

Introduction: Cultural Dialogue in South Asia and Beyond: Narratives, Images and Community (sixteenth-nineteenth centuries)

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Most of the essays in this volume were first presented as papers at a two-day conference held in Paris in 2009 at the *Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud* (CNRS/EHESS).¹ Our aim in organizing the conference and publishing the present collection with substantially revised contributions was to provide a space for dialogue between scholars working on dialogic forms of cultural mediation in the early modern and modern world. We were interested in particular in confronting research in the history of South Asia with that on other areas in order to identify comparable locally important, yet often invisible, histories against the looming global context of trade, communication networks, imperial claims and developing political formations. Since from the sixteenth century, face to face cultural encounters, premised on perceived and assumed difference, became an inescapable part of social landscape and for some—such as interpreters, merchants, travelers, missionaries, etc.—a special field of expertise, they also defined and shaped textual and visual sources as well as rituals and practices.

¹ We thank the participants of the conference (18-19 December, 2009)—Gauvin Bailey, Charlotte de Castelnau-l'Estoire, Jocelyne Dakhlia, Monica Juneja, Kapil Raj, Atsushi Yamanashi—who were unable to contribute to this volume for their comments during the discussion. The conference was made possible by a generous grant from the *Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud* (CNRS/EHESS, Paris). Our special gratitude goes to Denis Matringe, the former director of CEIAS, as well as Jos Gommans and Maurits van den Boogert who believed in our project from the start. We also warmly thank the anonymous readers who helped us in perfecting each and every article in this volume.

The study of cultural mediation, of cultural brokers and go-betweens, has recently produced a lot of new publications.² We take a step further in a different direction by looking into how a natural dialogue based on real encounters turned into historical narratives, court poetry, religious propaganda, fictions and visual objects in order to serve a particular purpose within the community of users for whom it was purportedly produced. Our geo-cultural orientation also differs to no small extent from the one traditionally presiding over inter-cultural studies: in accordance with the specialization of the two guest editors, the focus here is on South Asia, although a substantial effort has been made to widen the horizon with essays taking us eastwards (Indonesia, China, Japan) and westwards (Syria—and even Peru) in a comparative perspective. Moreover, whereas the encounter between Europe and its “others” has often been the privileged topic of such studies, some of our essays look at encounters which did not involve Europe directly. A number of contributions explore cultural dialogues in the context of the early modern Islamic world where, contrary to received wisdom, otherness was not exclusively about religious difference.

Taken together, this collection of essays shows that what historians have at their disposal is never a “pure” textualized (a transcription of an oral conversation) or visualized dialogue, but the richly or sparsely inscribed space the dialogue marked before disappearing. A photograph, a narrative or a sacred object can contain dialogical voices and traces that may tell or generate unexpected stories. It is these lost dialogues that appear only in fragments, in other forms and media, and under other names that the authors in this volume have worked the hardest to reclaim. Most of the dialogues and conversations we are interested in here are cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, “dialogues at the margin”.³ We follow to a letter the semantic root of dialogue that leads us to *convergere*, *conversio*, *conversare* (converge, conversion, converse).⁴

Cultural dialogue is therefore an archive of experiences of different communities, all of whom negotiated their way into the present by construct-

² See for instance Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, James Delbourgo, eds., *The brokered world: go-betweens and global intelligence, 1770-1820* (Sagamore Beach, Mass.: Science History Publications, 2009).

³ See Emily A. Schultz, *Dialogue at the margins: Whorf, Bakhtin, and Linguistic Relativity* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990): 53.

⁴ Cosimo Zene, *The Rishi of Bangladesh. A History of Christian Dialogues* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002): 29.

ing knowledge of their “neighbors” and of themselves by borrowing objects and arguments from their “interlocutors”. The goal of the contributions in this volume is neither to denounce nor celebrate *métissage*, hybridity, fusions and amalgamation, but to reconstruct geo-historical contexts in which historical agents inscribed their desires, voices and actions by building links and negotiating with other distant or different historical agents. In addition, they are attentive to specific genres in which early modern dialogues developed. Whenever possible, the earlier dialogic traditions on which they built are identified in order to bring out more clearly the adaptations and transformations necessitated by the nature and the scope of the early modern encounters.

Dialogues as a genre of writing, dialogical narratives and texts in dialogue provide a glimpse at different historical and historian’s perspectives. Instead of historical views from “nowhere” and working towards integral historical narratives, the authors address, by way of dialogue and dialogic, the micro-level of texts and practices, less known and visible in mainstream historiography—precisely because they are a view from “somewhere” and they do little to hide their “situatedness”.⁵ Only after “reading” histories from different perspectives, slants and angles that the dialogues and dialogical furnish almost by definition, we can start to understand the shapes and scales of our objects and then compare, contrast and measure them against each other.

The articles presented in the first part of this volume all focus on the dialogues that were spurred by the creation of new Islamic powers in South and South-East Asia during the sixteenth century. Relying on Persian textual materials, the contributions by Ali Anooshahr and Corinne Lefèvre both explore the Mughal facet of such dialogues by highlighting the importance of contemporary rival polities (Ottomans, Safavids and Uzbeks) in the imperial self-definition and the extent to which the new universal kind of rule the dynasty purported to embody was simultaneously grounded in the regional context of India. They thereby provide new insights into some of the ideological and practical aspects of the cosmopolitanism that has long been associated with the Mughals. The next two essays by Allison Busch and Cynthia Talbot allow the reader to peer into another side of

⁵ On perspectivism in history see Brian Lightbody, “Genealogy and Subjectivity: An Incoherent Foucault (A Response to Calvert-Minor).” *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 4/1 (2010): 18-27.

early modern South Asia's multifaceted looking-glass by taking him or her into the regional courts that flourished under the aegis of the Mughals: focusing on the *caritas* (or biographies) of two Rajput lords who entered imperial service, they recover the rajas' voices in the dialogue precipitated by Mughal domination and bring to light the benefits of reading together the visions of the victor and the vanquished. Concluding the first part, Paul Wormser points out the limits of the present inquiry by examining the case of seventeenth-century Aceh where, despite the existence of a multicultural environment, the Muslim religious specialists who flocked to the sultan's court failed to start a dialogue with the Hindu-Buddhist and Austronesian traditions that were present in Sumatra.

In the second part, the dialogues are closely connected with Catholic conversion or the lack of it. Given that the missionary movement, followed or preceded by the Iberian colonial expansion, was a global phenomenon, we felt that a wider geographical perspective was in order. Even though Peru was not a part of the Orient, its inclusion in our inquiry appeared all the more necessary because scholars working on Catholic missions in Iberian America have generally been less attentive to dialogue, some of them even feeling that the coercive nature of the encounter left little space for missionary dialogic texts or full-fledged dialogues as those in China and Japan.⁶ Claudia Brosseder's method of reading "against the grain" the texts written by Catholic theologians and priests in Peru, not unlike Carlo Ginzburg's analysis of Inquisitorial archives, reveals the world of Andean religious practices (often simply named magic and witchcraft) that the colonial church endeavored to extirpate and destroy. She shows that dialogue did take place and that it ultimately contributed to an "accommodated" indigenous Christianity. In a similar way, Ines G. Županov analyzes a sixteenth-century Jesuit confession manual printed in Tamil not as a product of missionary manipulation, but as an instrument by which new converts acquired self-knowledge and self-empowerment. Joan-Pau Rubiés, who studies Jesuit debates with Buddhist monks in sixteenth-century Japan, is interested in understanding the transition between the real cross-cultural encounters and the polished text. By comparing different versions of the same dialogue, he concludes that missionary literary

⁶ Charlotte de Castelnau-l'Estoile's paper presented at the conference ("Conversations missionnaires dans l'œuvre d'Yves d'Evreux, capucin français au Maragnan 1612-1615") challenged that common opinion debated at one point in Serge Gruzinski's seminar at EHESS in Paris.

dialogues were a way to domesticate “real” dialogues in order to please and teach different audiences. In the process, they created and underscored “difference” while “dissimulating the force of structural analogies” between Buddhism and Christianity. Bernard Heyberger looked into a torrent of writings by the French Catholic missionaries posted in the Middle East in the seventeenth century, some of whom wrote polemical fictional dialogues against Islam. Heyberger shows that the Catholic missionaries were able to provide a “touch of the real” in their dialogues, but they failed, perhaps self-consciously, to employ their linguistic competence and knowledge of the Koran in engaging and presenting Islamic scholarship and theological culture to their European readers. Zvi Ben-dor Benite shows that it was Jesuits who triggered Chinese Muslim intellectual revival in the late seventeenth century by creating their own “dialogue” with the Jesuit texts. The “dialogue” with Jesuits was, however, only a prop for a more important dialogue with Confucianism.

In the third part, the authors address conversations or cultural negotiations in which complicated mutual emulation created objects and visual knowledge with specific effects on cross-cultural relationships. Relying on allegory and history paintings produced in the Mughal atelier during the first half of the seventeenth century, Ebba Koch shows how the artists deployed different aspects of the European language of cartography (the globe-form but also bird’s eye depiction of landscapes) in support of the imperial claims of their patrons who thereby engaged in a visual competition with their Western counterparts. Alexandra Curvelo studies the paintings on the Japanese folding-screens and lacquer-ware in the Tokugawa Japan (seventeenth-nineteenth century) and shows how the Japanese used the image of “barbarians from the South” (*namban-jin*) for their various epistemic and identity purposes. Filipa Vicente looks into a late nineteenth-century photograph taken in Bombay in which an intellectual encounter is staged and performed by four Sanskrit scholars. By analyzing correspondence relating to the picture, she shows how the authority of orientalist knowledge was negotiated between the four sitters.