disguised identity. The rumours spread by the kāṇiyāṭci, by the 'lame school teacher' and by Herencheti Naiche, accusing Nobili of being a Portuguese, a frangui, or a Turk impersonating a Yogi 'of a caste of the rajus', are the inaugurating lines, while Nobili's refutations and the 'correct' self-presentation are the closing lines of this persecution scene. Hence, Nobili closed the plot of this 'dramatic' story as if he were writing fiction rather than an open-ended letter describing an open-ended affair. The readers are left with the impression that Herencheti Naiche became once and for all a protector of the Jesuit missionaries.

In fact, that was not the case at all. Not long after one persecution ended, a new one took place against Nobili, in a similar scenario. Leitão reported this case of persecution in October 1609. Again 'the chief Brahman of the temple of Cokkanātan', among other complaints against Nobili, accused him of being a 'vile man and a *Frangui*'.[58] The affair ended quite unheroically. The Jesuits discovered that the Brahman was after money and paid him 15 *scudi* for his 'friendship'. The Brahman's last words were: 'Propagate your religion as you please, and make as many disciples as you like; in future I shall stand by you like a brother'. Leitão's report betrays his growing disenchantment with Nobili's methods and with his 'new' Madurai mission. Nobili, of course, never wrote about such down to earth

[58] Leitão, E. to Laerzio, A., 3 November, 1609, in Laerzio, R. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75.

ruses as bribing. For him and for his readers, the progress of Christianity in India evolved as a divine, not human, endeavour and, therefore, every new effort or obstacle was treated as an exercise in holy semiotics.

Never asleep in the mission, the demon worked both without and within the Christian community. Two months after they paid for the Brahman's friendship, a Parava Christian belonging to Gonçalo Fernandes's church announced to the high-caste Christian converts that they had also become franguis through their association with Nobili.[59] In order to calm down his terrified converts, Nobili wrote about himself in Tamil on a palm leaf, *ōlai*, and had it nailed to the tree in front of his church. Since anybody could have read the palm leaf, the content of the text was available to Christian and non-Christian communities of Madurai town. Even so it did not conclusively persuade anybody, as a year and a half later, Nobili affixed to the tree in front of his church another palm leaf with a similar autobiographical *résumé*.[60]

The public display of his bio-data was a result of a long and problematic relationship with Herencheti Naiche, who moved from one Nobili story to another with less and less zeal for conversion. When he went to war, Nobili tied a gold medal—with a cross and INRI inscription on one face and '*in hoc signo vinces*' on the other—around Herencheti Naiche's right arm, 'as the gurus of this country are wont to do'. Herencheti Naiche for his part promised that, 'if God granted him the grace to return alive from the war he would most certainly attend the religious instruction'.[61] According to Laerzio's account, when Herencheti Naiche returned victorious in August 1610, he acknowledged that, 'all his good fortune had come through the Aiyer'. However, Laerzio displayed only moderate enthusiasm for religious conversion in the foreseeable future because 'his occupations and the favour he enjoys with the Nāyaka are most insurmountable difficulties, and the demon will not fail to create for him new obstacles and impediments'.[62] This pseudo-prophesy was inserted into Laerzio's report before Vico's letter, dated 24 November, 1610,

[59] Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 8 Dec. 1610, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 76–92.

[60] Vico, A. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 27 May, 1611, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 25 November, 1611, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 93–129.

[61] Leitão, E. to Laerzio, A., 3 November, 1609, in Laerzio, R. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75.

[62] Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 8 December, 1610, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 76–92.

in which Herencheti Naiche's ambiguous feelings about the Jesuit missionaries became more pronounced. Laerzio's comments in his annual reports were often disguised as prophecies, although they were written as frame stories for letters already received from the Madurai mission in which the outcome of events and affairs were concluded in one way or the other. For obvious reasons, Laerzio's prophetic abilities were always confirmed.

The persecution which Vico related in his letter was a sequel to the persecution of the previous year. Brahmans and paṇṭārams spread rumours 'through the town' that Nobili was of low birth and that he was responsible for the destruction of their religion. In addition, he was accused of 'breaking to pieces of the lingam and of throwing it into indecent places'. On this occasion again, the Jesuits turned to Herencheti Naiche, who proved reluctant to help them because 'one of his friends reported to him certain calumnies against our house, and two other men complained to him about a good Christian young man, who stays with the Aiyer'.[63]

The persecution again consisted in the circulation of rumours. Just as in the previous example, the rumours were made to circle around Nobili in such a way that it was never certain by whom they had been disseminated. A series of messengers came from Herencheti Naiche with contradicting orders. The first two emissaries transmitted Herencheti Naiche's astonishment that 'the Aiyer, though a *Frangui* and man of low birth, had the boldness to remain in his ward, build on his land, boast of being his guru and force honourable men to join the caste of *Franguis*.'[64] They also announced the immediate arrest of a young man living in Nobili's quarters. Next came a captain who ordered the Jesuits to immediately vacate the house and the church. During the night, some people came to arrest the young man. At this point Nobili, 'took a bold attitude and answered these messengers and those who had come in the morning'. He refuted the accusations and refused to hand over the young man. Being a nobleman by birth, reasoned Nobili, it was against the honour of the young man's lineage to commit such a treason, and he would rather have his head cut off than be disgraced through arrest.

Nobili's speech is reported to have completely turned the tables. All of a sudden, he recovered his noble identity, a man of a 'raju

[63] The young man in question was probably Aleixo Naiche.

[64] Vico, A. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 24 November, 1610, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., (It.), Cochin, 8 December, 1610, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 76–92.

caste' who witnessed the scene proclaimed that 'this man (Nobili) is truly a raju, for that is the way the rajus speak' and, therefore, 'the messengers then pretended they knew nothing of the insults poured on Nobili, assuring him that he was misinformed and that Herencheti Naiche had never said such a thing'. Finally, the last message came from Herencheti Naiche, claiming that the previous messages did not come from him and excused himself for all the inconveniences caused to Nobili. The whole event was suddenly turned into an infernal intrigue of lies. The political and demonological are, thus, ultimately collapsed into one.

In his letter, however, Vico disqualified all the messengers as they entered the text (or appeared on the stage). Through this procedure, Vico embedded the future foreclosure (the resolution of the story) in the narrative continuum, which produces an effect of prophecy and providence. The strategy of 'embedding' served also to come to terms with the disconcerting feature, from the missionary point of view, of local politics based on segmentary power relations which worked through rumours and intimidation rather than overt violence, and allowed every person in a chain of patrons and clients to carve his own power niche. Nobili, who had probably got wind of some of the personal strategies which would be used in such a system, insisted on his sovereignty, at times invoking his warrior background and at others his status as guru, within the limits of his church and over his Christian converts.

When on another occasion, Herencheti Naiche found out once again through the grapevine, that somebody had stolen 360 *scudi* from Nobili's new Jesuit residence in Madurai, he gave the order to arrest all Nobili's servants and brought a famous 'sorcerer' to conduct the inquiry. Vico and Nobili rejected his help and his methods, 'not only on account of the disturbance it might create among (our) Christian servants, but also because everybody would probably think that the Aiyer tried to recover the money by means of a sorcerer.'[65] Therefore, Nobili's jurisdiction as both a headman of his community and as a guru endowed with magic powers were challenged by Herencheti Naiche. The problem was that Nobili appeared to have accorded himself more sovereignty than Herencheti Naiche thought appropriate. The Jesuit claimed not only his moral and ritual

[65] Vico, A. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 27 May 1611, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 25 November, 1611, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 93–129.

dominance, but also his jurisdictional superiority, thereby encroaching on Herencheti Naiche's domain. Displeased, the young Telugu chieftain angrily informed Nobili not to 'ask for his help in future'.

The enigma of the theft was solved in another 'oriental' vignette recounted by Vico. 'One day, when the Aiyer was sitting under a tree in the *kiramam* three leagues from the town, and was recommending to God another affair of great importance for His honour and glory, he thought suddenly of the theft and saw clearly that the money was hidden above a certain door' in his Madurai residence.[66] No more details were provided about this 'visionary' event. Nevertheless, Nobili recovered his money as well as his honour and gained new admirers among the 'noble' and powerful chieftains in Madurai. An unnamed lord, *durai* (*turai*), 'praised the firmness of the Aiyer in refusing to hand over his servants to Herencheti Naiche, and later came to congratulate him on the happy ending of the whole affair.' Nobili obviously understood that he had to diversify, if not radically modify, his network of friends and allies, inasmuch as his relationship with his 'noble' patron Herencheti Naiche was strained beyond repair. The durai, grafted casually onto the principal story, signals the way in which political logic operated within local military and ritual circles. The clustering of the military chieftains, durais and nāyakas, around the overlord, the Great Nāyaka of Madurai, was structurally the same as the clustering of overlords around the king of Vijayanagara. The central tension in these hierarchically ordered relations was between economic independence and ceremonial submission. According to Burton Stein, the nāyaka system was a form of segmentary state in which the king exercised a ritual sovereignty, while his military chiefs controlled the largest part of the territory with an inbuilt tendency to splinter away as independent rulers.[67] The model of such segmentation was also reproduced on the lower levels among lesser military adventurers. What the durai saw as commendable in Nobili's behaviour was his claim to sovereignty over his own 'territory' and the protection of his 'liquid' assets (360 *scudi*), while at

[66] *Kirāmam* is a village in an agricultural tract. *Tamil Lexicon*, vol. 2, p. 927. According to Rajamanickam, the village in question was Kilaneri, near Nagamalai, west of Madurai. Saulière, *His Star in the East*, p. 184.

[67] Burton Stein, 'Vijayanagara c. 1350–1564', in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, eds, Raychaudhuri, T., and Habib, I., Orient Longman, Delhi, 1982, vol. 1, pp. 104–7 and Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, pp. 369–71.

the same time playing the game of ceremonial dependence to an overlord (Herencheti Naiche). In fact, Nobili's career in Madurai resembles that of a local military chieftain involved in the process of building a little kingdom of his own. The five 'minimal components' for nāyaka statehood, according to Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, are the following: 1) money in a portable, 'liquid' form; 2) mobility; 3) acquisition of a territorial base; 4) establishment of vertical linkages (relations of personal loyalty), and 5) divine authorization.[68]

It is well known that one of the charges against Nobili made by Portuguese ecclesiastics and Jesuit superiors was the cost of the mission in Madurai. Ready 'cash' had to be provided regularly by the superiors in Cochin. Even private missionary inheritance and funds were employed to shore up expenses for maintaining Jesuit 'kingly' presentation. Similar accusations were directed against Japanese and Chinese 'adaptationist' missions. In 1617, Vico calculated that 350 scudi a year would have been enough for a 'modest' living of the two missionaries and for the upkeep of the 'boys' who lived and studied with them.[69] Serious financial crises in the new Madurai mission was reported by Vico throughout the period. By 1621, Vico desperately tried to get hold of some of his family's inheritance (1000 florins) for the Madurai mission.[70]

Jesuit missionary mobility, exterior and interior, was part and parcel of their trade. In addition, the distance from the centre—Rome and Lisbon—facilitated the invention and application of the 'adaptationist' method of conversion by Vico and Nobili. The territory they carved out for themselves was not only 'spiritual', but also geographical, as one of their projects was the establishment of churches, schools and Jesuit residences. Tamil country was dotted, even during their times, with numerous Christian religious endowments. And last but not least, as they endlessly repeated—the very special divine grace was on their side.

[68] Narayana Rao, Shulman, Subrahmanyam, *The Symbols of Substance*, pp. 54–5.

[69] Vico, A. to Vitelleschi, M. (It.), Madurai, 3 December, 1617, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 252–3. He also added that 'the capital required to fund such income in India would not be more than 3000 scudi. Even 2000 would be enough if we added to that sum the little that we have which Father Alberto invested for us in certain estates when he was Provincial'.

[70] Vico, A. to Vitelleschi, M. (Port.), Madurai, 9 January, 1621, ARSI, Goa 18, ff. 44–5 and Vico, A. to Vitelleschi, M. (Port.), Madurai, 5 November, 1621, ARSI, Goa18, ff. 52–3.

Briefly, Nobili's encounters with the local military elite, mostly Telugu martial castes, were fraught with ambiguity, not only because such is necessarily the relationship between secular and religious experts, but also because Nobili deliberately muddled his origins and his goals. Hence, one can read in missionary letters about two types of encounters with the local warrior chieftains—direct or indirect persecutions and solemn receptions. The persecutions figure more prominently because they were more edifying, showing the Jesuits' march through the 'pagan' landscape as an ordeal, a descent into Hell in which they were tempted, imprisoned and tortured by the demonic and human agents. The solemn reception, on rare occasions, accorded to the Jesuits by the major nāyakas and by the Tirumalai Nāyaka, the ruler of Madurai himself, are of considerable interest from the perspective of ethno-history. The accounts of these highly ritualized face to face interactions reveal the cultural underpinnings of both the nāyaka kingship system and of the Jesuits' understanding of it. As much as the missionaries, for strategic reasons, coveted such encounters, in their letters, they were emplotted as ironic performances, made to impress the spectators.

The encounter between Nobili and Ramachandranaique (Rāmachandra Nāyaka) from Sendamangalam, a tributary to Tirumalai Nāyaka, was described by Vico in an otherwise rare ironic mode.[71] The irony, however, is not the result of a humourist or parodic impulse, but rather of an effort to create distance from the 'foreign' ceremonies in which, paradoxically, the Jesuits not only participated, but which they also partly created.

> The usual ceremonial on those occasions is as follows. The Brahman converts and some of the chief Christians surround the missionary with great respect. One carries his breviary, the other his parasol, a third person the tiger skin on which he will sit down, another holds in his hands an artfully wrought vessel which contains holy water, a fifth carries the scented water which will be sprinkled at the place of reception.

From the beginning, Vico signalled that this ceremonial reception obeys certain already established rules. We are told that the main lines of the scenario are always the same. What is not clear is whether

[71] Published in Bertrand, *La mission du Maduré*, vol. 2, p. 225. I was not able to find the exact original in the ARSI, but other letters describing the encounter are quite similar. For example, in Vico, A. to Mascarenhas, N. (Port.), 15 Dec. 1624 (ARSI, Goa, 48, ff. 217–27) the Nāyaka of Sendamangalam washed Nobili's feet and gave him 'all courtesies that they are accustomed to do to their teachers and spiritual fathers'.

the ceremonial code is used in the reception of all gurus, even those belonging to different Hindu sects, or only of Jesuit missionaries.

Looking at the items presented as symbols of Nobili's office, excepting the breviary and holy water, the remaining objects—the tiger skin, the parasol and the vessel containing holy water—seem to belong to the repertory of the Hindu religious specialist. Even the breviary, in its Latin Roman edition or on the palm leaves, could have passed as just another sacred object signifying the particular theological orientation of a Hindu guru. As for the holy water, placed at the end of the narrative sequence, the effect of which is immediately felt as a purification of the space of action and of the space of the text (both smacking of 'paganism'), it forms together with the breviary a sort of enclosure of ambiguous, native implements.

When another Jesuit was received by the Nāyaka of Senji (Gingi) in 1599, he was given a similar ceremonial reception in which the purifying effect of the 'holy water' was attributed with a different meaning. It was equated with witchcraft:

> He (the Nāyaka of Gingi) commanded that we should be brought in to his Presence. Before us two hundred Brachmanes went in a ranke to sprinkle the house with Holy water, and to prevent Sorcerie against the King, which they use to do every day that the King first entereth into any house.[72]

Nobili's ingenious concept of adaptation made it possible, less then a decade later, for the demonic water used by the Brahmans, and playing an important part in the ceremony of courtly reception, to become Catholic holy water. In his typical palimpsest gesture, he was able to do the same thing as the Brahmans, and to define it as completely different.

From the static description of the party of Christians at the gate of the reception hall, which 'looks pagan' but means 'Christian', Vico refocused on the Hindu actors of the story. 'The procession proceeds solemnly through the first apartments towards the throne. However, no, there is no throne; Indian majesties rest in oriental fashion on a

[72] Pimenta, N. to Aquaviva, C., 2 December, 1599, quoted from Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India*, p. 316. The original—Pimenta, N. to Aquaviva, C. (Port.), Madurai, 2 December, 1599, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 3–6. Pimenta's report instantly acquired a wide circulation in Europe. It was translated and published in 1601 in Rome in Italian and in Mainz in Latin. The Portuguese edition was ready in 1602. French versions appeared in Lyons and Antwerp in 1601 and 1602 (see Bibliography). English translation in Purchas, S. (ed.), *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgimes*, reprinted, Glasgow, 1905, vol. 10, pp. 205–22.

simple platform raised two or three feet above the ground close to the wall. The procession enters the enchanted hall but, not this, the prince is not yet there.' The absence of the proper throne and, fittingly, the absence of the king, constitute a delegitimizing, political comment on the 'oriental' kingship, even if, according to a different interpretation, the Nāyaka extended to Nobili a special favour by letting him enter the reception hall before his own arrival.

In the ensuing pantomime, the use of body gestures was very important. The importance of the control over the body-Christian, as against the lack of it in the body-pagan, is clearly inscribed in the missionary letters. Multidirectional, confused, frenzied gesticulations and movements of the body were considered the domain of the demon from the early Christian period. The figure of Christ with his measured, never redundant movements in space and in history was the foremost model to emulate. It seems that in the occidental Middle Ages, during the 12th and 13th centuries, the new ideological system of control captivated the domain of gestures. Hugues de Saint-Victor, in *De eruditione novitiorum* (around 1130), produced the first theoretical text concerning the taming of the body-Christian, more precisely the body of a peasant, of a poor person, a woman, and a fool, which in his time still smacked of paganism, such as with practice of ritual possession and in folk theater and carnival[73].

The Jesuit missionaries in the new Madurai residence (*in novae Residentiae*), unlike their brethren in Goa or other Portuguese enclaves on the Malabar coast and, of course, unlike the Jesuits in the old Madurai residence (*in veteri Residentiae*), had no choice but to tolerate the difference in body expression.[74] All they could do was to modify it through imitation. From the standpoint of Nobili's theory of adaptation, a modification through imitation is not a paradox; it is temporary and the only possible strategy of conversion.[75] In the follow-up to

[73] Jacques Le Goff, *L'imaginaire médiéval*, Gallimard, Paris, 1985, p. 128. See also Schmitt, J.-Cl., 'Le geste, la cathedrale et le roi', in *L'Arc*, a special issue on George Duby, no. 72, 1978; Schmitt, J.-Cl., '"Gestus", "gesticulatio", Contribution to the Study of the Latin Medieval Vocabulary of the Gestures'. *La Lexicographie du latin médiéval et ses rapports avec les recherches actuelles sur la civilisation du Moyen Âge*, Paris, CNRS (1978), 1981.

[74] The distinction between new and old residences is definitely established in 1611, in the catalogue of the Malabar province. ARSI, Goa 29, f. 3.

[75] Adaptation is, in fact, an ongoing, two-way process. Christian gestures preceded Christian words in all catechetical situations enacted by the missionaries. See my

Vico's representation of Nobili's courtly encounter, the interplay of pagan and Christian gestures discloses this problematic missionary situation.

> Suddenly everyone seems to be seized by a kind of frenzy, alone the *sannyāsi* (Nobili) keeps calm in the midst of the general excitement. The Christians and the people of the palace rush about with great fuss, they present to the *sannyāsi* the holy water, with which he sprinkled the place where he was about to sit, with the scented water he sprayed the floor and the walls while three or four men got hold of the tiger skin with a great show of zeal and spread it on the ground. Finally, the *sannyāsi*, always grave and majestic, advanced to the improvised carpet, sat down and crossed his legs under him.

Nobili's cool, grave and majestic body posture and minimal use of space is opposed to the excess of movement by Christians and 'pagans' alike. Having underscored this opposition, Vico tried to under-emphasize those body gestures Nobili had assimilated from Tamil religious specialists, like sitting cross-legged. Moreover, the rest of the scene functions as a proof that adaptation to the local ceremonies is the most efficient way of gaining temporal favour from the kings. Rāmachandra Nāyaka entered and prostrated himself in front of Nobili's feet, but the performance of this, according to Vico, 'curious ceremonial' resulted ultimately in the granting of a site to build a church and a presbytery.

When representing Nobili's encounter with the Nāyaka of Chelam (Salem), Chellampettenaique (Sālapaṭṭi), who was higher in rank than Rāmachandra, Vico omitted the ceremonial of reception. The scene started with the Sālapaṭṭi Nāyaka receiving the missionary surrounded by a multitude of Brahmans and learned men 'who had been drawn by curiosity and the desire to know the doctrine preached by that foreigner'.[76] After having discussed the destiny of the soul with the Brahmans, Sālapaṭṭi publicly declared that Nobili's doctrine was better and took him by the hand, 'in the presence of the learned

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'Mission linguistique'. However, in India, there were no picture catechisms such as the one created for the Mexican converts attributed to Bernardino de Sahagún in the first part of the 16th century. A 17th-century copy of the original is in Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Mss. mex 76.

[76] Bertrand, *La mission du Maduré*, vol. 2, p. 227 (no original available). See similar reports: Vico, A. to Mascarenhas, N. (Port.), 15 December, 1624, ARSI, Goa 48, ff. 217–27 and Vico, A., *Relação das cousas da missão de Madurè* (Port.), Madurai, 15 December, 1624, ARSI, Goa 53, ff. 91–102.

assembly who looked on with stupefaction', in order to have a *tête-à-tête* talk in his private chambers. They talked 'without a witness', except, of course, those who read Vico's letters. When the time of the audience had elapsed,

> the king urged (Nobili) to ask anything he desired. Prince, said the Father, are you prepared to grant me any boon I may ask? Yes answered the king. Think it over well, for I intend asking of you a present of great price and you may repent having given your word, and I for making an indiscreet request. After a moment's reflection the king said with great earnestness: yes, I promise. Whatever be your desire, you have but to name it, and you will be satisfied at once. The Father then said with a smile, well, Prince, give me your friendship. The request and the manner in which it was made gave great pleasure to the king, who hastened to answer by tokens of great affection and assigned to the Father a house in the finest quarter of the town, which is that of the Brahmans.

In this passage, Vico emphasized Nobili's ability to turn the conversation with the Nāyaka of Salem to his material advantage. Nobili cunningly led his interlocutor into granting him appropriate housing, which for Nobili meant much more than a mere dwelling place, but recognition of his elevated status and acceptance of his Brahmanical holy impersonation. This he did through a theatrical device which consists in building up a situation which solicits a particular kind of solution, only to resolve it in an unexpected way involving nearly comic relief.

The plot of this little situation comedy reenacted by Vico (and later Bertrand in French) before the eyes of his European audience is borrowed from Hindu literature, in both Sanskrit and vernacular languages. Tamil literary tradition, with which he was well-acquainted, abounds in scenes in which the devotee—after having performed *tapas* and having, often spectacularly, mortified the body—is granted a boon by the divinity. The control over one's body (and interior desires, of course) leads to control over the gods (i.e. the world). In theory, what is particular to the moral economy of desire managed by the system of boons in Hinduism is that, in order to fulfill one's desire, one must rid oneself of them completely, that is, one must rid oneself of one's identity. The boons reverse the roles of the deity and the devotee and are, therefore, moments of highest tension in which the correct order would seem to be threatened. However, built into the system, as is clear from Vico's account, is a homeostatic principle according to which the devotee is bound to respect certain limits of

his own claims, that is, he is not allowed to demand what he does not deserve to get.

In the secular context, the boons signal the existence of an exchange of services between individuals occupying different positions in a given hierarchical frame. The boon is granted from the higher position to the lower while the lower must perform a particular service to the higher. In the case of Nobili, as we learn from Vico's letter, the missionary had cured the wife and the brother of the Nāyaka with the help of some golden lamelae, inscribed with a few words from the Gospel and tied to the arms of the patients. The tying of the sacred writing on the arms was one more of Nobili's ambiguous adaptationist gestures.

With the continuous presence and visibility of the Jesuits in the region, they managed to raise their social stakes and insert themselves into the local, political patronage system. Their ability to heal important individuals and compete and outbid other religious specialists was also coupled with the favourable political situation in South India during the rule of Tirumalai Nāyaka who on several occasions solicited the help of the Portuguese in order to subdue his local rivals.[77] In the changed political climate of the latter part of the 17th century, when Nobili's and Vico's project of adaptation started to slowly collapse due to external pressure from Portuguese colonial authorities and ecclesiastical superiors, and the internal strife between rival Telugu and Tamil poligars, the theatrical scenes in

[77] In 1644, Tirumalai Nāyaka received Nobili as 'ambassador' of the foreign Portuguese king, to whom he sent his own envoy, a certain Ramappa, in 1639, when he needed Portuguese soldiers in order to quell the rebellion of his tributary, the Maravar Sētupati. The only account of this meeting was written by Balthazar da Costa. It contains very few spectacular descriptions and was told in a plain informative mode. The absence of a fictionalized or dramatized report is probably due to the fact that the encounter was in itself more impersonal and ritualized than with the lesser chieftains, and was a political event rather than a missionary presentation. With Tirumalai Nāyaka, the usual Jesuit *Spiel* with Brahman sannyāsi or paṇṭāram impersonation was, under the circumstances, neither possible nor profitable since, in return for Portuguese military help, he had given permission to all those who so desired to convert to Christianity. Balthazar da Costa to the General (Vitelleschi), *Relatione del successo nella Missione de Madurè* ...(It.), Tiruchchirappalli (*Trigerapali*), from 8 July 1643 to 29 October, 1644, ARSI, Goa 53, ff.127–42; 143–61. See also Sathyanatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madura*, pp. 90–1. Danvers, F. C., *The Portuguese in India: Being a History of the Rise and Decline of their Eastern Empire*, (first published 1894), reprint, New Delhi, 1992, vol. 2, p. 268.

Jesuit letters became more dramatic, describing tortures, imprisonment and even martyrdom.[78]

Low-caste Apostolic Self-presentation—Jesuit Paṇṭāram

With lesser chieftains inhabiting relatively distant peripheries of the nāyaka (small) galactic polity, unable to promptly determine the precise religious and social identity of their 'foreign' interlocutors, Jesuit missionaries were often more successful in imposing their pariticular impersonations.[79] In 1655, when the Nāyaka of Satyamanglam met Bathazar da Costa, he asked him, whether 'I were the paṇṭāram who passed a few days ago through the village of Ammapaleam (Ammapāḷaiyam), and whether it were true, as the *yogis* maintained, that I taught that there is no God or religion'.[80] The Śaivite religious mendicants, the paṇṭārams, recruited from all castes except Brahmans and untouchables, commanded, as the Jesuits discovered, much larger and more diverse social configurations than did the sannyāsis.[81] In his continuos experiments with Tamil priestly roles, Nobili established, therefore, in the 1640s, a new kind of 'nativized' missionary model—the paṇṭāracāmi—which co-existed side by side with the earlier model of the Brahman sannyāsi. The institution of paṇṭāracāmi missionaries was necessary, the Jesuits insisted, in order to reach the lower echelons of the population to whom Brahman sannyāsis were neither able to preach nor to administer the sacraments, except furtively and at night. Only hinted at by Martins and da Costa, who were to be Nobili's successors in the mission is the fact that the conversions of the Brahmans slowly subsided. There was less and less demand for

[78] See Saulière, A., S.J., *The Red Sand: The Life and Work of St. João de Britto, S. J., Martyr of the Madura Mission*, Madurai, 1976. On poligars see, Rajayyan, K., *Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamilnadu*, Madras, 1974.

[79] See Tambiah, S., *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*, Cambridge, 1976, and Tambiah, S., 'The galactic Polity: Structure of Traditional Kingdoms in Southeast Asia', *Anthropology and the Climate of Opinion*, ed. Freed, M., Annals of the New York Academy of Science 293, New York, 1977.

[80] Costa, B. da to the General (Vitelleschi, M.), *Relatione del successo nella Missione de Madurè* ...(It.), *Trigerapali* (Tiruchchirappalli), from 8 July 1643 to 29 October, 1644, ARSI, Goa 53, ff.127–42; 143–61. On the map of Jesuit missions in Besse's *Mission du Maduré*, Ammapaleam figures as Alampaleam.

[81] *Tamil Lexicon*, vol. 4, p. 2450. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. 6, pp. 45–52.

the Jesuit Brahman sannyāsi compared to the busy schedule of the Jesuit paṇṭāracāmis.

Nevertheless, Martins, in his letter from Satyamangalam in 1651, pointed to the fact that the role of the Brahmans, and, henceforth, of the missionary Brahman sannyāsi model created by Nobili, had considerable success among the lower castes:

> A *Brahman sannyāsi* makes more converts among the high castes than three or four fathers who wear the other dress. Moreover, both the Paraiyars and the Shudras are more easily converted by the Fathers who have the status of a Brahman and who have Brahman disciples (though they are rare).[82]

In sociological and anthropological literature, grappling with a question of caste stratification, the social process that Martins hinted at in this brief remark became known as the concept of 'Sanskritization' introduced by M.N. Srinivas.[83] It is a strategy of status emulation which enables social groups clustered as a caste or subcastes to acquire a higher ritual status within the traditional hierarchical order. Such upward movement on the social scale is usually preceded by the acquisition of economic and political advantages. In order to promote one's claims to elevated status the aspirant caste, nevertheless, had to adopt the modes of behaviour and lifestyles of the locally highest castes. Srinivas, who described the functioning of this process, called it Sanskritization because, in his view, Brahmanical orthopraxy (rather than orthodoxy) provided the master template for social change in pre-modern India.[84]

Nobili was clearly caught up in the inextricable web of Brahmanical theological, cosmological and sociological lore. In an exemplary gesture of Sanskritization, he disconnected himself from Gonçalo Fernandes, who was already stigmatized in his frangui role, and

[82] Martins, E. to the General (Port.), Satyamangalam, 31 October, 1651, ARSI, Goa, 53, ff. 219–22.

[83] Srinivas, M.N., *Religion and the Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford, 1952.

[84] While the process itself was not radically questioned in sociological and anthropological literature, the term Sanskritization had been both challenged by and appended with other terms such as Westernization, Ksatriyaization, Desanskritizaion, Rajputization, etc, or supplanted by alternative conceptualization such as the Little and Great Tradition, etc. See Staal, F., 'Sanskrit and Sanskritization', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. XXII, no. 3, 1963; Marriott, M., 'Interactional and Attributional Theories of Caste Ranking', *Man in India*, vol. XXXIX, no. 2, 1959; Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus*, Singh, Y., *Image of Man: Ideology and Theory in Indian Sociology*, Delhi, 1983.

adopted Brahmanical clothing, eating habits and pollution observances. The problems he encountered in maintaining his new 'social face' came partly from the fact that he was not fully supported by the other missionaries. Nobili's 'impression management' was constantly menaced by 'indiscretions' coming out of the old Madurai residence. More importantly, however, was Nobili's misunderstanding, at least initially, of one fundamental feature of this local strategy of hierarchical jockeying. Status enhancement is not an individual strategy but always involves the whole social group. Its new ritual and social position takes at least a generation to seal. Therefore, marriage alliances play a crucial role in constituting and affirming 'improved' status. A religious order, such as Jesuits or any other monogendered group, lacked this indispensable social handle to climb upwards.

Nevertheless, parallel to Sanskritization, there existed another strategy for upward movement, though neither on the social nor on the ritual scale. An individual, a man and rarely a woman, who wants to escape a stigmatized ethnic identity can opt out of the social structure and follow a model of renouncer.[85] Renunciation enables an individual to shake off the bonds attaching him/her to the social fabric, annulling his/her economic, social and ritual status. This new condition, however, far from being an unstructured limbo, insofar as it does not menace the hierarchical structure, enjoys social (and Brahmanical) sanction by virtue of belonging to the system of *varnāśramadharma*. Nobili, in fact, not only adopted indigenous strategies for status enhancement in order to impose his 'spiritual' sovereignty, but also as a vehicle for attracting all those groups who were ready to embark on the journey of social mobility.

Gradually, the Jesuits discovered that the local kingship system was closely connected with 'religious' or 'divine' sanction mediated by religious specialists, mostly Brahmans. In their prolific correspondence, the missionaries announce future conversion of this or that ruler who showed interest in Christianity. Ultimately, very few converted. Herencheti Naiche was Nobili's greatest disappointment. Other chieftains proved equally attached to their Brahman advisors.

[85] The relatively recent interest in women renouncers has produced a few anthropological studies. Carrin, M., *Enfants de la Déesse. Dévotion et prêtrise féminine au Bengale*, Paris, 1997, Teskey Denton, L. 'Varieties of Hindu Female Asceticism', Leslie, J. (ed), *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, London, 1991; Ojha, C. 'Condition féminine et renoncement au monde dans l'Hindouisme', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extême Orient*, 73, 1984.

One of the rare 'kings', Tirumangala Nāyaka, a dispossessed ruler of Sendamangalam, was baptized on Christmas of 1625 in Moramangalam, joined with eleven members of his family.[86] He, too, hesitated when his prospects of recovering the lost kingdom improved. It was only after his political situation became desperate that he turned to the Christian sannyāsi. Tirumangala Nāyaka, his three sons and his wife—he dismissed the second after conversion—took part in various theatrical scenes staged in Vico's letters. The missionary, in fact, allowed them to speak for themselves rather then having to explain in an orderly way their intentions, actions and motivations. By couching their biographemes in a theatrical mode, Vico was able to suppress and ignore facts about their everyday lives which were of a more non-Christian flavour.[87]

In general, the knowledge which the Jesuit missionaries collected, constructed, tailored and generated for their European audience within the limits of the theatrical mode is more interactive and heteroglottic than the one produced by the geo-ethnographic writing mode. In spite of its inherent ventriloquism, the theatrical mode echoes indigenous voices. The theatrical effect also unburdens the Jesuit *metteurs-en-scène* from the responsibility of producing fixed and orthodox definitions and descriptions. For example, if in the previous correspondence a person had been portrayed as nearly angelic, later he/she could easily be stripped of these qualities, because the indigenous behaviour, ideas and mentality which the Jesuits reconfigured in the theatrical mode were not yet solidified into an anthropological framework (and, therefore, with less generalizing or 'scientific' pretensions).

Theatrical effects were, nevertheless, regularly applied not only in epistolary narratives, but in all types of missionary genres. The treatises composed by Nobili and other Jesuits in the Madurai mission at the same time repose, for example, on a different epistemological basis. No 'native' voices were allowed to obstruct a smooth interpretation except in the form of quotations from indigenous texts and eventual signatures of approval by the indigenous literati. Such fragments did not function as dialogues with the missionaries but as proofs, arguments or mirrors of firmly entrenched Jesuit positions.

[86] Vico, A. to the Provincial, (Lat.), 30 November, 1626, ARSI, Goa 48, ff. 242–4.

[87] Biographeme in Roland Bathes's sense of biographical fragment rather than full biography.

The theatrical narratives reflected, of course, the Jesuit 'theatrical' mode of acting in the world. The Jesuit enterprise in Madurai was a sacred theatre performed as much for the Tamils as for the Europeans. As if on a revolving stage, the Jesuit had to deal with theatrical illusion at all times and diffuse potential hostilities coming from both front- and back-stage audiences. There can be, therefore, no doubt that missionary life provoked, attracted and created dramas. Public prominence, greatly coveted by the Jesuits particularly during the heyday of the Counter-Reformation, also uniquely exposed them to confrontations, critiques and persecutions. Individual desires and projections of martyrdom *ad majorem dei gloriam* very often became self-fulfilled prophesies, and in that sense appeared 'real' even before they actually happened. In addition, if martyrdom ultimately did not take place, the portents, omens, signs of their imminence still lived on in the missionary letters. Like the *trompe-l'oeil* cupola of the church of St. Ignatius in Rome, Jesuit letters often worked as substitutions for real missionary encounters. Such a synecdochic relation to reality neatly fits the general directives guiding Jesuit economy of spatial mobility. Each missionary stood for the Society as *pars pro toto*. A Croat missionary in Goa, Nikola Ratkaj, in his letters to his family and his friends in the Jesuit college in Zagreb, wrote about the mission in Tibet to which he was destined but never reached, as if he had already been there.[88]

Finale

The thin line between the real and appearance, between the event and the spectacle have often been transgressed, or rather confounded, in missionary actions and representations. Theatrical effects used in their correspondence to underline the divinely inspired, significant missionary actions, slipped in the long run from their primary, ethic domain into the aesthetic. Dis/authorized and cut from their original epistles, many theatrical fragments became 'free-floating', edifying material for young Jesuit novices and the large European audience, and found its natural expression in theatre.[89] By the end of the 16th and especially during the 17th century, Jesuit colleges staged theatre

[88] See Križman, M., 'Pisma isusovca Nikole Ratkaja, misionara u Indiji u prvoj polovici 17. st.; Filološki pristup', in *Hrvatske Indije*, *The Bridge*, Zagreb 1990.

[89] The similarity with the spectacularization of certain fragments of the Epistles from the New Testament, often performed on Jesuit school stages, is not accidental.

performances for lay audiences all over Catholic Europe. The scenes of martyrdom of the early Japanese Christians were shown to the Viennese audience in 1614 and in Namur in 1616; St Francis Xavier's conversion of the Paravas on the Fishery coast of South India was performed in Malines in 1624 and in Landsberg in 1676; many more followed. What started as an event, spatially and temporally singular, turned into repeatable spectacles and, by closing the circle—event (action)—text (letter)—event (theatre performance)—, reality became appearance in order to become reality.

Utopian Prefiguration and Saintly Signs: The Self-expressive Mode

The fact that, in the Jesuit missionary texts from Madurai, the self-expressive mode of writing were comparatively infrequent might appear surprising given that the genre of spiritual and confessional texts was all but lacking in Europe. The Jesuits themselves were masters of such literature.[1] Yet, from the distant missions, spiritual dreams and fantasies, exorcising confessions and similar inner outpourings were controlled and harnessed in order to give space to urgent pragmatic messages, ethnographic descriptions and dramatized representations. The *vita contemplativa*, which is the site of self-expressive literary production, although invoked as an ideal, found itself in collision with the daily experience of the *vita activa*. Instead of recollecting and expurgating his inner thoughts, a Jesuit missionary was overwhelmed with apostolic duties such as the administration of sacraments, catechizing, providing medical help, preaching, etc.

Individual self-expressive gestures, practiced by those Jesuits who lived within the boundaries of Catholic Europe, developed in a series of spiritual experiments.[2] These were punctuated with treacherous undercurrents prone to mislead into madness, excommunication, as well as sainthood. In de Certeau's words—it was a search for God which was always a journey toward the Other.[3] In the distant, newly appropriated worlds, the Jesuits had to face the alterity in oneself just like their European coreligionists, but the problem that overwhelmed

[1] Certeau, M. de., *La fable mystique*, Paris, 1982.

[2] See for example, Surin, J.-J., S.J, *Triomphe de l'amour divin sur les puissances de l'Enfer et Science expérimentale des choses de l'autre vie, 1653–1660*, ed. Certeau, Michel de, Paris, 1990.

[3] Giard, L, 'Epilogue: Michel de Certeau's Heterology and the New World', *Representations*, Winter, no. 33, 1991.

them in a more immediate and vitally urgent way was the alterity of the societies that they encountered. What emerged as spiritual literature in Europe turned into utopianism in the missions.[4] The source is the same, a space of mourning, emptied of the divine voice. As such, this space is open for social experimentation and self-fashioning. While spiritual literature revealed Jesuit private self, the utopian fragments produced by the missionaries configured the position of a very Jesuit public selfhood, grounded in social know-how and well equipped to assume leadership within the indigenous communities of new converts.

The self-expressive mode of writing consists of two mutually entwined, but inversely proportional registers. One which refers back, in a centripetal pull, to the writing subject and the other centrifugal, which engendered utopian simulacra through a propelling movement towards exterior. In both, however, the text produced functions as *witness of the other*.[5] It is in written accounts, in particular, connected closely and indivisible from the 'real' missionary action, that the strands of some arbitrary, provoked or imagined events began to metamorphose into utopian designs—turning losses into victories, hardships into divine ordeal, converts won over with difficulty into angelic figures, and the writers themselves into saintly candidates.

At times hesitant, aggressive or unconscious, missionary 'utopianism' developed piecemeal as a thaumaturgic, protective shield from the chaos of the lived experience, and as a patchwork of encroachments on the existing situation in which each individual Jesuit life served as an investment. The configuration of utopian mentality is instantly visible in the missionary's 'natural' impulse to describe, upon arrival at the chosen mission, the perilous passage, maritime and overland, from the known to the unknown world.[6] A sense of divorce from the given system (European) was articulated in order to restore it where it was lacking (in *'paganism'*), giving futuristic, reconstructional incentives to each mission and each missionary.

[4] Utopia is a written genre and more often than not a literary genre. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) coined the term. See Ricoeur, P., *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (ed. George H. Taylor), New York, 1986, p. 269.

[5] Certeau, M. de., 'Montaigne's "Of Cannibals"', *Heterologies, Discourse on the Other*, Minneapolis, 1986.

[6] See Marin's statement on More's *Utopia* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in Marin, L., *Des pouvoirs de l'image*, Paris, 1993, p. 171.

This was all the more so, as the urgency of Catholic 'restoration' loomed over the home front, as well as over alien frontiers. The reality-transcending elements were, therefore, the tools for interpreting and constructing reality itself.

Roberto Nobili left an impressive utopian edifice, the ('new') Madurai mission, built by his own words and deeds and by those of his followers. Although the authorship is therefore dispersed, initial rhetorical gestures were Nobili's, and they are the focus of this chapter—the use of an antithetical and reversal matrix for maintaining narrative coherence; the promotion of self-sanctification; and, most importantly, the 'nativization' of saintly behaviour.[7] These belong, in fact, to the arsenal of missionary strategies which gave comparable, though not identical, results when deployed in different contexts and geographical and cultural spaces. The first strategy comes from the inevitably agonistic morphology of utopian thinking which finds its own content in contrast to another. Hence, the missionary field branches out, not without 'irritating' overlaps, into 1) the saintly, luminous—*ite et inflammate omnia*, and 2) into the demonic—'the darkness of paganism'.[8] While the play of antithesis, a typical baroque figuring, worked out these oppositions on all levels of writing—lexical, syntactical, semantic—, the casting of sainthood wins over the satanic domain. One of the reasons is that the visibility of the demonic is inherently unstable, as is any representation of alterity. More importantly, however, the saintly prefiguration was an indispensable, founding attitude for any exemplary mission, and the one in Madurai was willed as such.

A Jesuit missionary had, of course, to find his way out of the forest of saintly signs and into the construction of a structured Christian community. Only through the designation of a saint-like leader was such a foundational move possible. Each Jesuit missionary had to 'know' how and when to decipher such otherworldly signs on his own body by closely following the direction of divine illumination,

[7] The play of antithesis in a baroque economy of signification entails, according to Genette, a symmetry between overstressed opposites. Genette, G., *Figures I*, Paris, 1966, pp. 29–38. In a similar structuralist vein Lotman defined antithesis as that which marks the opposing in a similar, i.e. correlative pair. Lotman, Y., *Analysis of the Poetic Text* (transl.), Ann Arbor, 1976.

[8] *Ite et inflammate omnia* which can often be seen on Jesuit inscriptions and coat-of-arms was imagined and represented as one of the war cries of the Jesuits (*the soldiers of Christ*). It belongs, however, to the aesthetic order rather than to practice.

spiralling from the top-down and backwards, each curve containing a miraculous or demonic de/con/version. Nobili's saintly self-fashioning was, therefore, a necessary cause, proof and effect of divine intervention. It also provides a mimetic model for indigenous saintly prefiguration.

The third stage in the Jesuit conversion process, in which Tamil converts began to use the Christian saintly model for their own individual and social purposes, is the site of a utopian return or regress into 'reality' or 'ideology'.[9] Complex social, cultural and familial negotiations between Nobili's new Christians and the European secular and church establishment, on the one hand, and South Indian, segmentary political and religious structures, on the other, disclose a variety of indigenous adaptive dispositions and manipulating powers. Moreover, various elements of the Tamil bhakti, tradition, such as certain expressions of religious fervor, often served as a middle ground for the acquisition and acceptance of Christian religious postulates and exigencies. Coupled with a possible enhancement of social and ritual status—flowing directly from the ability and credibility of the religious leader, the distributor of honours—, conversion to Catholicism in its 'adapted', Jesuit version, gained some, if meagre, ground in the mid-17th-century Tamil religious landscape.

Saintly Self-fashioning

Nobili dreamt about his utopian mission in the Collegio Romano, perhaps even before, when after having run away from his family in order to join the Society of Jesus, he made the decision to become a missionary and to choose the most difficult missions.[10] Enthusiastic letters written from Asia by Francis Xavier and other Jesuits seem to have caught his imagination during the novitiate in Naples and, at the same time, helped to channel his spiritual preoccupation into the

[9] According to Mannheim utopias are promoted by rising groups and ideologies are defended by ruling groups. Mannheim, Karl, *Ideology and Utopia* (transl.), New York, 1936.

[10] See Proenza, A. de, *Annua da Missão de Madure, 1655, 1656*, to Nikel, G. (the General), 20 October, 1656, ARSI, Goa 53, ff. 239–58. Nobili's 'application' letter to be sent to the missions is not extant, but there is a letter of recommendation by Fabio de Fabiis (It.), ARSI, Fondo Gesuitico, Indipetae, 1601, 140/2. De Fabiis recommended six people 'who want to go to the Indies' from the college in Naples. 'Robertus Nobilibus Romanus, anos 24 in Soc. 4' is described as possessing a 'mature spirit'.

missionary vocation.[11] The gap between an ideal Christian community and his experience of aristocratic and ecclesiastical Rome made Nobili yearn for a 'sweet exile', a desert, a retreat, and a place of martyrdom. Only on an 'unoccupied' site could one start building a pure Christian community all over again. The 'empty' site, a space of rupture between *nostrum* and *alienum*, was a source of Jesuit spirituality in the 17th century.[12] Nobili made of this source a space for his saintly self-discovery and utopian rewriting. Consequently, until the suppression of the Society of Jesus at the end of the 18th century, the Jesuits considered the Madurai mission as a very special and almost otherworldly enterprise compared to other missions in India. Nobili shared the desire for sainthood with most of the members of the Society of Jesus. What differentiated him from the others was that he felt elected. His ability to attract other Jesuits to participate in his personal saintly project was remarkable, and had he died a martyr's death, he would have been eligible for canonization. Half a century later, João de Britto, a paṇṭāracāmi missionary in Ramnad (Ramnathapuram), was martyred and, consequently, (relatively) easily qualified for canonization.[13]

As soon as Nobili joined Gonçalo Fernandes in the Madurai mission in 1606, he wrote about his first impressions, already suffused with motives of sainthood and utopia, to two of his female relatives in Rome.[14] As if acknowledging that his spiritual pose—ambiguously gendered because of its disregard to external bodily (sexual)

[11] See Schurmammer, G. S.I. and Wicki, I. S.I., *Epistolae S. Francisci Xaverii aliaque eius scripta*, Rome, 1996, 2 vols.

[12] Certeau, M. de, 'La réforme de l'intérieure au temps d'Aquaviva'.

[13] The sanctification of João de Britto, beheaded in 1693, had to be postponed for almost a century in spite of the positive opinion of the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued in 1740s. The reason for the delay was the Malabar and the Chinese Rites quarrel and the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773. João de Britto was beatified in 1852 and canonized in 1947. See Saulière, *The Red Sand*; Nevett, A., S.J., *John de Britto and his Times*, Anand, 1980. On contemporary anthropological research related to the cult of St John de Britto in Ramnathapuram, see Mosse, D., 'The Politics of Religious Synthesis: Roman Catholicism and Hindu Village Society in Tamil Nadu, India', in Stewart, Ch. and Shaw, R., *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, London, 1994.

[14] There were only four women to whom Nobili wrote. Besides Caterina Nobili Sforza and her daughter Constanza Sforza Boncompagni, he wrote to his mother Clarice Ceoli and his sister Ludovica.

difference and its physical 'weakness'—should be more promptly approved by women. Hinting at his divine disposition, he situated himself in a series of impotencies. As a pilgrim among barbarians who like St Paul, preached Christ crucified, a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles,[15] he was also considered to be a madman and surrounded by enemies.[16] In Cochin, before arriving in Madurai, he fell ill and almost died of fever, and due to 'the climate and bad food' continued to feel ill after reaching his destination.[17] The chain of weaknesses was somewhat broken with Nobili's quick progress in learning Tamil.[18] On the other hand, learning Tamil (and recovering his health and *vice versa)* weakened his Italian. In December 1606, Nobili wrote to his cousin Constanza not to be surprised at his 'words which are half Italian' because he was forgetting his mother tongue after having learned other languages, first Portuguese and then Tamil.[19] Nobili's apology for his loss of Italian became something like a topos in his Italian letters. However, although they do swarm with Portuguese words, the syntax was untouched.

His claim to be forgetting Italian would appear to have been more then a simple statement of fact. It was a part of Nobili's both apostolic and epistolary strategies. The oblivion of the mother tongue was a 'sacrifice', in the ritual sense of the word, in which Nobili renounced his former identity for the sake of acquiring a missionary body, which was a step towards his saintly goals. It represented an initial self-emptying before becoming totally other to himself, first as a 'Portuguese' missionary, as his mandate in India had to be approved by the Portuguese king, and then as a Brahman sannyāsi missionary. In Nobili's mind Italian was probably also associated with his Roman past and the general, 'corrupted' Roman space in which he saw very few chances of acquiring sainthood. The Jesuit concept of

[15] Nobili, R. to Sforza Boncompagni, C., Madurai, 6 December, 1606, Fondo Boncompagni, E6, Biblioteca Vaticana, in J. Wicki, AHSI, 37, 1968. Nobili often paraphrased St Paul's letter to Corinthians, I, 23. 'But we preach Christ crucified, unto Jews a stumblingblock, and unto Gentiles foolishness'.

[16] Nobili, R. to Nobili Sforza, C., Madurai, 7 December, 1606, Fondo Boncompagni E6, Biblioteca Vaticana, AHSI, 37, 1968.

[17] Nobili, R. to Sforza Boncompagni, C., Madurai, 3 December, 1607, Fondo Boncompagni E6, Biblioteca Vaticana, in J. Wicki, AHSI, 37, 1968.

[18] He added in the same letter that in six months he learnt Tamil well enough to hear confessions and to preach without interpreter.

[19] Nobili, R. to Sforza Boncompagni, C., Madurai, 6 December, 1606, Fondo Boncompagni, E6, Biblioteca Vaticana, in J. Wicki, AHSI, 37, 1968.

sanctification had a very strong cosmopolitan component and just like a perfect Jesuit, a would-be saint, at least in theory, had to forsake his regional, national and family ties, or at least subordinate them to the highest divine or Jesuit (terrestrial) authority. The loss of his mother tongue, therefore, was one of the requirements for saintly metamorphosis, but it was also considered as a commodity which could be exchanged for another, a pay-off. Nobili obviously thought that there were limits to memory, as to everything else, and when he acquired Portuguese and Tamil, he had to give up something. Since Latin was too important as his professional language, Italian had to be sacrificed.

The pull that makes the would-be saint reach the rock-bottom of abasement and self-humbling in this world illustrated only one side of Nobili's saintly gestures and movements. His celestial inspiration, invisible to the '*occhi di carne*' (the eyes of the flesh), though made visible by his text, provided the key to the correct reading of earthly signs. Hence Nobili claimed that

> our life may at first sight appear miserable, as it truly is if we look at it with the eyes of the flesh, yet I would not exchange it for any treasure in Europe because the satisfaction we experience amidst these labours undertaken for the love of God is greater than any other. Blessed be Jesus Christ and I pray your Excellency to help me in blessing and thanking Him for this ample grace.[20]

The site of misery, exile and danger was converted into a heavenly garden on earth in this typical reversal-passage. In his family letters, Nobili amply used this rhetorical technique geared to persuade his relatives that his choice to renounce his aristocratic title and become a missionary, bitterly opposed by them at the time, was right and divinely sanctioned.

The reversal of earthly and divine spheres was not merely a rhetorical figure for Nobili. The paradox of saintly self-fashioning was that saints had to decipher on their terrestrial bodies the signs of the special divine grace bestowed on them. These signs were present, just as they were in the Eucharistic miracle, as a puncturing and wounding of visibility itself. Therefore, the sites/sights such as wounds, sufferings, silences, amputations, exiles and missions contained the highest concentration of divine signs. In the Madurai mission, Nobili saw them everywhere and, translated into his apostolic vocabulary, these

[20] Ibid.

signs were called 'celestial help'. It saved him on his dangerous sea voyage from Europe, and more specifically at the time of the shipwreck near Mozambique. It made him recover from near fatal illness in Cochin, and finally, 'the celestial help can be marvelously seen' in his conversion efforts.[21]

This leads us to another example of reversed earthly and celestial goals. While Nobili counted on divine help for his survival and for the cultivation of the young Christian 'vineyard' in Madurai, he also needed to suffer and (hopefully) die as a martyr for his ultimate saintly ascension. He had to defect from his body in order to return as a saintly memory.

> With his help I renounce and confess that I do not want any consolation and rest in this world; instead of that (I want) the good Jesus to make me share at least a tiny part of his holy cross, because then I shall begin to be his true disciple and I will have some hope of sharing his glory after having been made worthy to suffer for his sake.[22]

Nobili died an octogenarian and his worst fears of 'dying in bed'[23] came true. Nevertheless, in his lifetime he experienced persecutions incited against him personally and against his Christians by the local Telugu military officials, temple Brahmans and other adversaries, which almost amounted to martyrdom.

While Nobili's self-portrait emphasized his impotent and frail human side, the manner in which he represented his enemies undermined and cancelled out the initial effect of this weakness. His Indian adversaries were not only passive, 'blind' and 'perverse idolaters'[24], but also active 'priests and slaves of the demon'.[25] The Madurai mission itself was an enclave of holy light enclosed by demonic forces. When in 1608, the *Caniachi* (*kāṇiyāṭci*) from the Ciocanada

[21] Nobili, R. to Sforza Boncompagni, C., Madurai, 3 Dec. 1607, Fondo Boncompagni E6, Biblioteca Vaticana; in AHSI, 37, 1968. At this point in the letter he refused to write about 'the very fine things (concerning his converts) in which the celestial help could be marvelously seen because of lack of time and poor health'.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Nobili R. to Nobili, Pier Francesco (father or brother), Madurai, 17 October, 1609, Archivio della P. Università Gregoriana, cod. Misc. 212, publ. in AHSI, 39, Fasc. 75, 1969. Nobili's open deprecation for 'death in bed' might have served him to reassure his father, to whom the letter was probably addressed, that he had not renounced some of his aristocratic-military values.

[24] Nobili, R. to Nobili Sforza, C., Madurai, 7 December, 1606, Fondo Boncompagni E6, Biblioteca Vaticana, AHSI, 37, 1968.

[25] Nobili, R. to Nobili, P.F. (father or brother), Madurai, 17 October, 1609, Archivio della P. Università Gregoriana, cod. Misc. 212, publ. in AHSI, 39, Fasc. 75, 1969.

(Cokkanātan)[26] temple accused Nobili of causing the drought, the missioanry was persuaded that the devil himself was behind these slanders.[27] In an endless procession of sick, possessed and mentally disturbed people who came to the mission after having tried other local healers and religious specialists, Nobili saw one more proof that the forces he was fighting were not of this world.

When some important person, such as a Brahman or a military chieftain, was converted or showed interest in the 'new' religion and their preachers, Nobili saw it as a 'blow to the demon'.[28] Therefore, conversion for him was a reconquista of souls locked out of Christianity by the devil. In his early letters, that is, before the beginning of the quarrel with his fellow missionary in the Madurai mission, Gonçalo Fernandes (1610), Nobili very often situated himself as directly facing these demonic forces. 'I am in good health, God be thanked, though living amidst persecutions and labours made for me by these ministers of the demon who cannot bear that the light of the Holy Gospel should spread in this kingdom'.[29] In this passage, he also implied that, before his arrival at the mission, the effects of the apostolic endeavours of Gonçalo Fernandes were practically non-existent.

Therefore, Nobili saw himself, in spite of Fernandes's physical presence in the mission, as the first real Apostle 'among the Gentiles'. 'When I arrived in this city', he wrote to Fabio de Fabiis, 'I found that the demon had so well closed the doors against the Holy Gospel that, though we had had in this town a residence for the last fifteen years, nothing could be done, in spite of the virtue and great sanctity of the father who resided there. Our Lord then began to open these doors (...)'[30] It was of course, Nobili who stood at the door. The metaphors of penetration as well as the light/darkness antithesis were standard items in the demonological, baroque vocabulary. The opening of another space, or the space of the other, was in

[26] Cokkanātan or Cokkalingam is the god worshipped in the principal temple in Madurai.

[27] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., 31 December, 1608, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, 17–75 (f.32).

[28] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C., Madurai, 25 October, 1609 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 18–25.

[29] Nobili, R. to Nobili, P. F. (father or brother), Madurai 17 October, 1609, Archivio della P. Università Gregoriana, cod. Misc. 212, in AHSI, 39, Fasc. 75, 1969.

[30] Nobili, R. to Fabiis, F. de, 8 October. 1609 (It.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 13–14 (St Paul, 1 Cor. 16:9).

itself an endeavour shot through with ambiguities. Nobili knew well that the demon was a trickster[31] who could speak in many different voices. He had seen his converts tempted and tortured by the unholy. From 1610, when Fernandes denounced him, Nobili became increasingly convinced that the demon tricked some of his fellow missionaries into disagreeing with his adaptationist conversion methods.

> There is a great fear, lest the door of conversions so far closed by the demon, and recently opened by God's mercy, be again closed on account of my sins, by our own Fathers. Such is the cunning of the enemy of mankind, in upsetting ~~that~~ work, that what he failed to achieve by war, he is about to achieve through a member of our household.[32]

'Paganism', which in the 17th century signified a demonic, corrupting force, rather then a 'different' religion, was considered as capable of affecting, if one were to be longer in contact with it, the mind of the Christians. Consequently, Nobili saw Fernandes and his supporters as falling into the possession of the demon when they denounced him to his superiors in Goa and Rome. Nobili was, of course, careful enough not to directly and overtly accuse his Jesuit opponents of demonic conspiracy. However, in 1619, when the last letters were written by both sides in the dispute to the ecclesiastical authorities in Rome and Portugal before the final decision of the Pope regarding the adaptationist method of conversion, Nobili wrote to his brother clearly connecting his European adversaries with satanic influence. 'A jealous demon (*invidus daemon*) tried to delay, by means which were the least expected, a work the beginning of which was full of promises. He arms against me those very soldiers (*milites armat*) who were particularly bound to defend my cause.'[33] Besides the unearthly powers operating against Nobili, he also hinted at another rather human quality which posed a problem to his apostolic efforts. Other Jesuits, in particular Portuguese, were jealous of the 'divine grace' bestowed on him by God. Francesco Ros, a Catalan Jesuit and the

[31] Nobili, R. to Aquàviva, C., Madurai, 25 October, 1609 (Port.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 18–25. 'I came rather to learn the language and return to the coast, than with the hope of opening the door to the Gospel. That door had been so tightly closed by the cunning of the demon that during the fifteen years we had residence here nothing could be done'.

[32] Nobili, R. to Aquaviva, C., Madurai, 19 October, 1610 (Lat.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 162–3.

[33] Nobili, R. to Mgr. Sforza Nobili, Goa, 20 February, 1619 (Lat.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 295–6.

Archbishop of Cranganore, was of the opinion that, had the Portuguese fathers started the adaptationist methods first, they would not have been opposed to it. Therefore, the divine grace was also a limited good which could not be shared. The problem was that it was hard to prove that one actually possessed it, as there was no consensus on how to decipher the signs of celestial sanctification.

Nobili's adversaries, in fact, saw anything but a special grace in Nobili's apostolic action. As part of a campaign against Nobili before the final, as it was hoped, papal decision, Dom Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa, the Primate of Goa, vehemently denounced Nobili's saintly pretensions.

> He makes himself a living idol, like those despisers of the world who are called *sannyāsis*, among whom P. Roberto places himself, in order to be adored and venerated by all; not like St Peter and St John whom the Jews wanted to adore, but like an idol, to which an homage of adoration is rendered, which is not due to it, but to God alone.[34]

The Archbishop more than hinted in this statement that Nobili's sainthood was not of a Christian, but rather of a pagan nature. Since paganism was equated with the demonic, Nobili was presented as the 'minister of the demon', while his adaptationist method of conversion became a product of the satanic illusion.

Accusing a person of being possessed by a demon was a common strategy for disallowing the opposing definition of reality. The demonic actually served as a boundary between the visible and invisible, between speech and silence, the natural and the surreal. The Jesuit missionary project was both the result and the proof of its proximity.

Models of Sainthood and Leadership—Catholic and Tamil

Nobili was caught up in a double process of saintly self-fashioning. The Archbishop of Goa, Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa, took advantage of this fact to destroy Nobili's pretenses to Christian sainthood by showing its incompatibility with the Indian model of sainthood which Nobili simultaneously developed and used in his apostolic mission. We can piece together Nobili's 'indigenous' saintly model from both hostile and friendly accounts. It was actually a series of models with

[34] Cristovão de Sá e Lisboa to Vitelleschi, Goa, 15 February, 1620, ARSI, Goa 18, ff. 7–8.

which Nobili experimented at different points of his career in the heart of Tamil country with the help of his Tamil informants.[35]

Nobili's first self-description as a Tamil Apostle can be found in one of his letters to Alberto Laerzio.[36] Even before, as early as 1607, Laerzio informed Aquaviva that, after the Consultation in Cochin, he authorized Nobili to proceed with his accommodation method. Yet, he refused a similar request by another Jesuit missionary, Padre Rubino, from the Chandragiri mission, which was not unlike Nobili's Madurai mission in that it was under the jurisdiction of the king of Vijayanagara.[37]. One reason why Laerzio refused his request was probably because he considered Nobili a better suited candidate for putting into practice, testing and defending the adaptationist method. In addition, two 'adaptationist' missions would have been too expensive to maintain. Moreover, Nobili's family connections in Rome qualified him for certain extravagances not permitted to others. Finally, the new method was considered as more apostolic than others, and whoever was to implement it successfully would also enhance his chances for sainthood, and Nobili already showed signs of election.

Besides these 'otherworldly' considerations, Nobili's leadership quality was also an important factor causing Laerzio to decide in his favour. The division between *effectus* and *affectus*, and between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, which informed Jesuit mentality in the early modern period, was not mutually contradictory, as it might seem at the first sight. In fact, they were two different strategies of individuation. A profusion of zeal in each of the domains elevated

[35] The first paṇṭāracāmi missionary was Balthasar da Costa, who came to Madurai mission in 1640. Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India*, pp. 220–1.

[36] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai (It.), 24 Dec., 1608 in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 20 Nov. 1609; ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and 17–75.

[37] In September of 1609, Rubino wrote to Aquaviva: 'It cannot be imagined how great is the aversion and how intense the repulsion we inspire in the Indians, simply by the fact of our being the priests of the Portuguese. From the time this Mission was founded till now, only fifteen have been made Christians, and they are the dregs of society. Their lives are so scandalous, that I have resolved not to baptize any other, unless he bears marks of a special vocation from God. Hence I have repeatedly entreated Fr. Laerzio, the Provincial, to be allowed to go away to some other place, where I shall be unknown and dress, eat and conduct myself in political things as an Indian *(vestire, mangiare, o nelle cose politiche trattare come loro)*'. Cited in Ferroli, *The Jesuits of Malabar*, vol. 1, p. 338.

the actors into leadership roles. However, narrowly focusing on only one—, such as retreating from everyday worldly actions—was looked on with suspicion by the Jesuit Curia, and at best, was branded as a sign of more or less holy madness. On the other hand, overstressing one's capacity to deal with mundane administration often provoked criticism about lack of spirituality. Therefore, a measured combination of the two was a ticket to success. Nobili's leadership qualities, a fusion of spiritual and earthly concerns, formed a solid base for successful missionary activity.

However, for his Tamil converts, neophytes and non-Christians, he had to exhibit such saintly signs and vocation as they considered appropriate. Here again, the question of leadership was crucial. When Nobili started experimenting with his self-presentation to the people in Madurai, he easily discovered that local models of saint-hood and leadership were comparable to the European ones. He singled out three types of leadership: kingly or military, Brahman and ascetic.[38] Nobili, for obvious reasons, had to renounce all similarities in his behaviour with the first type. However, because he held both kings and Brahmans as belonging to a single social category analogous to European aristocracy, he naturally felt that he 'belonged' to both of these local prestigious groups. He declared himself raja by birth and Brahman by profession, that is a spiritual teacher. The second category, which Nobili took for a perfect indigenous form through which, following Jesuit precepts, he could get 'inside', rearrange the interior and add a Christian substance to it, turned out to be problematic. Claiming membership in the Brahman community was much more difficult, if not impossible, than in kingly groups. Nobili was only partly aware that he was caught up in the local mechanisms of a status-raising process and that he was not alone in his efforts to enhance his ritual status.[39] What saved him from total failure was the third category, which enabled him to maintain his ambiguous raja/Brahman impersonation.

[38] See discussions about connections between these three social groups in Heesterman, J.C., 'Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer', *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, Chicago, 1985, pp. 26–45; Waghorne, 'From Robber Baron to Royal Servant of God? Gaining a Divine Body in South India'.

[39] Kshatriya or kingly varna was a category used, especially in South India, by the local groups who acquired economic and political power for enhancing their ritual status.

The role Nobili ultimately developed was a mixture of all three models, but his major outward presentation followed the model of an ascetic—sannyāsi. Nobili found this indigenous model to be closest in form and performance to that of the Jesuit missionary. In his usual manner of adaptationist procedure, Nobili picked and chose elements that suited his purpose and discarded the rest. According to Hindu classification, the term sannyāsi designates the fourth āśrama, or stages of life, in which a man leaves all his possessions in order to become a homeless wanderer until death. In an ideal Sanskritic and Brahmanical scheme of things, the fourth stage is a purificatory one in preparation for a fusion with the Brahman, the ultimate world soul. The concept of 'world-renouncer' such as the sannyāsi helped Nobili to construct his indigenous performative model. A few centuries later, in a different context, a body of social theory initiated by the French sociologist Louis Dumont, would also privilege it in *Homo hierarchicus*. Not unlike Nobili, Dumont understood Indian society as a highly hierarchical system in which any effort towards individuation is thwarted by the structure. The only way out of the hierarchy would be, according to this theory, to become a 'world-renouncer'.

Both Dumont and Nobili can be criticized for having espoused a Brahmanical view of Indian society and mistaken normative ideas for effective social organization. However, while Dumont was engaged in sociological depiction of Hindu culture, Nobili was more than a participant observer. He acted, or rather mimed, Hindu culture in order to transform it. Therefore, for Nobili, sannyāsi was a dynamic, operative category which he adapted to that of a Christian Apostle. The orthodox Hindu *āśramadharma* prescribed that the fourth, renouncing stage is obtained only after the first three stages: *brahmacarya*, *grhastya* and *vānaprasthya* [40]. It seems that the practice of omitting the two intermediate phases and becoming a sannyāsi was acceptable, although not recommended. Śankara (8–9th century), the founder of the Advaita Vedānta school of philosophy, is said to have chosen a *sannyāsa* state in his youth.[41]

When Nobili depicted the sannyāsi model to his European audience, he imposed his own syncretistic definitions based on Sanskrit

[40] An unmarried student; a married householder; a forest dweller, with wife if not widowed.

[41] Vivekananda is another example.

texts, Tamil classical and folk poetry and his own adaptive performance of the role. In the Sanskrit glossary called *Nighantu*, he found that the '*sannyāsi* is one who makes perfect abnegation and renunciation of all things'.[42] Quotations from Tamil poems conveyed the same ideal state of a renouncer who was free of the three desires, *poṉṉācai* (for gold), *peṉṉācai* (or women) and *maṉṉācai* (for land). It invoked the assumption of great purity and a refusal to be involved in the worldly structure.

However, when Nobili acted the role of sannyāsi, we can see a whole new dimension of this indigenous, Tamil renunciatory role model—the leadership propensity. In the South Indian context, leadership and renunciation have one important characteristic in common, they both produce and are in turn produced by autonomous individuals. This is not to claim that such a 'big-man'[43] is immune to caste affiliations and to the operating of local or regional hierarchies. On the contrary, a successful South Indian leader is himself a creator of social distinctions. Reminiscent of a medieval South Asian charismatic king, he is a divinely inspirited, altruistic being, distributing benefits and creating his own *mandala* social structure.[44] In a sense, a leader bestows on each of his subjects an additional social marker, which becomes a sign of recognition and liaison to a larger group of the 'big-man's' followers. This new group is and can be formed by cutting through caste and class affiliations.

Nobili's Christian community was one such group notwithstanding his high caste bias. He cultivated his personal charisma by making himself in, St Paul's word, 'everything to everybody', which meant preserving a kind of mystique about his origins and goals. In the manner of a Hindu divinity appearing in different incarnations and forms to test, help or trick his or her devotees, Nobili let rumours about him

[42] Nobili, *Responsio*, in Dahmen, p. 59.

[43] For an interesting discussion connecting individuality, leadership and renunciation in South India see Mines and Gourishankar, 'Leadership and Individuality in South Asia, p. 762; Mines, M., *Public Face, Private Voices: Community and Individuality in South India*, Berkeley, 1994.

[44] Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer.* The concept of mandala, or 'circles', comes from Kautiliya's political treatise *Ārthaśāstra* (4th c. BC). Each circle represented a political and geographical territory of a small king. The author of the *Ārthaśāstra* elabourated the relationships between these circles to the central mandala governed by the *vijigiśu* ('he who desires conquest').

circulate freely, without confirming or denying them. 'The rumour which spreads in Madurai and throughout this country regarding myself is that a new *Muni*, which means a hermit, master of a spiritual law, has arrived to destroy the idols and thus "*varii variis loquuntur*".[45] Only when he was forced to reveal who he was, he evasively declared that his place of origin was Rome and his family, Roman aristocracy. However, these geographical places were as distant and vague to his Tamil audience as Kailasa (Śiva's celestial abode) was to the Hindu devotees. It was a beyond-space and Nobili tried to keep it that way. He also tried to disconnect it from the Portuguese space, which was equally a-topical but, on the contrary, considered as highly polluting.

In his purification effort, Nobili encroached upon Fernandes's jurisdictional prerogatives. Fernandes functioned as a 'spiritual' leader of a Parava fishing community in Madurai and of all other Christians such as Portuguese merchants who happened to pass through the city.[46] However, in Nobili's larger scheme of a galactic Christian polity spreading throughout Madurai country and ultimately through the whole of India, Parava Christians would have formed a separate spiritual circle, or mandala, just as Brahmans would be contained in their own. However, this Tamil 'big-man' pattern of leadership which Nobili very easily adopted and adapted to his purpose of saintly self-fashioning, was effectively and continuously subverted by Fernandes who was an embarrassing witness of Nobili's back-stage preparations and strove to discredit Nobili in the eyes of both European and Tamil audiences.[47]

Fernandes did not succeed in expelling Nobili from the mission and stopping the adaptationist method not only because Nobili's disgrace would have directly or indirectly implicated a whole network of aristocratic Roman families, but also because Nobili, as opposed to Fernandes, had a vision of a perfect society, a utopian vision, which attracted, if not fully persuaded, both his Tamil and European audiences. Finally, the utopian vision and saint-fashioning mutually

[45] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 24 December, 1608, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 17–75(f. 31).

[46] About the Parava caste see Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. 6, pp. 140–55. Bayly, S. (née Kaufmann), 'A Christian Caste in Hindu Society: Religious Leadership and Social Conflict among the Paravas of Southern Tamilnadu', *Modern Asian Studies*, 15:2, 1981; Roche, P. A. *Fishermen of the Coromandel: A Social Study of the Paravas of the Coromandel*, New Delhi, 1984.

[47] Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 8 December, 1610, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 76–92.

reinforce each other, and were both much in fashin in the 1620s in Rome. While Nobili's case was decided by the Cardinals and the Pope, two Jesuit founding fathers Francis Xavier and Ignatius of Loyola, who in their turn, succeeded in imposing their own utopias were canonized by the Sacred Congregation of Rites. Outright condemnation of Nobili's methods would have seriously jeopardized preparations for the Jesuit's triumphant celebrations of 1622.[48]

The Madurai Mission as a Site of Utopian/Saintly Metamorphosis—Tamil Christian Biographies

For European readers, Nobili portrayed his 'new residence' as a divinely carved space afloat in the midst of 'paganism'. Just like spiritual literature which substituted text for the absent God-speech, the Madurai mission was also a textual substitution. Properly speaking, as utopia, it existed only in the text, which was at the same time a protective shield against the forces of disorder threatening to reverse individual intentions. Furthermore, one of the features of Nobili's Tamil utopia was that he located it in the past. For Nobili, the Tamils whom he encountered were analogous to the early Christians converted by the Apostles. Hence, the Madurai mission became something like a Primitive Church containing an almost angelic community resisting a powerful adversary created from the combination of demonic and human agencies. The most important presumption about this community was its purity of faith and devotion. Nobili and other missionaries wrote with admiration about the Christian piety of their Tamil converts. Even if at times they noticed that indigenous devotional practices took unusual forms, from obsessive carving of crosses on one's furniture and on everything in one's house[49], to excessive piety and self-mortification, the Jesuits found in the zeal of

[48] The Pope Gregory XV (1621–23) who canonized Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier was considered as a 'pure Jesuit product'. He was also responsible for the creation of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith (*de Propaganda Fide*) conceived as a papal response to the Portuguese flaccid *padroado*. The conversion of the world had to be rescued from the 'secular' hands of indifferent or impotent rulers. Nobili's indirect rejection of Portuguese ecclesiastical supremacy became his asset in the controversy. Venard, M., 'L'église catholique', in Mayeur, J.-M., Pietri, Ch., Vauchez, A., and Venard, M., *Histoire du Christianisme des origines à nos jours; Le temps des confessions (1530– 1620/30)*, Paris, vol. 8, 1992.

[49] Ibid., The carver was a Telugu 'noble' Visuvasan.

their new Christians proof of an additional grace required for the cultivation of the 'Lord's new vineyard'.

Although other metaphors were used by missionaries in South India to describe their new Indian converts, such as 'bitter mustard seeds' and 'callous branches', Nobili himself never used such derogatory terms when speaking about 'his' Christians. Even when his most devoted converts tried to chase him away from the mission and denounced him to his adversaries Fernandes and Buccerio as a seducer of local women, Nobili continued to nurture the image of his exemplary utopia in his correspondence. His personal investment was too great since, as a would-be saint, he needed a context, and the only context for Nobili was his Madurai mission. Therefore, in spite of 'small' problems such as hostile testimonies against him[50], Nobili portrayed the new residence in the Madurai mission as a privileged space of transparent relationships, moral behaviour and direct divine intervention. This last was the principle attribute of his utopia.

From Nobili's remarks about the society he knew in Rome, rare as they are in letters, we can see that he considered the life of the court and Roman Curia as un-saintly and corrupted.[51] Brought up in an aristocratic family, Nobili, as the first born son, was supposed to take over his father's title and engage in a military career. He rejected the title and escaped from his family to Naples until they agreed to his entrance in the Society of Jesus. His piety, fashioned at least in the beginning on the model of his saintly uncle who bore the same name, Roberto Nobili, the little Cardinal, was finally approved by his elders with much reluctance. It is precisely Nobili's spiritual side and his ambition which set him on a search of a perfect, transparent and spontaneous piety. What he saw in Madurai impressed him immensely. Actually, the devotion shown by the Tamils to their own gods astounded Nobili. In 1607, Nobili wrote to his uncle Francesco Sforza that the Tamils 'are so devout in their religion that I am ashamed when I see that I do not work with so much ardor in the

[50] The original depositions against Nobili are not preserved. All we have, and they seem to be quite revealing, are recantations of Carnayake Bramane and Bonifacio Xastri recorded in Portuguese in Cochin on 23 December, 1617. ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 261–5.

[51] In his letter to Nuno Mascarenhas, Nobili begged him to advise his brother Mgr Nobili 'that the useless expenses he makes to become a Cardinal would be better employed in helping this mission.' Nobili to Mascarenhas, Madurai, 15, December, 1624 (Port. mixed with Italian), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 314–15.

service of Our Lord as they do to offend Him by serving demons'.[52] Even more importantly, Nobili saw that the Tamils had direct access to the sacred. The possessions, miracles and the variety of devotional forms all gestured towards the proximity of the divine presence—and of the demonic presence, of course. Nobili took these presences as signs of his special calling. His mission was to teach the 'pagans' to discern the correct signs.

The ambivalent status of otherworldly intervention is equally present in the European spiritual literature. A vision, a dream which seemed divinely inspired, could turn into a nightmare of demonic temptation. The Catholic Church made an extraordinary effort to produce a catalogue of otherness, providing a vocabulary with which to describe, expurgate and control individual religious experiences. The best known alien religions, such as Islam and Judaism and increasingly Protestantism, were used as a backcloth for Catholic spirituality and cultural construction. In a situation in which a fragile membrane separated the Holy from Evil, the spillover and overlaps were a constant threat. Or, rather, it was precisely this opaque no-man's-land where the Catholic semiotic factory concocted the old signifiers for the new signified and vice versa, exorcising all alterity through etymologies and by building analogies over troubled differences.

In the same way, Nobili understood the indigenous religious practices in Madurai as some sort of unholy cacophony which, if harnessed by appropriate Christian vocabulary, would disclose the traces of the long lost Revelation in India. However, while Tamil 'paganism' had to be cleansed and purified, especially those indigenous concepts resembling Catholic ones such as the Trinity which, Nobili maintained, was always 'on their lips', the piety which he saw as innate to Tamil culture had to be redirected to the divine and preserved.[53] Moreover, it could teach European Christians something

[52] Nobili, R. to Sforza, F., 1 December, 1607, Madurai (It.), ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 7–12.

[53] Ibid. 'It is true that they go wrong when they come to explain how this happens, for they introduce a distinction in God according to His various operations and not according to the differences of persons, just as Sabellius said, that God as creator is Father, as redeemer Son and as sanctifier Holy Spirit, so our Indian theologians say that God, creating, preserving and punishing is triune and because he has only one nature, he is one'. The Trinity that Nobili saw in 'Indian theology' was the concept of Trimurti or the Triple Form of Brahma the creator, Viṣṇu the preserver and Śiva the destroyer. This concept seems to have been developed as early as Gupta times, but

they seemed to have forgotten and lost—direct communication with the divine. This was direct in a Jesuit sense, of course, which meant mediated through the celestial bodies of the founder, Ignatius Loyola, or future saints such as Xavier and, finally, Nobili himself. The frontispiece of Bartoli's *Dell'historia della Compagnia di Giesù* is again the closest pictorial representation of this percolation of the holy energy. The ray of light that passes through either the hands or the heart of the founder, who serves as a lens which deflects its light onto the Earth, is also meant to scorch it . The communication thus easily turns into distruction. (*'Ite et inflammate omnia* [go and inflame every/thing/body]').

Therefore becoming inflamed was a sign of the Holy touch and a proof of missionary 'enlightening' efficiency. 'It was a very great consolation for me to see', wrote Nobili to Laerzio in 1608, 'how God enlightens these people.'[54] What Nobili never ceased to hint at was that this fervent devotion of his Christians was a result of his special grace enabling him to deflect the holy ray in the right direction. Given the dangers which surrounded the new Christians in the Madurai mission, the power of this divine communication had to be even stronger than elsewhere. In the same letter to Laerzio, Nobili stressed this point. 'God helps this new Christian community, and knows at all times how to give his elect the strength, constancy and light which he formerly gave to his Saints'.

The Madurai mission was fashioned, therefore, as a space of saintly metamorphosis[55]. While he left his own saintly persona to the descriptions of his followers, providing, however, all the clues for their project, Nobili endeavoured instead to portray the saintly self-fashioning of his converts. Especially in the letters to Laerzio during his first four years in the mission, and before Gonçalo Fernandes

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achieved a prominent position in Hinduism only later. Klaus K. Klostermaier explains the development of Trimurti as later attempts to unify different sects, at least theoretically. See Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, p. 132–3.

[54] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 24 Dec. 1608, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, November, 20, 1709, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and ff. 17–75.

[55] When he mentioned Francisco Xavier in his letter to his cousin Constanza, he already called him 'B(eautus)', although he was not yet officially beatified. Xavier never ventured into Madurai, but came close enough for Nobili to make this subtle point about the Indian divine geography. Nobili to Constanza, Duchessa de Sora, Madurai 3 December, 1607, Biblioteca Vaticana, Fondo Boncompagni E6, published in AHSI, 37.

brought charges against him, Nobili outlined a master-story to accommodate indigenous saintly characters. His follower and missionary colleague, Antonio Vico, continued, with special zeal, this hagiographic writing about the 'native' Christians. Until the end of the mission in the eighteenth century, the missionaries in Madurai cultivated similar stories. These stories continued as a sequel to a kind of 'missionary soap opera', from letter to letter and from missionary to missionary. Some characters would be followed from the day of their conversion until their death, for ten and more years. Others disappeared without notice, leaving us to suspect apostasy or, perhaps, their Christian biography lacked exemplary qualities or deeds. In the first three decades of the new Madurai residence, Nobili and Vico followed at least a dozen indigenous Christian biographies. The impulse behind these life stories was to provide a utopian refuge for European imagination, and to re-territorialize the Madurai mission as a geographical space.

All the Christian stories in the Madurai mission were anchored around an excess of devotion in the manner of European martyrologies and hagiographies. However, as much as Nobili and Vico tried to interpret this source of piety as a deflection of the divine grace which trickled downwards, and through their own bodies into the bodies of the new Christians, they admitted on many occasions that the Tamils possessed, in the first place, their own source of pious fervor. In addition, from the latter part of the 16th century, Brahmans were increasingly accused by the European missionaries in India of tricking the masses into worshipping them rather than the 'Lord' and of inventing all kinds of 'falsehoods' while at the same time jealously hiding the 'Christian truth' bestowed on them in the past. This particular brand of the (Christian) 'golden age' theory of Indian history, in different guises and combined and welded with other mythologies of corrupting forces of time, such as the *Kaliyuga*, continued to haunt 'scientific' statements concerning India.[56]

What kind of religious ideas and practices did Nobili actually encounter in Madurai, and why did they seem to him analogous to a brand of early Christianity? He saw a form of Tamil bhakti Hinduism that developed in South India from the sixth century onwards. It

[56] The basic presupposition of classical Indian thought is the doctrine of the cosmic cycles of destruction and regeneration. *Kaliyuga* is the fourth and the last age of the world. It is also the most degenerate period having began around 5,000 years ago.

started as a militant Hindu movement against both Vedic orthodoxy and such heterodox religions as Buddhism and Jainism. Tradition has it that a number of Tamil poet-saints[57], twelve Vaisnava *Āḻvārs* and sixty-three Śaiva *Nāyaṉars*, shaped a new and revitalized Hindu ideology which culminated around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries during the rule of the imperial Cōḻas. Jesuits were intrigued by the bhakti, or personal devotion, to a single chosen god, either Viṣṇu or Śiva.[58] The stress on love (*patti*), grace (*aruḷ*), and moral order (*tarumam* [Skt.*dharma*]) appeared to the Jesuits to be concepts theologically close to Christianity.[59]

Therefore, Nobili found in Madurai, traditionally one of the major centres of Tamil learning, highly articulate local literati, heirs to a rich tradition of bhakti poetry and elabourate theologico-philosophical texts, both in Tamil and Sanskrit. He was especially attracted to the later vedantic elaboration of bhakti ideas[60], which he understood as Hindu 'sacred texts' providing explanations for the plethora of popular religious practices and even folk piety. Although some of these practices must have appeared different, to say the least, if not bizarre, to Nobili and even more so to his nemesis, Gonçalo Fernandes, Nobili considered their effects in fostering virtues like chastity, humility, devotion, etc., as commendable on the whole.

Briefly, Nobili was attracted to the way in which the sacred was daily recreated among the Tamils and the way it segmented society and made it cohere. The sacred is here understood in the Durkheimian sense of a circulation of social electricity between individuals and groups. Tamil sacred material is crystallized in a concept of a residue, a 'leaving', and as such invests the social structure with a few unsoluble contradictions. The relationship between God and the

[57] The word 'saint' is used here for want of a better term. No such word carrying a general meaning of a saint can be found in any Indian language. Each tradition, therefore, has its own vocabulary to designate its saintlike figures. See Cutler, Norman, *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion*, Indiana University Press, 1987, footnote 1, p.13. See also Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning*.

[58] Dhavamony, M., S.J., *Hindouisme et foi chrétienne*, Paris, 1993; Clooney, F.X., S.J. *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India*, New York, 1996.

[59] See Arokiasamy, S., S.J., *Dharma, Hindu and Christian, According to Roberto de Nobili; Analysis of its meaning and its use in Hinduism and Christianity*, Rome, 1986.

[60] Shulman, 'Idealism and Dissent in South Indian Hinduism', p. 12.

devotee illustrates this ambivalent status of the sacred. While the food offered to God is given back to the devotee as a *prasādam*, a holy remnant, the divine 'grace', which he can then, in a hierarchical order, redistribute to his relatives, the human leftovers are considered to be highly polluting, like all other bodily substances: blood, sperm, sweat, milk, hair, etc. According to Brahmanical ideas of social stratification, everything and everyone is ranked according to the amount of pollution intrinsically possessed or taken in. Brahmans stand at the very top with the minimal intake of polluting substances, and the untouchables are at the lower end with the maximum consumption of pollution.[61]

The hierarchy established on the purity–pollution axis appeared to Nobili as a sign of a well-ordered, 'classical', pre-Christian society. Again, Nobili thought the analogy with the Jews was appropriate. What he saw as specifically Tamil were apparent transgressions, such as devotion to God, which went somewhat beyond the purity/pollution structure. These were manifestations of bhakti practices ranging from possession to self-mortification and pious suicide. In a society in which the family, or rather clan structure was extremely strong, Nobili understood that excessive devotion, asceticism and possession were the only permissible expressions of individualism. Since Jesuit proselytism in the 17th century targeted individuals rather then corporate groups, Nobili directed his efforts towards channelling indigenous fervent expressions of piety into adoration of the Christian God, and in that way (or for that reason) sought to break the familial grip over individuals. A further step would then be to absorb the whole family into the Christian fold. The Jesuits perceived this redirecting of the flow of the sacred as a basic anti-demonological strategy. The fragments of exemplary biographies of Tamil neophytes

[61] McKim Marriot established a fourfold classification of transactional strategies belonging to different *jātis* (castes). 1) Minimal transactors such as goldsmiths (Vaishyas) are those who refrain from receiving and when they do, they use money, precious metal etc. 2) Maximal transactors are those who give and receive without problems. Kings (Kshatriyas) belong to that group. 3) Optimal transactors are Brahmans. They give but refrain from receiving. 4) Pessimal transactors receive far more than give. What they give might not be readily received by anyone. Untouchables belong to this group. 'Hindu Transactions: Diversity Without Dualism', in *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic behaviour*, ed. Bruce Kapferer, Philadelphia, Institute for the Study of Human Issues. See also Valentine, Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, Berkeley, 1984, pp.70–71.

can illustrate this passage from ecstatic 'paganism' to 'ecstatic' Christianity.

Amator's Christian Life Story

A biography of Amator can be pieced together from the missionary letters written between 1608 and 1620, when he died. His rebirth as a Christian was recorded on 21 December, 1608, the Feast of Saint Thomas, when Nobili baptized him and eight other (male) neophytes. The moment of baptism, *ñāṉasnāṉam* (the spiritual bath) marked the double origin of a Christian (and Jesuit) history/historiography in Madurai, and of an individual Tamil Christian biography. The will to create *ex nihilo*, to invent new origins through sudden religious rupture—geared to imprint durable effects on social action, while simultaneously documenting the whole process in the texts—was the foundation of the Jesuit utopian *praxis*. The effective proselytizing process started, nevertheless, only when the will to change, to convert, to forget and to learn began fuelling the actions and the imagination of the Jesuit neophytes. Tamil participation was crucial in Nobili's utopian experiments.

Amator, or *Iesupattan* in a Tamil version of his name, who would seem to have been called *Calistri* before his conversion, belonged to the Irangoli Vellala or Irkuli (Īrakolai Veḷḷāḷa) jātī[62], an assumed name among certain Vaṇṇāṉs (washermen).[63] He embraced Christianity with an extraordinary fervor. Initially Amator came on his own to talk to Nobili and inform himself about the new religion taught in Madurai. However, at the time of his baptism, his father and two sons also became Christians. Gnani, Amator's father, was hesitant at first and was not persuaded right away, but, as a very pious man he immediately went to talk to Nobili and to 'convince (him) and make (him) worship the cow'.[64] In addition, Gnani kept a house for sheltering pilgrims and supported a paṇṭāram who lived in it

[62] *Artigos que se hão de preguntar*, Madurai, September, 1610, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 39–50 (seconda via). According to this document, Amator belonged to the *'irancoli'* caste and was illiterate and thirty-five years old. 'Irkuli or Irangolli Vellālas, said to mean Vellālas who killed dampness, is a name assumed by some Vannāns.' Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. 2, p. 372.

[63] For a picturesque, ethnographic description of the Vaṇṇaṉs, see Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. 7, pp. 315–21.

[64] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 24 December, 1608, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and ff. 17–75 (f. 27).

permanently. When comparing this narrative of Amator's and Gnani's former 'pagan' incarnation with their later Christian lives, the first thing to become apparent is how little they had changed after their conversion to Christianity.

'His devotion', wrote Nobili about Amator, 'and strength of character is such that I cannot help wondering at it myself. He is so inflamed with the desire of suffering and dying for the faith of Christ that he speaks and thinks of nothing else.'[65] However, as Nobili admitted, before having became a Christian, he was an equally devout worshipper of idols. Nobili's adversaries, by reversing Nobili's proposition, therefore claimed that it was the missionary himself who was finally 'convinced' and turned into a 'pagan', rather than his converts having found Christ. In his Latin treatises, Nobili was compelled to refute such accusations through a series of complicated theological explanations. All a missionary had to do, according to Nobili, was to change the *finis* (an end, a goal) of a given social custom or cultural expression. That is what Nobili did, henceforth turning every 'pagan' custom into Christian practice.

For example, if devotion was directed toward the true God, it was good regardless of its form. As for historical precedent for such an action, among others, Nobili quoted Baronio's *Annales ecclesiastici* extensively.[66]

> We indeed find no gentile customs, which the Church did not transform into a practice consonant with faith, that all those who formerly worshipped the devil might, to his greater confusion, render honour to Christ. It is what, among others, Gregory the Thaumaturgus did, when he turned the gentile feasts into celebrations in honour of the martyrs, as told by Gregory of Nyssa in *Oratione de Iustit.* p. 19.[67]

This inclusive idea of Christianity reflecting the growing cultural and social differences within the already splintering Catholic community of Europe seems to be similar to what Trevor-Roper called an early international ecumenical 'movement' beginning in the early 17th century and collapsing with the Thirty-Years War in 1618.[68]

[65] Ibid.

[66] Cardinal Cesare Baronio (1538–1606), Oratorian, was the first early modern historian of the church who went back to original sources in his research. The *Annales ecclesiastici* were published between 1588 and 1607.

[67] Nobili, *Narratio*, in Rajamanickam, p. 49.

[68] Trevor-Roper, H., 'The Church of England and the Greek Church in the Time of Charles I', in *Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian*, ed. Derek Baker, Studies in Church History, vol. 15, Oxford, 1978.

As for Amator's and Gnani's paṇṭāram, they replaced him with Nobili, who used the occasion to tell another 'almost-martyrdom' story. 'In his prayers', wrote Nobili about Amator, 'he always asks God for the grace to suffer something for his love'.[69] The persecution that followed a day or two after his baptism was provoked by the paṇṭāram, who was probably turned out of the house and who lost his income. In spite of intimidation, which even involved 'policemen from the Nāyaka's palace', the father and son 'suffered this with great peace and joy'.

The fervor of devotion displayed by Amator and Gnani before conversion thus remained intact. What changed was the teacher, the guru, whom they supported. A guru in Hinduism is not merely a withdrawn religious specialist, but one of the foci of the local political network. Depending on his power to attract followers and distribute honours and gifts, a guru may ritually and juridically extend his control over a whole cluster of castes. His principal attraction is his ability to integrate local communities into a larger, galactic Hindu polity. For castes such as the one to which Amator belonged, considered ritually low,[70] connections with a guru who claimed such supra-local ties meant an enhancement of status.

Obviously, certain individuals, and through them their communities, had important investments in Nobili's enterprise. His ambiguous, but still Brahmanical, self-presentation made these groups rally around him. The biographies of Nobili's and Vico's famous converts point to the fact that, for various reasons, at the time of their conversions to Christianity they were going through a life crisis, either as individuals or as members of a caste-group in transition, or both. Faced with declining fortunes and social weakness or, on the contrary, eager to enhance their ritual and social status which lagged behind their newly acquired economic advantages, they were all possible missionary targets.[71] Amator's kinship group found itself in the middle of a transitional social whirlpool in the early 17th century.

[69] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 24 December, 1608 in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and ff. 17–75.

[70] In Amator's obituary written by Vico we can learn that 'neither blood of kings nor of Brahmans flowed in his veins', Vico, A. to Palmeyro, A. (Port.), November, 1620, ARSI, Goa, 48, ff. 211–16.

[71] A similar phenomenon is recorded by Hardgrave, R.L., Jr., in *The Nadars of Tamil Nadu; The Political Culture of a Community in Change*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1969.

In 1610, Nobili wrote a letter of invitation to Antonio Vico, who was still teaching grammar and theology at the Jesuit college Madre de Deos in Cochin. Among other miraculous conversion stories which Nobili enacted for Vico in order to lure him to join the Madurai mission, a couple of vignettes about Amator's female relatives were also included. First, Amator's wife was tormented by the demon and 'now he assured me', wrote Nobili, 'that when he ordered him in the name of Jesus Christ to leave her alone, he fled immediately'.[72] It seemed that the woman completely recovered and received baptism. However, only a year later, Vico, who had in the meantime arrived and taken over many of Nobili's epistolary tasks, reported that the same women again fell under demonic spells.[73]

As soon as Amator cured his own wife with the Christian prayer, he used the same remedy for his niece, who was also 'troubled by an evil spirit'[74]. From Nobili's story, it seems that the woman was considered to be a medium. She was occasionally 'possessed' by the 'demon', and special clothes were kept in the house for such events.

> Your Reverence must know, Nobili explained to Laerzio, that in this country, when someone is troubled by the demon, it is the custom to offer him some clothes of gold and silver or whatever he asks; they keep these things with great veneration in a box and, when a feast occurs, they dress the energumen in these clothes; then the demon begins to speak and receive worship.

Obviously, susceptibility to possession was considered as a dangerous but privileged quality, which also enhanced the status, even if only temporarily, of the possessed person. The effort of her father-in-law and her husband to cure her of the seizures might also have been an effort to dispossess her of the special status she claimed by virtue of her extraordinary powers.

Following all too willingly Nobili's advice, the husband of the afflicted woman, 'to show his contempt for the demon, put on the dress consecrated to the demon and finally burnt it'. The woman, who had probably brought this expensive clothing as a part of her dowry was thus stripped of her personal possessions, which tied her

[72] Nobili, R. to Vico, A., 17 June, 1610, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 8 Dececember, 1610, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 76–92.

[73] Vico, A. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 31 August, 1611, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 25 November, 1611, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 93–129.

[74] Nobili, R. to Vico, A., 17 June, 1610, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 8 December, 1610, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 76–92.

to her maternal household and represented important markers of her individuality. According to Nobili, when her husband burnt her clothes, the 'pagan' part of the family, that is his father and other relatives, 'reproached him bitterly for allowing her to go to the church of the Christians'. At the same time, Nobili sent Aleixo and a Christian Brahman to sprinkle her head with holy water and appease her pains with the reliquary. In a typical turn of the 'miracle' scenario, as soon as they entered the house, 'she got up suddenly, drank some holy water and was completely cured, to the amazement of the whole household which consists of forty persons'.

With the prospect of baptizing forty people because of this surprise effect, Nobili's story line reaches its climax, a sort of cathartic narrative resolution, and the proof of his missionary competence. However, there is a postface to the story which sheds more light on the nature of this familial crisis and its tentative resolution. What is important to note, is that the missionaries used such problematic family ruptures in order to insert themselves as competent mediators. The woman whose material and mental possessions provoked the familial drama continued to suffer from convulsive attacks on certain specific occasions which were connected with her husband's household. 'Today', Nobili went on to inform Laerzio, ' the patient came to learn the catechism, but as she was returning home, she felt some symptoms that her enemy was returning; those signs were cramps in her limbs, and loss of consciousness. She was therefore obliged to go back to the church, where her husband wished her to remain till her baptism'.[75] At this point, Nobili decided to conclude the story, partly because what happened was in reality far from an easy resolution. The woman continued to swoon and fall into convulsions and, finally, Nobili began to suspect that her afflictions were only a pretense. Was Nobili's suspicion based on his psychological reading of the situation—the woman's rejection and quasi-rebellion against her husband's household? The unfortunate husband, who had the last word in the story, replicated this suspicion in the short exemplary monologue. 'Whether my wife be possessed or not, alive or dead, I know that whatever the Aiyer (Nobili) has taught me is true, and on no account shall I retrace my steps'.[76]

The position and status of the women in Amator's caste seems to have been in general problematic. His own wife, who haltingly

[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

accepted baptism almost two years after her husband, was ready to apostatize on the first occasion. In 1611, Vico included an elaborate account of Amator's illness, which he emplotted as a demonic temptation 'story'. It started with the description of his suffering: 'He could neither eat nor sleep, neither lie down nor sit down, nor stand, nor remain in any position without groans of pain which moved to compassion all who heard him'.[77] In a slow crescendo, the narrative then traced additional calamities and unexpected blows from both human and diabolic agencies. He spent all his money on various medicaments and doctors. His 'pagan' relatives decided to expel him from the caste while those who were already Christian apostatized. It was, however, his own wife whom Amator accused of surrendering to demonic influence. When she complained about his refusal to give up his Christian god, whom she blamed for his illness, Amator answered:' Come in and say all you like, for I must always have a demon by my side to tempt me'. Two months later, his mother gave in as well. Finally, except for his father Gnani, all other members of the family reverted to 'paganism'. Obviously, women in Amator's caste were the first to fail this test. Jesuit accounts portrayed women as either conservatively resisting Christianity or immediately becoming almost saints. However, all possible 'female stories' were in one way or another bound to their male counterparts—husbands, sons and other relatives. A female story functioned in the Jesuit texts, and in their apostolic deeds, only as a refraction of male interactions and intentions.[78]

Nine years later, summing up a brief necrology of Amator's Christian deeds and virtues, Vico mentioned as his last and most important endeavour the abolishment of polygamy in his caste.[79] Under Vico's indignant pen, this custom assumed a form of 'demonic impurity' practiced by those who possessed 'degraded intelligence' and revelled

[77] Vico, A. to Laerzio, C., Madurai, 31 August, 1611, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C., Cochin, 25 November, 1611, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 93–129.

[78] Appended at the end of Vico's story about Amator's illness is a paragraph which served as another signal of turbulent family relations, partly provoked and partly accelerated and enhanced by Amator's conversion to Christianity. When his mother-in-law died without a male progeny, Amator and his sons were designated to perform her funeral rites. Vico's insistence that Amator refused to comply in order to avoid performing 'superstitious' ceremonies might not have been the whole truth, since he could have easily performed them in a 'Christian manner'.

[79] Vico, A. to Palmeyro, A., Madurai (Port.), November, 1620, ARSI, Goa 48, ff. 211–16.

in an 'abominable promiscuity'. At a caste meeting in Tiruchchirappalli, Amator managed 'to gradually captivate their (the caste headmen's) minds and hearts with his persuasive eloquence' and, 'burning with undaunted courage, he appealed successively to their reason, their sense of natural decency, public good, and above all, he touched that chord which vibrates in every Indian heart, the honor of the caste.'[80] Furthermore, Vico related that the headmen adopted the principle of monogamy as a law and established rigorous penalties in case of adultery. All these various provisions were then approved by the Nāyaka himself and communicated to the 'judges of customary law who are responsible for their execution'.[81]

What Vico described here, using the European juridical language of the 17th century, is an example of the process of Sanskritization. Since important historical data are irrevocably missing from Vico's narrative, the reconstruction of this process can be but incomplete and deficient. There are, nevertheless, a few significant indications, which resurfaced in Vico's necrology. The first question to ask, is to what extent and for which groups the practice of monogamy or polygamy functioned as status markers. It is known that the Telugu warrior castes, the Nāyakas who ruled Tamil Nadu in the 17th century practiced polygamy. António de Proença, who joined the Madurai mission in 1652, remarked on the occasion of Tirumalai Nāyaka's death that, 'the greatest obstacle to his conversion came from his two hundred wives, the most distinguished of whom were burnt on his funeral pyre, according to the barbarous custom of these people.'[82] A Muslim traveller, Muhammad Shariff Hanafi, reported having witnessed the *satī* of seven hundred wives of Muttu Virappa Nāyaka, Tirumalai Nāyaka's predecessor and older brother.[83] From other sparse references and general presumptions, polygamy seems to have been in vogue among the leading martial castes. For a Dutch traveller, John Nieuhoff, the inhabitants of the Coromandel coast were 'black and

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Sathyanatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madura*, Appendix C, p. 203. This is an English translation of a letter written by Proença to the Father General, G. Nikel taken from Bertrand's *La mission du Maduré*. The original is in Rome. Provenza, Antonio di, *Lettera annua*, 22 July, 1659, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 130–72.

[83] Establishing a correct date for Muttu Virappa Nayaka's death and Tirumalai Nāyaka's accession seems to be problematic. See Sathyanatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madurai*, pp. 81–3.

strong (...) deceitful and cunning' and 'take but little account of their wives, but generally keep two or three harlots, by whom they have sometimes sixteen or eighteen children'.[84]

As for the Brahmans, according to a Jesuit writer in the middle of the eighteen century, G.-L. Coeurdoux, polygamy was far from being prohibited. Nevertheless, it was rare, practiced 'above all in the big cities where disorders took place among the Brahmans'.[85] The Jesuit missionaries, backed by their Tamil informants, early on proposed and elaborated the theory of the degeneracy of Indian customs, which was taken up later by Tamil revivalists. Besides this general *caveat*, it seems that what Coeurdoux referred to as 'disorder' was the fact that in the bigger cities a Brahman could more easily hide his concubines from his first wife. On the other hand, maintained Coeurdoux, the whole procedure of obtaining the second wife from her parents, appeasing the first wife, not to mention the costs of maintaining an additional woman in the household, seem to have worked as deterrents to polygamy among Brahmans. At the same time, while they themselves appeared to refrain from polygamy, expatiated Coeurdoux further on the topic, 'they preach to the Princes to marry five women'.[86]

From the patchwork of Western accounts which prefigured the problem of polygamy in a variety of ways, and invariably imposed their own ethical and epistemological framework on the description itself, it is difficult to discern the role played by the practice of polygamy in status negotiations among Tamils. According to Vico, Amator's efforts to introduce monogamy were in large part the result of his conversion to Christianity. But, on the other hand, the 'shaming technique' Amator used to persuade the 'pagan' headmen of his caste, by appealing to the sense of caste honour and making 'their ears tingle with shame', could not have been efficient without an underlying value grid which promoted, maybe not monogamy as such, but something like the Brahmanical ideal of sexual restraint. Adopting monogamy with a stress on 'conjugal fidelity' and 'rigorous

[84] Ibid., Appendix C, 250. See Churchill, A. and J., *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, II, London, 1704, 'Mr. John Nieuhoff's Remarkable Voyages and Travels to the East Indies' (transl. of J. Nieuhof, *Zee und Lantreise, door verscheide Gewesten von Oostindien*, Amsterdam, 1682).

[85] Murr, Sylvia, *L'Inde philosophique entre Bossuet et Voltaire–I*, p. 75. Also pp. 117, 100.

[86] Ibid., p. 100.

punishment of adultery'[87], and having it approved by the Muttu Virappa Nāyaka, meant undoubtedly that the caste as a whole claimed a new elevated status by espousing, what Dumont termed the 'Brahmanic pattern'.[88] Therefore, the Jesuit missionaries such as Nobili, who adopted the Brahmanical model of self-presentation, provided a channel for the ritual status elevation of certain willing and richer castes.

As much as the Jesuit missionaries, following Loyola's precepts, 'entered' into the system of the other in order to invade, rearrange and Christianize his/her interior, those different others used the intruders in order to perform their own urgent social and cultural tasks. While the Jesuits were adapting Hindu rites and ceremonies to what they deemed to be analogous Christian ones, their Tamil converts adapted in turn these Christian practices according to their own soteriological ideas and pragmatic purposes.

Gnani's Christian Life Story

As we have seen, in order to enhance the status of his caste by way of a Brahmanical model, Amator used the ideal of monogamy, which was impressed upon him because of his conversion to Christianity. On the soteriological or rather spiritual level, there were similar mutual adaptations. For Gnani, Amator's father, being a Christian, as he was for the last twelve years of his life, involved an elaborate daily performance of a number of different pious actions. 'He (Gnani) led a life so spiritual and unworldly', wrote Vico to Mascarenhas in 1624, 'that it appeared to Father Roberto and myself in many things more admirable than imitable'.[89] The description of Gnani's daily spiritual routine is couched in such a way that images already fixed by the history of Christian mystic experiences immediately come to the contemporary European reader's mind.

'All his thoughts were on God our Lord', explained Vico to Mascarenhas, 'except for a few hours given to sleep and nourishment, he spent all his time in prayer'. When immersed in prayer, Gnani was

[87] Vico, A. to Palmeyro, A., Madurai, November, 1620, ARSI, Goa 48, ff. 211–16.

[88] Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (transl.), pp. 112–29. Dumont found two contrasting patterns: Brahmanic (monogamous except in cases of barrenness) and royal (polygynous). As for the middle castes, he found that sororal polygyny was practiced, although limited according to economic resources.

[89] Vico, A. to Mascarenhas, N. (Port.), Madurai, 15 December, 1624, ARSI, Goa 53, ff. 91–102; another copy ARSI, Goa 48, ff. 217–27.

completely oblivious of the outside world. If someone called him, 'he would run up like a man in distress who has been roused from his sleep'. By enchaining Gnani's spiritual experience to the standard vocabulary of European mystic speech, Vico tried to abolish (textually) a possible constitution of difference (cultural, religious, etc.). In a procedure similar to, for example, Theresa of Avila or John of the Cross, Gnani privileged 'sleeping ' and 'dreaming' as a space of the (ultimate) communication. However, a few fragments in which Vico described the manner in which Gnani reached this state of proximity with the divine betrayed, from the European Catholic standpoint, certain unusual practices. At times, Gnani would 'pray standing, without leaning on any support, keeping the arm in which he held his rosary stretched out without ever relaxing'. While this could appear to Vico's European audience as an individual, if somewhat unorthodox, atonement position, in Hinduism it is not one of the more difficult postures of worship.

The inventory (mostly literary) of Hindu, especially bhakti, praying or worshipping postures is due to a particularly complicated relationship between the deity and the devotee, the patron and the client. Harsh and extraordinary postures assumed by the client were considered efficacious in coercing the patron/God to grant boons or act on a client's behalf. From standing for years on one foot, like the mythological evil hero, Hiraṇyakaśipu[90], such that an anthill grew over him, to gouging out one's eyes in order to heal the bleeding eye of the Śiva-Lingam, as did Kaṇṇappa Nāyaṉār[91], acts of self-laceration were one of the most prominent devotional techniques, whether performed out of some pragmatic necessity or out of the bhakta's 'pure' love (*aṉpu*) .

Gnani's devotional *modus agendi* unmistakably points to its bhakti substratum, in spite of Vico's textual 'make up' which, clothing his actions in Christian garb, effaced the suspicion of difference. Vico also never failed to mention that all devotional practices of the Madurai Christians except, of course, those of the Paravas, who belonged to the church of Gonçalo Fernandes and his followers, were

[90] The antagonist in the story of Viṣṇu's Narasimha, or Lion Avatāra.

[91] One of sixty-three Tamil Śaiva saints or Nāyanārs. See Hudson, D. Dennis, 'Violent and Fanatical Devotion Among the Nāyanārs: A Study in the Periya Purāṇam of Cēkkilār', in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees*, ed. Hiltebeitel, A., New York, 1989, pp. 373–404.

examined and approved by the Jesuit fathers. Regarding Gnani's 'austerities in matters of food and bodily mortification', wrote Vico, 'he increased or decreased them as we directed him, never following his own opinion'.[92]

To what extent were the Jesuit missionaries able to control the religious practices and devotional excesses of their Madurai neophytes? Not as much as Vico would like us to think. Most of the 'angelic' characters, like Amator, Gnani, and many others, whose biographical fragments remain scattered in various letters written by Nobili and Vico, appear to have had very much a will of their own. In the document entitled *'Testimónio'* (1617)[93], Gnani and his son Amator/Iesupattan are mentioned, among others, as participants in neophyte rebellions against Nobili several of which occurred from late 1614 until 1617.

Aleixo's Christian Life Story

Aleixo, one of Nobili's first converts, played the major role in the failed *coup* against the Jesuit missionaries in the New Madurai residence.[94] His Christian biography began with Nobili's laudatory comments on his character and behaviour. He was one of the first neophytes to take vows of chastity and obedience and shared the house with Nobili as one of the sannyāsis. Nobili saw in Aleixo signs of the 'marvelous effects' operated by divine grace. In a letter to Laerzio, Nobili described the ceremony of Aleixo's public pronouncement of the vows (on Sunday, 19 July 1609) in all its dramatic details, from the moment of his resolution, which was preceded by a particular incident attributed by Nobili to divine testing, to Aleixo's impeccable Christian life.[95]

Just like Amator and Gnani, Aleixo was an overzealous convert. He spent sleepless nights thinking about his sins, he fervently prayed

[92] Vico, A. to Mascarenhas, N. (Port.), Madurai, 15 December, 1624, ARSI, Goa 53, ff. 91–102.

[93] *Testimónio* by Bonifacio Xastri, Cranganore, College of the Society of Jesus, 15 December, 1617, Cosigned by Francisco Ros, the Archbishop of Cranganore. ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 261–5.

[94] Aleixo is his Portuguese name. In Italian letters, he is sometimes referred to as Alessio. In the document *'Artigos que se hão de preguntar'*, he signed his name in Tamil—*Alecu*. ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 39–50; 51–62;63–73.

[95] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 19 July, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and ff. 17–75.

to the Holy Virgin while holding her picture, begged her 'amid tears to indicate to him the way of salvation'[96] and, after taking vows, continually demanded that Nobili teach him new kinds of mortification. Although Nobili portrayed Aleixo in the light of his general project of creating 'angels' and 'saints' in his 'holy mission', and although, as reported by other witnesses, he appeared to have established very close personal ties with him, certain disconcerting character traits of his young friend, sixteen when baptized, come through clearly in Nobili's early letters.[97]

'He is somewhat hot tempered and self-willed', wrote Nobili to Laerzio in 1609, 'and he occasionally gave trouble to those with whom he lives and particularly to me who admitted him to my house in order to help me during the Mass and do other services'.[98] Before taking vows of chastity and poverty to which, at the last moment Nobili added a vow of obedience to his Guru, that is Nobili, Aleixo would seem to have been a local dandy. He wore 'fine and costly clothes' and adorned himself in gold jewels 'that he inherited from his grandfather worth at least 80 scudi'.[99] When a thief stole '30 scudi, two pendants, a ruby and two rings' from his house, Aleixo went mad and treated the alleged perpetrator of the crime very cruelly. He also consulted a local diviner, a 'possessed person', who 'told him many things which were true', but did not help him recover his stolen property.

Nobili told this story about Aleixo, not to individualize his character, but to show how Christianization transformed vices into virtues, egoism into charity, etc. When Nobili publicly reprimanded Aleixo on his display of cruelty and vanity, 'after a sleepless' night, the neophyte decided to wear, henceforth, only a simple white cloth, 'to abstain from bathing, to undertake a long fast and to ask pardon for his crime'. In a further development, he also gave all his money to be

[96] Ibid., (*e prendendo una immagine della Madonna, cominciò a pregarla con gran fervore, e calde lagrime que gli mostrasse il modo con qual si aveva da salvare*).

[97] 'When Aleixo was with P. Roberto, he was a sannāysi and had the same name *suami* (*cāmi*) as P. Roberto, who in those days was very much attached to Aleixo and whatever the people of the house might say against him he would not believe them'. *Testimónio* by Bonifacio Xastri, Cranganore, College of the Society of Jesus, 14 December, 1617, cosigned by Francisco Ros, the Archbishop of Cranganore. ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 261–265.

[98] Nobili, R. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 19 July, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and ff. 17–75.

[99] Ibid.

used in the building of a new church in Madurai and placed himself in Nobili's service. Although Nobili tried to dissuade him from giving away his money, advising him to leave it instead to his brother Visuvasam (a future Christian convert) and his mother, Aleixo remained firm in his decision. When his mother threatened to commit suicide, he managed to calm her down until she complied with his resolution. Until the end of 1610, Aleixo appears in Nobili's, Leitão's and Vico's letters as a model Christian. He often helped missionaries to exorcise demons from other Christians and non-believers,[100] and was one of the co-signers of a document containing (positive) opinions concerning Nobili's method and general teaching of Christian doctrine.

Before 1615, Aleixo disappeared from the Jesuit correspondence and he would never appear again in Nobili's letters. When the silence was lifted on a few occasions, it was to discredit his accusations against the Jesuits of the new residence in Madurai and to denounce his evil character. In a last groping effort to reclaim Aleixo back into the 'angelic' fold of the Madurai Christians, Vico wrote a generous obituary for him in 1624.[101]

The problem Aleixo posed to Nobili and Vico was not his excessive devotion, which they managed to channel into Christian practices. He meditated one hour in the morning with Nobili and then, alone, examined his conscience twice a day, took discipline several times a week and attended communion and confession every eight days.[102] The fissure which took place between Aleixo and Nobili was a result of betrayed and misunderstood expectations on both sides. They both acted from within different transactional models of the patron-client relationship.

Aleixo understood his position *vis-à-vis* Nobili as one of hierarchy and dependence as it crystallized in a segmentary political and social system in which he grew up. He took Nobili's spiritual, political and economic enterprise in Madurai as an attractive investment, apart from its soteriological benefits. When he donated all his money for

[100] Vico, A. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 17 June, 1610, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 8 December, 1610, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 79–92.

[101] Vico, A. to Mascarenhas, N. (Port.), 15 December, 1624, ARSI, Goa 48, ff. 217–27; and the copy ARSI, Goa, 53, ff. 91–102.

[102] Leitão, E. to Laerzio, A., Madurai, 26 September, 1609, in Laerzio, A. to Aquaviva, C. (It.), Cochin, 20 November, 1609, ARSI, Goa 54a, ff. 2–16 and ff. 17–75.

the construction of the church[103] and 'surrendered' himself bodily to Nobili by becoming his 'servant' in a typical bhakti fashion[104], he also presumed that certain obligations of reciprocity would be automatically respected by Nobili, such as distribution of ritual honours and appropriate endowments. Moreover, Nobili played his part well, as long as it did not contradict his own ideas of the patron–client relationship. He entrusted the management of one of the Jesuit houses in Madurai to his fervent young convert and paid an annual stipend of a hundred *panams* to his mother.[105] This privileged position enabled Aleixo to create his own circle of clients, Christian and non-Christian, and to control their access to the economic, spiritual and other related benefits of transactions with Nobili. Aleixo naturally manipulated the funds over which he had control in order to establish and enhance his own social position. In Nobili's cultural code, such independence amounted to treason and larceny.

Nobili's appreciation of hierarchy made him approve of the caste system, but he did not understand that the exact position of a caste, except for Brahmans and untouchables, was endlessly fluid and disputed, and that one of the mechanisms for enhancing one's position came from the ability to act as an altruistic patron. Having understood the Brahmanical ideology, fixed in what he thought were the 'sacred' texts, Nobili conceptualized his human environment as complying to certain immovable and controlled rules and orders. Any discrepancy with the texts was treated as recent decadence or individual fault. Furthermore, Christian and Jesuit universalism prescribed—often in collision with Nobili's aristocratic hierarchical upbringing—equality in daily interaction between the neophytes. The equality, however, also meant the breaking of the social bonds (family, caste, tribe, clan), threatening to block or hinder an ideal Christian structure of relations and authority privileged by the missionaries and the

[103] I have a suspicion that the theft story which preceded his donation was fabricated or simply imagined by Aleixo himself, or another member of his family, in order to keep some liquid assets aside.

[104] The primary relationship is between God and the devotee. In bhakti poetry it is extended into other relationships: master–servant, mother–child, man–woman, etc. See Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning*.

[105] *Testimónio* by Bonifacio Xastri, Cranganore, College of the Society of Jesus, 14 December, 1617, cosigned by Francisco Ros, the Archbishop of Cranganore. ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 261–5.

Counter Reformation, in which individuals were to face institutions strictly on their own. In a sense, he privileged the position of a *metteur-en-scène*, controlling directly each individual member of his congregation.

From Laerzio, we learnt that upon his arrival in Madurai (15 September, 1610), Vico replaced Aleixo as manager of the house.[106] On the other hand, from the testimony of Carnayake Bramane, the office went, perhaps some time later, to a certain Chandi (a Brahman?).[107] This humiliation damaged Aleixo's patronage network. Combined with an additional problem, only hinted at but never clearly explained in any of the documents, Aleixo was forced to flee Madurai, fearing for his safety and embittered towards his spiritual teacher. After spending five years in the Jesuit College of Vaypicota and then in Coulão (Quilon) where, according to Laerzio, 'he was troublesome to the fathers', Aleixo returned to Madurai. Nobili, however, refused to take him back in his 'service'. In a move that Laerzio attributed, not without irony, to a particular physiological disposition of the Tamil neophytes—their 'wonderful (...) ability in adapting themselves to the mind of those who govern and to speak accordingly'[108]—, Aleixo used the existing escalating divisions among the Jesuits in South India to his own advantage. He informed Gonçalo Fernandes and Andrea Buccerio, who in the meantime, had switched sides and joined the old residence, about Nobili's illicit sexual activities. Already in 1615, Laerzio dismissed as defamatory all accusations of Nobili's involvement '*em materia da molheres* (in matters of women)'[109], and in 1617, Bonifacio Xastri (alias Śivadharma) and Carnayake Bramane officially recanted their statements against Nobili. According to Bonifacio Xastri, Andrea Buccerio indirectly solicited statements accusing Nobili of having sexual intercourse with local women, and offered him more money then Nobili's stipend (10 panams per month). Buccerio also told him that Nobili's mission was under fire from higher authorities and that it would soon be

[105] Laerzio, A. to Mascarenhas, N. (Port.), Cochin, 30 November, 1615, ARSI, Goa 17, ff. 146–7.

[107] *Testimónio* of Carnayake Bramane, Cranganore, College of the Society of Jesus, 14 December, 1617, cosigned by Francisco Ros, the Archbishop of Cranganore, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 261–5.

[108] Laerzio, A. to Mascarenhas, N. (Port.), Cochin 30 November, 1615, ARSI, Goa 17, ff. 146–7.

[109] Ibid.

destroyed. In his recantation, Bonifacio Xastri also admitted that the women he brought to the house were for him alone and that Aleixo, also, indulged in illicit sex while living under Nobili's roof. Nobili, on the other hand, according to Xastri, refused to believe such stories about his favourite convert.

Although Bonifacio Xastri's testimony was written down by Francesco Oliveyra, Rector of the College of the Society of Jesus at Cranganore, and did not claim to be a direct recording of the words of the witness, it is shot through with simulated voices of various actors. Thus, Aleixo disclosed his ultimate goal to Bonifacio Xastri in these words:

> I shall give you money and we shall both be masters of everything. At least we shall drive out Padre Nobili and we shall remain with Padre Buccerio, who told us that the Provincial would reward us. The Fathers who remain in Madurai will do only what pleases us. Padre Nobili's house will be destroyed and Padre Buccerio and Padre Fernandes will also leave the other house, and I shall put on a black cassock and remain here master of everything, including the houses and the property of the Fathers.[110]

This statement, a mixture of Jesuit paranoia and Aleixo's intentions, is significant because it served as an admonition to the missionaries. The price of their internal divisions could be either fatal for their enterprise, or could open channels for impersonators who would do nothing but discredit the whole missionary structure. On the other hand, Aleixo most probably reasoned in the same way as Francisco Oliveyra interpreted Bonifacio Xastri's allegation. His long sojourn among the Jesuits and their indigenous novices on the Malabar coast (Kerala) must have given him a new perspective and understanding of the religion he enthusiastically embraced. He understood that by virtue of being a Christian he belonged to an institution much larger and more complex than the Madurai mission, and that he could exploit the internal fighting to safeguard his own interests.

Unfortunately, documents which would shed light on this affair are scarce. Except for Laerzio's letter and the *Testimónio* of Carnayake Bramane and Bonifacio Xastri, as well as a few hostile and even virulent letters by Gonçalo Fernandes[111], Nobili remained conspicuously

[110] *Testimónio* by Bonifacio Xastri, Cranganore, College of the Society of Jesus, 14 December, 1617, cosigned by Francisco Ros, the Archbishop of Cranganore, ARSI, Goa 51, ff. 261–5.

[111] Fernandes, G. to Mascarenhas, N., Cochin, 20 December, 1619, ARSI, Goa 51, f. 307.

silent on the issue. Aleixo's case went against his efforts to establish the Madurai mission as an experimental utopia, a model of Christian piety which would not only attract the non-Christians, but also teach and improve the decadent Christian Europe. What he was not able to put into texts or into practice, Nobili simply ignored or obliterated. There is no trace in his extant correspondence of his refuting the seduction accusations or his troubled relationships with certain neophytes.

The last time Aleixo reappeared in Jesuit letters was when he died. It was Vico who wrote a kind obituary, which softened the edges of Aleixo's unruly Christian life. Passing briefly through his adolescent troubles, including his stay 'in a Seminary (in Vaypicota and Quilão), but without justifying the high hopes we had placed in him'[112], all Vico had to say about Aleixo's involvement in the 1615 affair was that 'Nobili deemed it necessary to free him from his vows and to restore him to common life'.[113] Vico also mentioned that Aleixo persisted in his faith and entered the service of 'a powerful man called Andiappa Pillai, winning his affection and confidence'. Protected by his patron, Aleixo continued to propagate Christian religion. 'You cannot imagine', writes Vico, 'with what intrepidity he refused to participate in acts of idolatry, which are so frequent in the mansions of the great, and with what boldness he persisted in his sarcasm and his contempt for pagan superstitions'. In the final death scene, Vico reproduced Aleixo's last pious monologue in which he entrusted the spiritual being of his wife and his 'little child' to Vico himself.

In this way, Vico recaptured and re-enclosed Aleixo's biography in the utopian space which Nobili had delineated in his early letters from the Madurai mission. As much as the ultimate, pragmatic goal of the Jesuit missionaries was the establishment of the Christian political community, the life histories of the Madurai neophytes show that even as it began to take shape, both Nobili and Vico continued to emplot its history as utopia. Partly, it is because a political community is essentially unrepresentable without some sort of ideological grounding, utopian de-territorialization being only one of the options. Partly, it is a result of Nobili's obsession with sainthood. Gonçalo Fernandes lived in Madurai for more than a decade before Nobili's

[112] Vico, A. to Mascarenhas, N., 15 December, 1624, Goa 51, f. 312.

[113] Vico, A. to Mascarenhas, N., 15 December, 1624, ARSI, Goa 48, ff. 217–27; and the copy ARSI, Goa, 53, ff. 91–102.

arrival without noticing in his Christians any sign of divine inspiration, whereas Nobili found his first convert in a teacher working in Fernandes's elementary school.

Until the suppression of the Jesuit order in the middle of the 18th century, all the Jesuits in the Madurai mission followed Nobili's adaptationist method of conversion and continued to rely on the utopian mode in their writing whenever they wanted to situate their own position as subjects in the missionary field. In a state of permanent weakness and insecurity without direct institutional or military support, the missionaries were doomed to live and write a utopia in order to bridge the gap between the strange and the familiar, the mute and the loquacious, the 'pagan' and the Christian. The writing of utopia is a destruction of reality and/or imposition of the writer's frame on the 'strange world', a total separation of the name from the thing. However, even textually a prefigured site such as a utopia bears the traces of the silenced cultural 'stuff'. That is, besides learning about the Jesuits themselves, we can also extract marks, lines and notches revealing the indigenous culture.

The life stories of the Tamil Christians continued to appear in Jesuit correspondence. Just as in Nobili's letters, the names of the neophytes in their Tamil or Christian variants were subsumed in the narrative of their exceptional deeds. Often, in fact, the missionaries, in the 18th century referred to them simply as 'Christian soldiers', 'pious neophytes' and similar non-individualized terms.

These new Christians were still described by the missionaries as 'angels', though with less and less zeal. While there were a couple of learned Brahmans and poets among Nobili's converts, in the latter part of the 17th and in the 18th centuries, the Jesuits portrayed their Christians, with rare exceptions, as rather ignorant. Actually, it was the Jesuits themselves who gave up the rigorous learning of Sanskrit and their admiration for the Hindu 'sacred books' and the Brahmans diminished. The model of the Brahman sannyāsi was completely discontinued after 1673,[114] although even before this date most of the Jesuits were following the model of paṇṭāracāmi. From 1635, no new attempts to convert Brahmans were made in the mission. The Jesuits were successful only among the lowest castes in the area.

What stayed, nevertheless, was the demonological discourse. Just like Nobili and Vico, the first two missionaries who defined the code,

[114] The last Brahman sannyāsi was Benedict da Costa who retired in 1673.

the diabolic events and the presence of the Devil himself continued to haunt both their actions and their writing. There is, however, an increasing effort to explain the phenomenon 'rationally'. The miracles performed by Tamils were readily ascribed by the missionaries to tricks and Brahman conspiracy. Their own miraculous stories at the same time remained 'true'. They also went into detailed descriptions of the workings and healing of various illnesses which they witnessed or from which they suffered in South India. The same was the case with torture and their own incessant problems in the mission.

With the suppression of the Jesuit order, the Madurai mission disappeared as a real space and a site of utopia. When the Jesuits returned in the middle of the 19th century, the 'New Madurai Mission' was no more an otherworldly space and its founder, Roberto Nobili, fell into oblivion. However, it was the sedimentation of the Jesuit accounts, bursting with heteroglottic voices, which informed other European actors in South India. Besides German Protestant missionaries, the French colonial administration was the first to take notice of Jesuit 'information', since most of the latest missionaries were also French nationals. Finally, one of the most influential ethnographic compendia, Abbé Dubois' *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*,[115] was probably a plagiarized version of a text written by a Jesuit missionary, Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux (1777).

The meandering of the utopian ideas initiated by Nobili incarnated in other discourses and other texts after the 18th century, and the descriptions of Tamils as 'angels' in various guises have continued well into 19th and 20th centuries. British administrators, Indian revivalists and foreign and indigenous missionaries privileged certain groups as 'authentic Dravidians', 'sons of the soil'—briefly as utopian characters from their own imagination.

[115] Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*.

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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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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