

Final version of this article is published in:

“Goan Brahmans in the Land of Promise: Missionaries, Spies and Gentiles in the 17th-18th century Sri Lanka”, *Portugal – Sri Lanka: 500 Years*, ed. Jorge Flores, South China and Maritime Asia Series (Roderich Ptak and Thomas O. Hölmann, eds), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2006, pp. 171-210.

Goan Brahmans in the Land of Promise: Missionaries, Spies and Gentiles in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Sri Lanka

Ines G. Županov *

In 1688, thirty years after the loss of Sri Lanka to the Dutch, Fernão de Queiroz, a Jesuit in Goa, added the final touches to his bulky manuscript *Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, and then died¹. Consequently, by neglect or on purpose, the book was not published until the early 20th century and the manuscript probably had a limited circulation outside the Goan administrative and clerical milieu. Nevertheless, his message was clear. With divine providence on their side, the Portuguese had, a century and a half earlier, both conquered this jewel of a territory in the Indian Ocean and lost it in 1658. His was, therefore, a lesson in providential history on how divine grace can be bestowed and withheld. If the Portuguese were brought to the East, and to discover the island of Sri Lanka, it was for the purpose of spreading Christianity, for engaging in spiritual conquest. However, according to Queiroz, the temporal conquest that went hand in hand with the spiritual perverted this lofty ultimate goal. That the desire for gain, riches and fame, under the humoral excesses of the tropical climate, corroded Portuguese national character was not a new idea; theories of decadence had been elaborated from the mid-16th

* CNRS, Paris. I am grateful to Ângela Barreto Xavier for introducing me to the history of the *Congregação do Oratório de Santa Cruz dos Milagres* in Goa and to Jorge Flores for encouraging me to cross the Bay of Mannar.

¹ Fernão de Queiroz, *Conquista temporal e espiritual de Ceylão* (Colombo, 1916). See also an English translation by S. G. Perera, *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, 3 vols. (Colombo, 1930, rpt. New Delhi, 1992).

century onwards by both metropolitan and Asian diasporic Portuguese administrators and literati.

The reason why Queiroz, who never visited Sri Lanka, decided to write a history of the island with detailed ethnographic and geographical descriptions was closely connected, at least in the beginning, with another literary project much closer to his heart. This was the biography of the Jesuit Brother Pedro de Basto, who became a local Kochi celebrity due to his saintly life and his acclaimed gift of prophecy². Fernão de Queiroz, as well as many of his co-religionists of the period, was particularly sensitive to prophetic figures and events. He was one of the seven Portuguese fathers selected to accompany the Jesuit party of Marcello Mastrilli to India in 1635; Mastrilli's prophetic visions brought him from Naples to Japan and, according to contemporary hagiographies, to his glorious martyrdom³. While some Jesuit fathers were endowed with the gift of seeing the future through a special form of divine intervention, Queiroz's mission in his *Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon* was a call for political, missionary and military action. Implied in Basto's prophecies was that the Portuguese, who were fulfilling the divine plan, would ultimately reconquer Sri Lanka. The time was ripe, claimed Queiroz, to go back and reclaim this land for Portugal and for God.

Another soldier and writer, João Ribeiro, who spent eighteen years in Sri Lanka and saw it slip through Portuguese hands all the way, until the fall of Jaffna in 1658, makes the same point as Queiroz⁴. "This finest piece of land,

² Pedro de Basto, son of António Machado Barbosa, was born in 1570 in Portugal and died in Kochi in 1645. He enlisted as a soldier and went to India in 1586. In 1599, Basto entered the Jesuit order in Goa and remained a spiritual coadjutor, spending his time doing lowly domestic work, as if it were the ultimate spiritual mission, until his death in Kochi in 1645. His prophetic predictions made him a coveted advisor to many local clerical and political figures. He was compelled by his superiors to write an account of his own life, which remained unpublished. Fernão de Queiroz, according to his own words, decided to write Basto's biography, *Historia da vida do veneravel Irmão Pedro de Basto* (published in Lisbon in 1689) because of the miracle that happened in 1664, in which a fire in the Jesuit College of St. Paul in Goa consumed all of his manuscripts, except for the autobiography of Pedro de Basto. Queiroz interpreted the rescue of the manuscript as a sign of Providence.

³ Ines G. Županov, "The History of the Future': Jesuit Mobile Prophecies from Naples to India to Brazil (17th century)" (unpublished), presented at the conference *Mobility and Religion in Political Landscapes (16th-18th centuries)*, organized by Ines G. Županov and Heike Paul for the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*, 2-3 June 2004.

⁴ Ribeiro wrote his book after 1680, when he came back to Lisbon after a long period of military service overseas. The preface is dated Lisbon, 8 January 1685. It was not published until 1836. João Ribeiro, *Fatalidade Histórica da Ilha de Ceilão*, ed. Luís de Albuquerque (Lisbon, 1989).

which the Creator has placed upon this earth” should have been made into the capital of the *Estado da Índia* and the centerpiece of Portugal’s political, military and colonial policy in Asia⁵. Of all the maritime outposts from “Sofala to Japan”, it was Sri Lanka that was worth holding on to, instead of overstretching one’s power along more than “5000 leagues” of coastline and maritime passages⁶. Both Ribeiro and António Bocarro before him emphasized the fact that the interior of the island, in the hands of the king of Candea [Kandy], needed to be conquered in order to secure the island politically, economically and psychologically⁷. The problem was, wrote Bocarro, that the inhabitants of the lowlands, both Christian and non-Christian and presumably under Portuguese control, kept on escaping to the Kandy region whenever they resented Portuguese treatment⁸. As soon as they felt threatened in Kandy, on the other hand, they returned to the coast. It is this inconstancy that was expected to end with the establishment of firm Portuguese rule throughout the island. When the Dutch conquered the lowlands of the island, they experienced the same problem of keeping the population in one place.

In 1688, there was some political will among the Portuguese in Goa to return to Sri Lanka and at least chase the Dutch from the low-lying maritime provinces, and to presumably alleviate the plight of the Catholics. Queiroz concluded his work with the tears of the Christians who were not allowed by the Dutch to practice their religion and with a clearly spelled out obligation “that should animate Portugal to recover that island”⁹. For the Portuguese, however, the reconquest of Sri Lanka was not in the stars, as the *Estado da Índia* continued to shrink, with even Goa and its Northern Territories (*Praças do Norte*) coming under attack from Mughals and Marathas.

There was, however, a small group of pious clerics in Goa, known as Oratorians (*Milagristas, Padres Bragmanes*, etc.), who took Queiroz’s exhortation seriously. The hagiographic literature that grew up around the history of the *Congregação do Oratório de Santa Cruz dos Milagres* and around the biography of one of its members who founded the mission in Sri Lanka, José Vaz, continues to cultivate and polish a smooth and monumental image of both the institution and of its heroic missionary father figure. Starting with the works of Sebastião do Rego, a Goan Brahman and a former Oratorian (celebrated as a “Goan Vieira”) the story proposed – and continues to circulate

⁵ Charles Boxer, *Opera Minora*, vol. II: *Orientalism*, ed. Diogo Ramada Curto (Lisbon, 2002), pp. 93-94.

⁶ Ribeiro, *Fatalidade*, p. 162.

⁷ António Bocarro, *O Livro das plantas de todas as fortalezas, cidades e povoações do Estado da Índia Oriental*, ed. Isabel Cid, 3 vols. (Lisbon, 1992), vol. 2, p. 219.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Queiroz, *Conquista*, p. 993.

today on the internet – seems to be one of seamless Catholic expansion from its centre in Goa, the Rome of the East. Thus, what Oratorians endeavored and achieved in the late 17th century, all the way until the suppression of all religious orders in Goa in 1835, was a continuation of the strategies and techniques used by other religious orders under the Portuguese royal *Padroado*. The Society of Jesus, before it fell out of favor, with its famous method of “accommodation”, is usually given as providing the closest model for the founders of the Oratorian Congregation, most of whom had close ties to the Jesuits and were educated in their institutions in Goa and Rachol.

In this article I will try to dismantle some of the elements in the hagiographic edifice erected around the Oratorian mission in Sri Lanka and built into celebratory “histories” that ultimately succeeded in re-opening the canonization process of José Vaz in the late 20th century. Against the tautologies inherent in celebratory literature and historiography, saturated with, in Michel de Certeau’s words, “identical meanings”, my aim is to show the audaciously self-inventing side of the Congregation of the Oratory of the Cross of Miracles during their first half century in Sri Lanka¹⁰. By recruiting its members exclusively from the Catholic Brahman families in Goa, this Congregation was from its inception both a caste institution and a “new” religious order in Goa. Unable to achieve “spiritual” promotion, that is, to join one of the already established religious orders, these highly educated Brahman priests found their own way to break out of the perceptual prison in which they were locked by the Portuguese colonial and ecclesiastical administration. Openly discriminated against in the local ecclesiastical scene on the basis of their “heathen” heritage and their “tropical” psychological makeup, the “native” priests were in fact recruited from the local “noble” castes, especially Brahmans. However, they were usually relegated to subaltern posts, without benefices and honors. Even if religious orders did at times recruit or claim to recruit “natives”, these cases were extremely rare¹¹. As the number of secular Goan priests was on the increase by the end of the 17th century, complaints about their blocked promotions, and of the linguistic incompetence of the European pastors, were louder and louder¹². Another point of social friction among the local ecclesiastical actors, which escalated in the 18th century, was the rivalry between the Catholic Brahmans and other aspiring castes, such as

¹⁰ Michel de Certeau, “A Variant, Hagio-Graphical Edification”, in *The Writing of History* (New York, 1988), pp. 269-283.

¹¹ Carlos Mercês de Melo, S.J., *The Recruitment and Formation of the Native Clergy in India (16th-19th Century)*. An Historico-Canonical Study (n.p., 1955), pp. 163-164.

¹² Melo, *The Recruitment*, pp. 154, 173.

Charodós, because the former claimed not only the noblest status among all Indians, but also a special right to the office of priesthood¹³.

The foundation of the Congregation of the Oratory of the Cross of Miracles was an ingenious way for the Catholic Brahman priests to position themselves and their lineage (*nação*) higher up, as the occasion permitted, within the local hierarchical colonial structure. Although the life-stories of the Oratorians may lead us to think that they were guided by spiritual quest, which is necessarily based on individual grace, it is also safe to claim that, against the larger political and social canvas of late 17th-century Goa, the Congregation was a communal enterprise geared toward enhancement of status. This is not to say that individuals did not count and that their choices and actions were geared exclusively towards one single goal. On the contrary, the identity politics involved in this enterprise required individual heroes who were ready to undertake risky spiritual and political adventures, to endure losses, and to learn how to orient gains.

It was José Vaz who imprinted his own aspirations and desires onto the shaping of this first religious order of the “native” priests in Goa. He joined the three founding fathers, Pascoal da Costa Jeremias, Custódio Leitão and Bernardo de Coutinho on 25 September 1685 and, according to Sebastião do Rego, “with him entered the Congregation all the good things, even his name meant increase, a felicitous foreboding of what this Congregation would become through this hero”¹⁴. Vaz was already an experienced missionary who had just returned from the Canara, where he had worked for three years as Vicar Forane (*vigário da vara*), earning a reputation as an energetic and saintly person. It is probably under his domineering personality that the order decisively turned towards missionary work in Ceylon, but also among the “native Christians” in Goa where they were called to “reform their customs”¹⁵.

There is a hagiographic version of the events that made José Vaz choose Sri Lanka for the order’s privileged mission territory. He heard in the early eighties, before he went to Canara in 1681, about the “pitiful state of those abandoned Christian people” from “F. de Sardinha, conego da Sé de Goa”, who went to China and stopped in the city of Columbo¹⁶. Ever since, according to

¹³ See the seminal article by Ângela Barreto Xavier, “David contra Golias na Goa seiscentista e setecentista. Escrita identitária e colonização interna”, *Ler História*, 49 (2005), pp. 107-143.

¹⁴ Sebastião de Rego, *Chronologia da Congregação do Oratório de Goa*; Lisbon, Biblioteca da Ajuda [hereafter BA], cod. 51-VII-33, p. 61.

¹⁵ “Parecer do P. Francisco Simões sobre a erecção do Oratório em Goa”, in M. da Costa Nunes, *Documentação para a História da Congregação do Oratório de Santa Cruz dos Milagres do Clero Natural de Goa* (Lisbon, 1966), p. 33.

¹⁶ Rego, *Chronologia*, p. 67.

Rego, Vaz “burnt” with desire to help those abandoned Christians, and in 1686 he left without much preparation and with very few things (a breviary and the *aparelhos da Missa*) for Sri Lanka by land¹⁷. The lack of enthusiasm for his mission, even among his co-religionist, is interpreted by Rego as another sign of providential foresight available only to the chosen.

At the time, his move must have seemed like evidence that he was heading for certain failure. The Dutch had closed off the island from all Portuguese influence, precisely fearing the presence of Catholic priests whom they saw as the fifth column of the *Estado da Índia*. On the other hand, for José Vaz, Sri Lanka was a Promised Land not only for the Portuguese, a belief he probably shared with Pedro de Basto and Fernão Queiroz, but also for his own spiritual and social portfolio, and in the long run for the portfolio of the Catholic Brahman community in Goa. It was in his missionary role that he tried to efface, consciously or unconsciously, the stigma of a heathen past attached to all *cristãos da terra*. By becoming missionaries in a heathen land, in the setting of a primitive church and away from the Portuguese colonial and ecclesiastical administration, something Jesuits desperately tried to recreate in the Madurai Mission across the Gulf of Mannar, José Vaz and his followers would finally manage to reconnect the past and the future of the Catholic Brahman community. Sri Lankan mission territory was for the Oratorians a space of freedom to experience a whole register of pious self-fashioning used and discussed by the Catholic missionaries from the middle of the 16th century. In Goa, a “native” priest was first of all a “native”, and defined by his local caste affiliation. In Sri Lanka, even if only in rumours and stories, a missionary could become for strategic reasons a spy, “a Portuguese”, a washerman, a porter, a doctor, a Brahman, a gentile, a royal translator, a yogi, etc. In the same way, the power and authority to organise communities, to build networks and to erect churches, in secret in Dutch territory or openly in the lands of the Kandyan king, would not have been possible in Goa under conditions of inert ecclesiastical patronage. By taking on roles considered unseemly for the “new” converts from heathenism who had to endlessly prove that they were “authentic” Christians, José Vaz and other Catholic Brahman missionaries in Sri Lanka were able to break through the mirror of ready-made exoticism, which hampered their social and spiritual ambitions. In fact, what they wanted to replace it with may have been equally exotic and imaginary, but it was “their” version of themselves. Even though Sri Lanka was an extremely difficult mission territory (the missionaries were constantly on the road, visiting far away parishes from one end of the island to the other, were under constant threat from Dutch guards and sentinels who had orders to catch and deport all Catholic priests, and, while in the hinterland, had to continue to placate the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Kandyan king) the prestige they were earning in Sri Lanka and in Goa was enormous.

The Oratorian mission in Sri Lanka enabled writers like António João de Frias, a Brahman parish priest in Goa, at the turn of the 18th century to elaborate discursively the pro-Brahman arguments in the battle of identity politics among the status-ambitious Indian subjects to the Portuguese Crown¹⁸. Shored up by the missionary experience of the Oratorians, these writers brought to light the inherent constancy of the Brahmans who were selflessly zealous missionaries in the present, as they were in the past during the early Christianization of India at the time of St. Thomas the Apostle. Careful reinterpretation of the sacred history of conversion during early apostolic times, and during the contemporary mission in Sri Lanka, was used as proof for the old claim of the Goan Catholic Brahmans – that they were the natural priestly caste of the Indians. It was also proof that Catholic Brahmans could and would do, with equal ability, what Portuguese soldiers and missionaries were unable or unwilling to do in Asia for the benefit of the Portuguese Crown.

Same Color, Same Language, Same Customs, Same Temperament

One of the advantages of employing the “native” catechists in the Christianization of Asia was the issue of linguistic ability and translation. The topazes and interpreters were, early on, considered as untrustworthy, and the learning of Asian languages became imperative for those who specialised in frontier missionary fields¹⁹. Even in Goa, where the Portuguese language became an official instrument of administration, Konkani continued its underground existence within the Christian families of the converts. The majority of the population in the villages never even had a chance to learn the language of the European masters. Although the Jesuits and some other missionary orders did learn Konkani and translated confession manuals, lives of the saints and other catechetical works, by the end of the 17th century these vernacular parishes were mostly in the hands of the native priests²⁰.

¹⁸ António João de Frias, *Aureola dos Indios & Nobiliarchia Bracmana, tratado historico, genealogico, panegyrico, politico, & moral* (Lisbon, 1702). For an excellent discussion on identity politics and the “native” elite in Goa, see Ângela Barreto Xavier, “A Invenção de Goa, Poder imperial e Conversões Culturais nos Séculos XVI e XVII”, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, European University Institute (Florence), 2003.

¹⁹ Ines G. Županov, *Missionary Tropics, Jesuit Frontier in India (16th-17th century)* (An Arbor, 2005), especially ch. 7 (“Twisting a Pagan Tongue: Portuguese and Tamil in Jesuit Translations”).

²⁰ Melo, *The Recruitment*, p. 173. In 1705 there were reportedly 2,500 native priests in Goa.

The Oratorians were not parish priests, but undertook visitation missions to the villages and the towns in Goa where native confessors and preachers were needed especially during the holiday season (Easter in particular). By the beginning of the 18th century they were much in demand and had to decline invitations. Part of their success, according to the friendly account of a Jesuit, Francisco Simão, was the fact that their “color, language, customs and temperament are similar to those of the people they deal with”²¹. As favorable as it is, this statement is also condescending, not because it underscores the similarities between generic gentiles or converted natives, but because it downgraded their missionary skills to simple facts of biology combined with cultural routines (idiom and custom) acquired at home. This is as if to say that their education and extraordinary motivation counted for less than their natural qualities, especially since the same qualities may also be disparaged in other contexts. Under the humoral theory of persons, dark skin and life in the tropical belt made people more effeminate, inconstant, treacherous and so on. Even Dom Custódio de Pinho, the bishop of Hyerapolis and the Vicar Apostolic to the Great Mughal and to Golconda, appointed by the Propaganda Fide, and himself a Goan Brahman, in his written testimony repeated the words of Francisco Simão, but added an important clarification. Besides colour, language and behavior, these native priest were also knowledgeable about “heathen” rites and “barbaric sects”²². It took a lifetime for a European to acquire this strategic knowledge, but it was at the fingertips of indigenous priests.

From the mission field, the bond of similarity between the missionaries and the natives of Sri Lanka was both implied and undermined by the Oratorians²³. From their letters and the reports embedded in Sebastião do Rego’s text, the missionaries creatively manipulated proximity and distance to their charges, to the heathens and to the “heretics” (Protestants). There were certain similarities, such as skin color, that they skillfully used whenever possible.

In 1697, almost ten years after his arrival in Sri Lanka, José Vaz was finally joined by two other Oratorians, José de Meneses and José Carvalho. At that time, Vaz decided that José de Meneses would stay in the low-lands of the island, while José de Carvalho would join him in the mission in Kandy. Skin color determined Vaz’s decision to leave Meneses in Putalão [Puttalam], a coastal town under the jurisdiction of the king of Kandy, Vimaladharmasurya II (r. 1687-1707), in order to minister to some 1000 Christians who lived around it

²¹ Francisco Simões, S.I., *Parecer*, 15 January 1690, BA, 51-IX-34, ff. 238v-239r.

²² *Certidão*, Custódio de Pinho, 10 November 1693, BA, 51-IX-34, ff. 247v-248r.

²³ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 229. A report written in Goa on the basis of letters from Sri Lanka mentioned Francisco Simão’s statement about Oratorians being “helped by similarity of color, by communication in languages, by the same clothes and by knowledge of rites...”.

and to undertake visitation-missions all the way down south to Colombo²⁴. Meneses was white²⁵. José Carvalho, “who had the color of the natives”, that is dark, was to accompany Vaz, incidentally also his uncle, to the mountainous kingdom of Kandy²⁶. Pero Ferrão, a priest from Margão, who arrived on his own in Sri Lanka and later joined the Congregation, was also considered colored enough to blend in with the people of the island. He was assigned a mission in Vanni and Jaffna, among the Tamils. When during the persecution in 1708, a sixty six year old Simão da Cruz, a Christian from Negombo, was asked if the father (Manuel de Miranda) who stirred the commotion in the region was “white or black”, he responded that “in some things he was white, but that he is not sure about the caste although he heard he was a Brahman”²⁷.

Proficiency in Tamil and Sinhalese counted even more than skin color. José de Meneses was initially assigned to Puttalam and asked not to venture out into Dutch territory because of his “imperfect language”²⁸. The particular language in question is not clear, since the missionaries had to learn both Tamil and Sinhalese. Just like Jesuits, the Oratorians began learning Tamil on their way to Sri Lanka, either in Kochi or Kollam or on the Fishery Coast, but unlike the Jesuits they never complained about linguistic difficulties²⁹. While the Jesuits transformed the apprenticeship of Indian languages into a special type of martyrdom or a special divine gift, José Vaz and his followers took it as just another everyday, profane activity³⁰. José de Meneses and José Carvalho learned Tamil in Kollam (Quilon), from March to October of 1696, and they took classes with a Jesuit Manoel Pereyra who taught them without a grammar (*Arte*) and only some basic principles³¹. They also took classes from a Malavar (Tamil) teacher in order to learn to read and write, and they paid him 2 *pardaos*

²⁴ *Atestado*, António João Frias, 5 November 1701, BA, 51-IX-34, ff. 245r-v.

²⁵ *Relação*, 1701, BA, 51-IX-27, f. 261r. Technically, he said “cores brancas” which may also mean in this context “whiter in color”. The definition of white may vary in the reports. A person of Portuguese ancestry like António da Horta, an important official in the palace of the King of Kandy, was addressed as “white”, because he was a friend of Vaz. On the other hand, some other people, also of Portuguese ancestry, are called *mestiços*, a term mostly used by the Oratorians as a disparaging remark on one’s character.

²⁶ José Vaz, 28 February 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 14v.

²⁷ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 353.

²⁸ José Vaz, 10 September 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 262r.

²⁹ Sebastião do Rego, *Vida do Venerável Padre José Vaz* (first ed. 1745, third edition, Goa, 1962), p. 66.

³⁰ Županov, *Missionary Tropics*, ch. 7.

³¹ The Jesuit was their school colleague from Goa (*condiscipulo em alguns dias na primaria*), José Menezes and José Carvalho, 2 February 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, ff. 12r, 13r.

per month.³² All these efforts at learning Tamil were prompted by the “Padre Governador” of Kochi, the Dominican bishop Dom Frey Pedro de Pacheco, who did not allow them to begin their mission without learning Tamil sufficiently well. This was partly for their own security, and partly in order not to compromise the Jesuit missionaries and parish priests on the Fishery Coast who were under Dutch jurisdiction³³. Once in Sri Lanka, according to some of their passing remarks in letters and reports, it took them at least another year to improve their language skills.

Some Oratorians did not simply learn languages in order to hear confessions and preach, but also became writers in Tamil and Sinhalese. The case in point is Jácome Gonçalves who arrived in 1706. José Vaz was reputed to have written the first Sinhalese dictionary for the use of the missionaries, as well as a Catechism and a manual of prayers, litanies and meditations (*The Way of the Cross*)³⁴. At one point he was also employed by the king of Kandy in translating a treatise on medicine written in Portuguese³⁵.

Behind the label – “the same language” – applied to Oratorian missionaries by the European ecclesiastic establishment in Goa, there was a huge amount of linguistic apprenticeship, for which they demanded no credit. It may have been easier for the Konkani native-speakers to learn Tamil and Sinhalese, that much is clear³⁶. However, for foregrounding and sustaining their authority and social purchase in the context of Goan and metropolitan politics, language competence in other “Indian” vernaculars was not enough precisely because it was presumed “natural” to the natives.

Equally difficult to fend off or turn into profit was the label – “the same temperament (*génio*)”. Father Bartolomeu de Quental, the founder of the Congregação do Oratório de Lisboa, under whose wing the Goan priests were able to organize their own congregation, wrote indignantly in 1698 that “with this (mission in Sri Lanka) it should stop the fame that the natives are inconstant”³⁷. As usual, the letters from the mission and the hagiographies are as completely silent on this particular “similarity” as they are on the label of “the same customs”. If some topics had to be wished away, some others are, at first sight, surprisingly or symptomatically absent.

³² José Menezes and José Carvalho, 2 February 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 12r.

³³ On their way to Sri Lanka, the Oratorians needed help and protection from the priests stationed on the Fishery Coast. These were under Dutch surveillance, especially in Tuticorin, the port from where they could get a boat across the Gulf of Mannar.

³⁴ The text of *The Way of the Cross* was later revised and reissued by Jácome Gonçalves.

³⁵ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 256.

³⁶ According to linguists Konkani is an Indo-European language (as is Sinhalese) with some Dravidian features. Tamil is a major Dravidian language.

³⁷ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 138.

One would expect to see long descriptions and treatises on gentile rites and customs that the Oratorians presumably knew so well. In the letters written from the field, these kinds of ethnographic narratives are almost entirely absent. Passages found in Rego's *Chronologia* are few, and may have been taken from other sources as well. Obviously, missionaries were not particularly impressed or shocked by the "alterity" of customs, nor were they curious to know more about them. Unlike Robert Knox, a British merchant who spent 20 years in captivity in Kandy and who left detailed descriptions of the palace of the king and all the major festivals, with only a rudimentary understanding of some of the cultural expressions, the Oratorians tended to write not about what they saw, but about what they did³⁸.

What they were passionate about was their own position on the local political chessboard, maintaining and developing their missionary networks, and sanctifying their own missionary gestures through miraculous events.

Spies in Disguise between Heretics and Gentiles

José Vaz arrived on the Sri Lankan scene in 1688 as a one-man band. It is not clear whether other members of the brand-new, though unofficial Congregation to which he belonged from 1685 knew in advance that his ultimate goal was to reach Sri Lanka. He left under the pretext of visiting the Kanara mission where he worked as a Vicar Forane between 1681 and 1684. Although hagiographies paint him as already showing characteristics of a saint, this mission did not go all that well. He was sent by the Archbishop of Goa as a representative of the Portuguese *Padroado* to stand up to another Catholic Brahman priest Tomás de Castro, who was sent as a Vicar Apostolic by the Propaganda Fide in Rome. Instead of resorting to a typical strategy of the *Padroado* clergy, of not recognizing the prelates sent by the Propaganda Fide, Vaz did something that the Goan ecclesiastical administration refused to do – he actually checked and read Tomás de Castro's papal letters of appointment and found them genuine. As a result, he was quickly revoked back to Goa. It is possible that Vaz had learned an important lesson at this point, and that his escape to Sri Lanka was also partly an escape from the Goan ecclesiastical and colonial mud in which he was sinking, his apostolic ideals having no future there. In fact, at the same time as Vaz planned his clandestine mission to the south, the Propaganda Fide was also trying to persuade the Catholic emperor Leopold I of Austria and the Vicar Apostolic of the Netherlands, Johannes van Neercassel, to acquire permission

³⁸ Captain Robert Knox, *An historical relation of the Island Ceylon, in the East-Indies* (London, 1681). I consulted a French translation, *Relation de l'Île de Ceylan*, intr. Eric Meyer (Paris, 1983).

for at least some European missionaries to enter Sri Lanka³⁹. With his arrival, the Royal Portuguese *Padroado* in fact gained ground against Propaganda. This is why the Oratorians in Goa suddenly acquired an excellent reputation, which even led to a quarrel between the Archbishop of Goa and the Bishop of Kochi regarding the direct jurisdiction over the mission in Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka, Vaz left behind the controversy between *Padroado* and Propaganda, although it would try to catch up with him later when the Vicar Apostolic Thomas Maillard de Tournon passed through Pondicherry on his way to Macau in 1704⁴⁰. This ill-fated prelate may have tried secretly to persuade Vaz to forge closer ties with the Propaganda Fide, but the effort was in vain. For the Oratorian missionaries, the political game and the major actors to watch out for were in Sri Lanka, not elsewhere. The quarrel between the Portuguese *Padroado* and Propaganda Fide was not something to meddle in, especially for a Portuguese subject.

For the first ten years of his solitary apostolate, Vaz established mission-stations according to the particular geo-political division of the island⁴¹. While most of the low-lying maritime territories were in the Dutch East India Company's hands, the forest and mountain areas around Kandy belonged to the king Vimaladharmasurya II. There was a sea of mistrust between these two political units, which enabled Vaz to break the Dutch religious embargo on Catholicism throughout the island.

During the first three years, Vaz's apostolic activities were based mostly in the Jaffna region, where his presence was a contributing factor to bringing persecution against the Catholics. An order to clamp down the Catholics was given by the "Commissary of the heretics" (*commissario dos hereges*), *Henrique Vuanrey* [Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein]⁴². Although also known for his botanical work and his friendship with Discalced Carmelites

³⁹ Apostolic Vicar of the Dutch Mission, Johannes van Neercassel (1663-1686) was a titular Bishop of Castoria. In spite of these negotiations the government of the Netherlands refused to allow any Catholic missionary to enter the island.

⁴⁰ See a letter written by José Vaz to Thomas Maillard de Tournon in 1706, Nunes, *Documentação*, pp. 289-293.

⁴¹ He was with João de Bragança, who went back due to health problems, and with João Vaz (a Gauda) who was his servant boy and grew into his coadjutor. He was sent to Goa to be ordained and was supposed to return, but he never did. There is an article written about him (that was not available to me) by Constâncio Roque Monteiro, "A Epopeia do Escravo" (see Rego, *Vida*, p. 69).

⁴² According to the report of a Jesuit, André Freyre, there were persecutions on the Fishery Coast as well. He mentioned that bad news came from Holland, which made van Rheede *irritado* and provoked his anger against Christians. There are no details about the content of this message. Report, 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 3r-v; and Report, 1701, BA, ms. 51-IX-34, f. 220r-v.

on the Malabar Coast, van Rhee, Commissioner General of the VOC, gathered an army of Dutch soldiers and local *lascarins* commanded by a heathen *canarim* Babapatten, and mounted a raid on Christmas Eve of 1689 of all Catholic churches and oratories of the Christian Vellalas in the area of Jaffna⁴³. Some three hundred Christian Vellalas were arrested, men and women both, and put in prison and tortured, according to the Jesuit André Freyre, superior of the Madurai Mission⁴⁴. Only a few, Vaz among them, managed to slip through, and according to the Jesuit, this *canarim* father and a “Brahman from Sancoalle” made himself into a “Proteus in a variety of disguises”⁴⁵. The last minute escape from the persecution became a topos in Oratorian missionary letters and acquired a miraculous dimension in reports written in Goa which were meant to be read by the Viceroy, the *Junta das Missões*, *Conselho Ultramarino* (Overseas Council) and the King. The game the missionaries played in the “heretic” lands was to move freely, under the noses of the Dutch sentinels, dressed as the lowest beggars, fish sellers or porters.

The “protean” mission of the low country under the heretics demanded constant movement, secrecy, and a complete trust in local Christians⁴⁶. There were no public churches. Private houses were used for the Mass and the missionary often had to carry the “aparelho da Missa” on his back from one place to another. The permanent missions, “without fear of the Dutch”, were in the areas under the sovereignty of the Kandyan king. When the first three missionaries sent from Goa arrived in 1697, Vaz had already worked out where to send them. José de Meneses went to Puttalam and Pedro Ferrão to the region of Vanni, from where they traveled all year long to other places deeper and deeper into Dutch territory. Thus Ferrão’s church, located in a place where a hundred Christians were permanently settled, was occasionally attended by Christians from Mantota, Mannar island, Renery and Jaffna. However, he also regularly went to visit those places secretly (*ocultamente*). The advantage of his location was that the lord of Vanni, who was only nominally a vassal of the King of Kandy to whom he paid “an annual tribute of a few elephants”, was baptized with all his family. The problem was, according to Ferrão, that he continued to live as a gentile and an apostate. This particular patron was phased out from later correspondence, but what is clear is that he was hostile to the

⁴³ *Canarim* is a vague term designating an inhabitant of Kanara or Karnataka. The Portuguese used this term, erroneously according to Dalgado, to refer to the natives of Goa. *Lascarim* means a gentile soldier. Together with Brahmans, Vellalas belong to the most honorable Tamil castes in Sri Lanka. Sebastião Rodolfo Dalgado, *Glossário Luso-Asiático* (Coimbra, 1919), pp. 197-198.

⁴⁴ Nunes, *Documentação*, pp. 129, 215.

⁴⁵ *Report*, 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 3v.

⁴⁶ José Vaz, 10 September 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, ff. 263v-264r.

Dutch⁴⁷. According to José de Meneses, “he promised that if anyone under his jurisdiction denounced his visit to the heretics, or if through somebody some misfortune comes to the father, he would immediately cut off his head”⁴⁸. In later years, Mantota became the center of Oratorian activity, though in the beginning Ferrão described his mission habitat as “living in the forest like a hermit among the animals”⁴⁹.

The port town of Puttalam was another center from which missionaries made their apostolic incursions southwards to Negombo, Colombo and eastwards to Kottiyar and Trincomalee. José de Meneses was the first to reside and to die in this place in 1723, after almost thirty years of missionary life. Before him, Puttalam was a refuge for both João de Bragança, who returned to Goa in 1689, and José Vaz before he left for Kandy in 1692⁵⁰. As one of the biggest missions, numbering 1000 Christians at the end of the 17th century, it became a Catholic bastion in the lowlands of Sri Lanka in the 18th century⁵¹. Initially Puttalam was, according to Menezes, partly Christian, partly Muslim and the headman was an apostate, but as with the lord of Vanni, he was well-disposed to the fathers. “If the Lord grants us mercy with this Muslim, all those who are of muqueros [Mukkava] caste will convert”⁵². In the course of the time, Menezes built a “good” church. A house and some “cubicles” were added, as in the church of the Holy Cross of Miracles in Goa, for the use of the fathers. By the time he died, it was the only public church on the island covered with *telhas* (roofing tiles)⁵³. At the same time, the other public church in Kandy was covered with *ollas* (palm leaves) because of the royal interdiction against using roofing tiles. They were reserved exclusively for the palace of the king⁵⁴. Puttalam, a town under royal jurisdiction, was obviously far enough for this rule not to be applied to the letter. The geographical distance between Kandy and Puttalam, according to the missionary measures, was eight days on foot through extremely rough terrain, especially during a long rainy season.

Against all odds, secret Catholicism flourished in the *terras baixas*, the low country, and even gained prestige with the Dutch persecutions. The missionaries’ job was mostly to re-convert former Catholics who were either “perverted” by the “heretics” or who had simply sunk back into “heathenism”.

⁴⁷ In 1704, he is referred to as a friend of the Oratorians. Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 258.

⁴⁸ José Meneses, 14 May 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 16r.

⁴⁹ Pedro Ferrão, 10 April 1697 BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 16r.

⁵⁰ João de Bragança returned as a missionary to Sri Lanka in 1725. Nunes, *Documentação*, pp. 662, 682.

⁵¹ José Vaz, 10 September 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 262r.

⁵² José Meneses, 14 May 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 16r.

⁵³ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 610.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 610.

Unlike the Madurai Mission across the Gulf of Mannar, where the Jesuits plowed a hostile heathen land, inch by inch, in order to prepare it for the seeds of the Christian message, Oratorians in Sri Lanka were mostly employed in weeding out diabolical overgrowth. When the last Portuguese priest was expelled, or rather beheaded, after the fall of Jaffna, there were an estimated 250,000 Christians on the island⁵⁵. Philip Baldaeus, who was the first of the Dutch Predikants to reflect on the religious situation, gave a detailed report, not without some admiration, on the network of Catholic churches and schools that the Dutch inherited from the Portuguese⁵⁶. In the Jaffna region where he was sent to plant the seeds of Reformed Christianity, while four other Predikants were invited from Batavia to come and minister to the southern Church councils (*Kerkraad*), Baldaeus recorded with obsessive punctiliousness all the relevant numbers. "According to the Church registers (called here *Patolas*) in the year 1663, there were of Christian Men and Women in the Kingdom of Jaffnapatnam 62558, not including the Slaves, whereof there were 2587"⁵⁷.

In the early days of the Dutch conquest, the Predikants optimistically thought that it would be easy to take over and reform these Catholic communities and networks. The task proved very complicated. Respectful of kinship and community, and based on public rituals and celebrations, Catholicism was more easily assimilated into the web of existing social relations in the 16th century. In particular, certain groups and individuals who had been invited to become partners in the Portuguese colonial game were susceptible to religious "migration". Portuguese names that the Dutch found scattered throughout the low country, as well as the Portuguese language, were deeply rooted vestiges of the former European rulers. The policy of imposing pecuniary fines on transgressions such as not teaching Dutch to one's household, and of denying honors and employment for the VOC to Catholic and "heathen" headmen, fed widespread resentment, sporadic rebellions and migration towards the interior under the jurisdiction of the Kandyan kingdom⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power in Ceylon, 1658-1687* (New Delhi, 1988), p. 217.

⁵⁶ Philip Baldaeus, *A Description of East India coasts of Malabar and Coromandel and also of the Isle of Ceylon with their adjacent kingdoms & provinces and of the idolatry of the pagans in the East Indies* (rpt., New Delhi, 1996; first published in Amsterdam, 1672), pp. 792-808.

⁵⁷ Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power*, p. 218, Baldaeus, *Description*, p. 810. Patolo = silk cloth. James Emerson Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon*, (rpt. New Delhi, 1998; first published in London, 1850), p. 44.

⁵⁸ Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power*, 219. François Valentijn, *Description of Ceylon*, trans. Sinnappah Arasaratnam (London, 1978). Valentijn gives a summary of Church history in Sri Lanka in the fifth volume, which is not included in this edition.

Without evincing an excessive penchant for exact numbers and accounting, the reports of the Oratorian missionaries reveal the pace of their progress and success in rewiring Catholic worship during their first fifty years in the field. From an estimated 25,000 Christians, one fifth of whom were in Kandy and Vanni in 1703, the number grew to between 50,000 and 55,000 in 1723⁵⁹. In the same way, the number of consecrated churches at the time of José Vaz's arrival in 1688 was close to zero, since there were no priests available on the island. In 1704 the number reached 50 and by 1717, according to Sebastião do Rego, there were 15 big and some 400 small churches.

According to José Vaz, one of the crucial, or as he would put it, providential factors in the missionaries' success was the Kingdom of Kandy. In 1697, he wrote that "to have a church and the fathers in this city enables the Christians in other places to assist fathers publicly and freely and to do their obligations. All this was done before in fear and in secrecy"⁶⁰. The more the Dutch persecuted the missionaries and sent demands to the kingdom of Kandy to arrest the intruders, the better were they treated by King Vimaladharmasurya II. Moreover, while Catholic public services were forbidden in the low lands, Catholics were allowed to celebrate with ostentation in the capital. Vaz could not help evoking the irony of the current situation. "when ours [Portuguese] were masters of these lands", he reminded his readers, there was a church in Kandy, but the fathers did not have the same "liberty" as the Oratorians did in his times⁶¹. The times were obviously topsy-turvy. An Asian heathen king protected the Catholic fathers and their charges, while a European, but "heretic" administration did everything to "pervert" the Catholics and stamp out their religion.

The reversal of the situation is, of course, attributed to the effects of Divine intervention. Just as the Jesuit brother Pedro de Basto predicted that the reconquest of Sri Lanka was imminent, this time it was to be a spiritual takeover. On the ground, even when covered by a thin or thick celebratory or providential veneer, the missionaries also proved to be excellent political strategists. There is no doubt that the enmity against the Dutch favored the entrance of José Vaz and Oratorian missionaries to the kingdom of Kandy, but their continuing success was a result of hard work. It is often said that Vimaladharmasurya II collected "foreigners", just as his predecessor Rajasinha

⁵⁹ The estimate of 25,000 was given in Vaz's letter to Thomas Maillard de Tournon in 1706, Nunes, *Documentação*, pp. 289-293. The number of 50,000 is given in "Sumária Notícia sobre a Missão de Ceilão", Goa, 28 December 1723, in Nunes, *Documentação*, pp. 652-654.

⁶⁰ José Vaz, 10 September 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 622v.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, f. 263v; Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 253.

II (r. 1635-1687) had done⁶². Mounting isolation imposed on the kings by the Dutch who controlled maritime access to the island made them welcome “foreigners”, especially those with skills and information difficult to obtain locally.

Vaz interpreted his captivity during the first three years of his stay in Kandy as the product of the king’s obsession with spies, which was fanned by Dutch rumours⁶³. He even admonished his superiors in Goa never to write to him about issues concerning “secular government, because people here understand our office as purely about service to God and salvation of souls”⁶⁴. In addition, Vaz requested that in the response no mention was to be made as to how the letter arrived to Goa and about his whereabouts. For the next fifty years at least, these instructions were followed to the letter. Especially in Kandy, the missionaries were placed in a complex and ambiguous situation in which they had to both deny and affirm their connection with the Portuguese. They were even accused by certain high officials, such as the *vedor da fazenda* (a treasury official, controller of revenues), of siding with the heretics and spying on the court⁶⁵. From the beginning, Vaz had “negotiated” the right to visit Catholics scattered within the Kandyan kingdom, and he also ventured into Dutch territory without permission. Hence the accusation. The tacit agreement was that one father always stayed in town, as a sort of honorary hostage, while the other went on visitation. When José Carvalho died, Vaz obtain permission for another missionary to come and join him. Rarely more than two to three missionaries resided in Kandy, since permission was not always readily granted.

In the early 18th century some missionaries, such as Jácome Gonçalves, Inácio de Almeida and Crisóstomo Fernandes earned an honorable place within the court of the new king Narendrasinha (r. 1707-1739), who accended to the throne at the age of sixteen. He organized and encouraged public discussions between Catholics and Protestants and, according to the missionary reports, took interest in theological arguments and in books written in Tamil and Sinhalese by Jácome Gonçalves⁶⁶. In 1714, the King ordered his surgeons to try to cure Jácome Gonçalves’s mouth ailment (*achaque na boca*) from which he suffered for almost a year⁶⁷. It was also said that Inácio de Almeida became “a

⁶² See, for example, Knox and Valentijn’s *Description of Ceylon*, p. 141.

⁶³ José Vaz, 10 September 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 262v.

⁶⁴ José Vaz, 27 October 1693, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 7v.

⁶⁵ José Vaz, 28 May 1699, BA, ms. 51-VII-34, f. 232r. The accuser was punished for his “foul” language with a sudden wound in his mouth.

⁶⁶ Nunes, *Documentação*, pp. 489, 536.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 442, 536.

[fac] *totum* for the King”⁶⁸. For his services, he received presents, but was also obliged to stay in the royal city, moved to Angrequita [Hangurangketa], and was thus unable to visit the Christian outposts in the region on a regular basis⁶⁹. He managed, however, to combine his assignments (*negócios*) for the King with a pastoral visitation when he was sent to Sitavaka and to Colombo. Although there is nothing in the report about what kind of *negócio* Almeida performed in Sitavaka in 1712, the king was particularly pleased and sent him the next day (on Christmas day) a few collector’s items from the palace – “a nice chasuble from the time of the Portuguese reign, ten paintings, ten *passos divinos*, a silver lime holder (*chunambeiro de prata*) that he himself used [...] and later a large and curious candlestick”⁷⁰.

Further, the king favored other “foreigners” or half-foreigners. One of them, Pedro Gascão, was converted by Jácome Gonçalves and became a friend and protector of the missionaries. He was a son of “a mestiça” woman and a Frenchman who came with the embassy and who never left the island. José Vaz mentioned De Lanorelle and his companions (thirty of them) as his fierce enemies and staunch Calvinists⁷¹. Pedro Gascão was therefore born into a Calvinist family and became an *adigar*⁷². He gained the king’s favor after an unsuccessful coup d’état by a rival *disava*⁷³. When the rebellion was quelled, he personally cut off the heads of the culprits. According to Almeida, the *adigar* was “inclined to the white people because he did not trust the Sinhalese”. The category “white” is obviously applied here very generously to all *mestiços* and priests sent by the Portuguese. In fact, the missionaries were often called *padres portugueses*. Jácome Gonçalves ultimately converted Gascão after a religious dispute, but in fact, it may have been easier than that. As a little boy he was taught to read and write by José Vaz, who made him write down sentences such as “Hail Mary, full of grace”⁷⁴.

The network of patrons and clients carefully cultivated an enhanced level of missionary visibility, as well as increased their political prestige, while in the kingdom of Kandy. However, it also provoked enmities and persecutions from the rival contenders, especially Sinhalese nobles, Buddhist monks and other religious specialists. Churches were destroyed by the landlords who demanded

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 510. By *passos divinos*, Almeida may well mean the Passion of Christ.

⁷¹ On Nanclars de la Norelle’s embassy see, Abbé Carré, *The Travels of the Abbé Carré in India and the Near East 1672 to 1674* (rpt., New Delhi, 1990), vol. 2, p. 425. See also Knox, *Relation de l’Ile*, pp. 276-280.

⁷² Chief minister to the king of Kandy.

⁷³ Administrator of a province.

⁷⁴ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 507.

their land back and instigated villagers to demolish the buildings. Accusations were made of religious abominations such as performing baptisms with the blood from a severed cow's tail. These were only some of the dangers brought on by the missionaries' success⁷⁵. Moreover the Oratorians' strategy of maintaining a strict division between their lowland missions and the missions in Kandy made them forever suspicious of spying from one or the other side. Some of their "disguises" also became well known.

As opposed to the "secular" disguise used in the lowlands, while in the mountain kingdom, José Vaz wore the long habit of an Oratorian in Goa⁷⁶. According to descriptions, he always walked barefoot and never washed his feet except in the rivers and brooks. He wore a black cassock, mended over and over until the Christians begged him to discard it and leave it as a relic. For the first ten years of the apostolate he proudly wore the only cassock he brought with him from Goa. Underneath he had drawers and a tunic that never went to the washer but were simply replaced when "the color and the form were completely lost"⁷⁷. In a word, missionaries in Kandy were disguised as themselves, members of a religious order from Goa. They looked more "authentic" among the heathens than among the "heretics".

It is possible that some local religious specialists "imitated" the missionary dress code. According to Inácio de Almeida, "Passing through the street there was an *anddy*, who is a heathen penitent, dressed in black; the king saw him from the window and asked the adigar behind him who was that person, thinking that he was one of us"⁷⁸. Finding out that this was not the case, the king told him angrily that he did not give him permission to be dressed like the fathers, and that the next time he would be punished if he were found dressed like that. The local political order was based on publicly visible differences, and a specified dress code helped enforce this order. Nobody was allowed to disguise him- or herself as somebody else. Even the king had to play his role perfectly, as an invisible idol kept behind the curtains and surrounded with candles⁷⁹. This was a very different situation from the lowlands, where self-fashioning was part of the daily survival strategy for the missionaries and possibly for other social groups and individuals.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 529.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 510.

⁷⁹ Rego, *Vida*, p. 277. The royal audience was given with the visitor prostrated in front of the king. For some 18th century Dutch illustrations (namely the interesting watercolour by Jan Brandes, c. 1785), see R. K. de Silva and W. G. M. Beumer, *Illustrations and Views of Dutch Ceylon, 1602-1796* (London and Leiden, 1988), pp. 341-343.

The Oratorians did not hold a monopoly on dissembling. In order to bring the king's bride from Madurai against the wishes of the Nayak, who demanded "rich and large presents", disguise and secrecy were necessary until she reached Dutch ships in Nagapattinam (Negapatão). From Jaffna, the future queen was escorted with great pomp to the kingdom of Kandy⁸⁰. In spite of this instance, collaboration between the King and the Dutch was on the whole far from unequivocal, as Inácio de Almeida felt on his own skin. In 1714, he was sent to Colombo by the King to "negotiate some trinkets (*brincos*) from Holland"⁸¹. When he finished the job and sent the stuff (*fato*) to Kandy in all secrecy, he stayed on to minister to the Christians. For a price of 50 *patacas*, a boy denounced him to the Dutch and he was taken prisoner. That was the end of his disguise, since he admitted and answered all the questions "without hiding anything"⁸². The moment of truth was as desired as the disguise. It was another side of the same medal and the missionaries were prepared to play the new role equally well⁸³. In fact, at one point in 1708, after a period in which the Dutch showed relative tolerance or indifference to missionary successes in the region, Manuel de Miranda demanded that the Catholics in Colombo publicly proclaim their faith. The richest and the most honorable urban Catholics with Portuguese names, such as the two *mudaliyar* brothers Dom Afonso and Dom Lourenço Pereira, Simão da Cruz, and many others, supported this initiative as did other Catholic castes, such as the Paravas in particular, but in the end they lost the wager⁸⁴. The Dutch in Sri Lanka refused to make any concessions. The authorities in Batavia, where most of the leaders of this religious rebellion were

⁸⁰ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 427. There exists a different version of this story, which is discussed by Lorna Srimathie Dewaraja, "Matrimonial Alliances between Tamilnad and the Sinhalese Royal Family in the 18th Century and the Establishment of a Madurai Dynasty in Kandy", *Fourth International Tamil Conference Seminar* (Jaffna, Tamil Eelam January 1974). According to Sinhalese and Dutch sources the brides who were brought across to Ceylon were of royal birth. The Tamil document referring to these marriage alliances contradicts this view, obviously serving a different political agenda, regarding the ancestry of Narendrasinha's queen. According to this Tamil document, entitled *Narrative of the Affairs of Kandidesam*, the Nayak of Madura at the time, Vijayaranga Cokkanatha (1688-1732), was enraged at the audacity of the king of Kandy, who had dared to ask for a bride from his royal household. A poor Hindu subject of the Nayak accepted the gifts from the Kandyan envoys and gave them his daughter. The Tamil text was edited and translated by Rev. William Taylor in *Oriental Historical Manuscripts, in the Tamil Language*, vol. II (Madras, 1835), appendix G, pp. 42-49.

⁸¹ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 522.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 523.

⁸³ Almeida was sent on a long journey to Holland via Tuticorin and Kochi and managed to return to Goa via Lisbon in 1718 (*ibid.*, p. 613).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 333-371.

sent in exile or to stand trial, were relatively more flexible and ready to negotiate⁸⁵. It is also possible that the Catholic demands for “religious freedom” came as a result of dissensions between the Predikants and the government, and were connected to some other local grievances against Dutch policies in Negombo and Colombo⁸⁶. Missionary sources stop short of providing a clear sociological context for the unrest they provoked, and in the next two or three years, we get only snippets of what happened later. Some of the *degredados* were sent from Batavia to Tuticorin, some returned to Colombo and regained some of their property, and some died along the way.

Travelers, Exorcists and Small Pox

Two decades after the arrival of José Vaz in Sri Lanka, the influence and importance of a handful of zealous Goan priests reached vertiginous heights. According to their own reports they were stirring rebellions in the maritime lowlands and winning favors at the Kandy court. Their strategy of disguising themselves as “Sinhalese” among the Dutch and as “Portuguese priests” among the Sinhalese was obviously working well. Although physically they resembled the “natives” of the island, and culturally they were certainly close to the Portuguese, the missionaries themselves had a complex sense of their own multiple selves. They were experiencing on their own skin the effects of political hierarchies of low and highland Sri Lanka, in addition to their equally layered status in Goa, which was in the process of being negotiated by their co-religionists, all of whom belonged to the same Brahman caste.

The multiplicity of identities that the Goan Brahman priests had to identify with and act out did not make them even a bit cynical, as was usually the case with secular professionals and unbelievers. Neither were they pushed into suspicions of cultural (and religious) relativism, nor did they begin to thaw under the diversity of their performative tasks. At least they left no visible marks on the surface of their texts. Unlike the Jesuit missionaries across the sea in the Madurai mission who had to specialize in their “roles” among the heathens, the Oratorians dressed and undressed depending on geographical location and occasion. In Madurai, the Jesuits who were trained to become “Roman *sannyasis*” and to emulate the Brahmanical model of sanctity in order to convert and minister to the highest castes continued to wear the prescribed outfit and to eat vegetarian food even when outside their mission field⁸⁷. A less

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

⁸⁶ For the period fifty years earlier, see Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power*, p. 223.

⁸⁷ Roberto Nobili brought his Brahman cook to Goa when he was ordered by the Archbishop to submit himself to the inquisitorial inquiry concerning his accommodationist method.

exclusive but equally accommodationist disguise, the *pandarasami*, was employed among the non-Brahman, martial and lower caste lineages, and by the end of the 17th century it became a dominant guise of the Jesuit missionaries. What both sannyasi and *pandarasami padres* had to endlessly conceal was their association with European powers, with the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* and the French *comptoir*e in Pondicherry.

The Goan Oratorians were in a somewhat different situation in Sri Lanka. Rather than dissembling their Portuguese “connection”, they actually had to prove it. Although José Vaz was probably suspected of “spying” for the foreigners when he arrived uninvited in Kandy, as a “Portuguese” or even as a Portuguese spy, he was not considered threatening at all. For Vimaladharmasurya II the real, present threat was constituted by the Dutch while the memory of the Portuguese rule sank into comfortable oblivion. In the lowlands, at least for some social groups, this oblivion merged with nostalgia. The fact that the Dutch were so eager to arrest the missionaries and deport them was all the more reason for allowing them to stay and protect them.

For Narendrasinha, a successor to Vimaladharmasurya II, who was born around the time José Vaz arrived in Sri Lanka, the Goan priests were no strangers. In fact, his close contact with them was a way to learn and acquire things from the world that he may have desired to see but had no access to because of the Dutch blockade of the mountain kingdom. It is not clear how he developed a desire for a “good diamond” and why the Oratorians thought that they could satisfy that demand. Apparently, the king, because of his “sovereignty”, did not want to ask the Dutch, but was advised by his palace counselors that the missionaries from Goa were also able to procure the desired object. In the letters to superiors in Goa written from Sri Lanka between 1713 and 1715, there was a flutter of requests from Gonçalves and other missionaries to send this precious stone via this or that channel. Although the king was ready to pay for it, “for the good of this mission”, according to Jácome Gonçalves, the Oratorians insisted on offering it to him as a present. He also reveals an interesting detail: the king presumed that the missionaries were poor in his land because they came to save souls, but that in their own country they were well off⁸⁸. Just like the monks of the *sangha*, they were taken to be individually poor and communally rich, and the missionaries made no effort to protest against the king’s assumption.

The situation became quite embarrassing when these promises were not kept, and the king was getting more and more impatient. The missionaries tried to wriggle their way out of the situation by denouncing the Dutch control of the

Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission, Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge* (New Delhi, 1999).

⁸⁸ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 493.

maritime trade between the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka. Every single shipment of commodities and objects required for the mission had a difficult trajectory and by the time it reached the missionaries, if it ever reached them, its contents diminished by half or more. For Miguel Francisco the troubles started at the Aguada in Goa, when the customs officials hustled him for two *frasquetes de tabaco* that he carried for his personal use, and ended in Sri Lanka with his *fato diminuto*⁸⁹. The story of the diamond vanished from the correspondence after the capture of Inácio de Almeida by the Dutch.

In spite of this failure, the missionaries were allowed to continue their mobile apostolate throughout the island. Their network of clients and patrons was indeed incredibly large given that there were never more than ten to twenty missionaries at the time. One of the obsessive and recurrent themes in their reports was the description of travel and nature. Their apostolic mobility was partly a result of the geographical location of the Christians, who were scattered all over the island. In his letters, José Vaz transformed travel into an act of humility and piety: “I am no settler in any place; I’m a passerby in all places”⁹⁰. Pedro Ferrão, who lived in the region of Vanni, also mixed the metaphorical and the literal when he said that he lived in the forest, as a hermit among the animals, since his travel stories in the region inevitably included encounters with elephants and other ferocious animals.

Since the missionaries traveled in all seasons, they were exposed to a full range of the elements. Besides the scorching sun, overflowing rivers, muddy slopes and thick jungle forests, they also had to fend off creatures, from mosquitoes and leeches to bears and elephants. Upon his return to Goa in 1713, Manuel de Miranda wrote a long mission report with descriptions of all possible geological and animal dangers. “We arrived at a place where, after some rain, all the ground and the grass is covered with leeches, big and small. Myself and the father (Almeida), rolled up our trousers and fastened them at the knees so that the leeches would not move upwards, while from the knees down we let them stay. There were so many of them hanging from our legs that we were unable to count them...Finally, about seven o’clock at night, after these troubles and others we had in descending the hill that was too steep and slippery and afraid of encountering an elephant because it was already dark, we arrived at the house of a Christian”⁹¹. Between the dramatic passages of travel through savage nature, a human and a Christian haven always revealed itself, making and marking an absolute difference and distance between these two spaces. For instance, the Christian in Tupana village received them with charity and

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 499, 504.

⁹⁰ José Vaz, 28 March 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, f. 15v.

⁹¹ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 428.

“applied lime juice on their feet to make the leeches drop off”, and later cured their wounds with local remedies.

While the ordinary missionaries had to avoid forests and places infested with wild animals such as elephants, tigers and bears, José Vaz was an exception, according to his hagiographer Sebastião do Rego⁹². Not only did elephants, which he encountered during his travels, suddenly become docile and friendly in his presence, but one of them actually went on his knees and saluted the father with his trunk⁹³. In his mastery over animals, Vaz became like Adam from before his sin and expulsion from the Garden of Eden⁹⁴. Sri Lanka was, in fact, mistaken for the terrestrial paradise in medieval European literature. Although the Portuguese colonial enterprise rapidly undid this fantasy, in 1723, Francisco Vaz, the general of the Goan Oratorians, felt obliged to counter the idea of Sri Lanka-as-Eden, backing up his contention with some first-hand proofs. “This opinion is not based on any solid reason, and it is difficult to believe that God should have chosen this island, situated in the Torrid Zone, as the place of so many delights”⁹⁵. This was only an echo of a standard Catholic theory of tropical decadence, which fed into the theories on race of the 18th century⁹⁶. Not only Sri Lanka, but Goa as well was considered a Torrid Zone oozing with demonic spirits before the arrival of the Catholic missionaries.

During the British colonial period Sri Lankan “demonism” was identified as the “darker” underside of Sinhala Buddhism⁹⁷. For the Oratorian missionaries - native Goans - there was no mystery about these supernatural beings and there were no special surprises in store for them. Demonism was also a “darker” side of Catholicism and it was their duty and job to exorcise it wherever and whenever they could. Just as in Southern India, trance-possession was one of the most prominent public expressions of grievance, resistance or dissent, occurring either spontaneously or as part of an organized public trial⁹⁸. In both cases, transe-possession was highly dramatic and potentially dangerous for the order that it contested and for the main actor in the play⁹⁹.

⁹² In 1716 Miguel Francisco had to leave the forest near Trincomalee because of tiger attacks. *Ibid.*, p. 544.

⁹³ Rego, *Vida*, p. 244.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Nunes, *Documentação*, pp. 605-606.

⁹⁶ I develop this topic in my book *Missionary Tropics*.

⁹⁷ Tennent, *Christianity*, p. 229.

⁹⁸ “ ‘One Civility, but Multiple Religion’: Jesuit Mission among St. Thomas Christians in India (16th -17th centuries)”, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 9/3-4 (2005), pp. 284-325.

⁹⁹ Possession in India has been amply studied. For the most recent research see Isabelle Nabokov, *Religion against the Self. An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals* (New York, 2000). Possession in Sri Lanka appears to be an anthropological cottage industry. See Bruce Kapferer, *A Celebration of Demons* (Bloomington, 1983); David Scott, *Formations of*

For the missionaries these events were important because they were moments in which they could display their expertise and competence and “gain souls”. Many stories were told in their reports about successful conversion of a whole family after an effective exorcism of one of its members. One typical case was described in the report written in Goa in 1723, in which a woman possessed by the devil was unable to give birth to a child. “The demon held on to her entrails”¹⁰⁰. The husband “danced for the devil”, that is, he went into possession and performed many other diableries (*diabruras*) before coming to ask help from the Father José Barreto. After making sure that the woman was “sincerely ready to embrace Christ”, the Father read the Gospel over her, blessed her and instantly the devil ran away, allowing her to give birth. A few days later the whole family was baptized.

The scenario of this possession and exorcism story is fairly similar across most of the cases and is comparable to descriptions coming from the Catholic missionaries in India from the 16th century onwards. The missionaries, Indians and Sri Lankans took these events very seriously, as supernatural interventions into terrestrial affairs. They all believed that these malign spirits or demons existed in the interstices between the holy and earthly existence, hiding out in the lush environment and thick jungle. They attacked bodies and souls and provoked illnesses, which in turn caused social disintegration, as in the case of the small pox epidemics that occurred with frightening regularity.

Catholicism had produced its own demons and had developed ways and strategies for containing them. It was therefore quite at ease working within other “demonological” traditions such as that of the Tamils and Sinhalese. Missionaries coming from the Brahman convert families were in addition quite familiar with the folk traditions of possession and healing. This is probably one of the reasons why their “anthropological” descriptions were less spectacular than the descriptions of the Jesuit missionaries. American and British missionaries in the 19th century produced much more coherent and detailed narratives of what they called “demon worship”. Even more spectacular are twentieth-century anthropological studies of the rituals such as *yaktovil*, on the effects of *distiya* (evil eye), on *pretas* (ghosts), and so on.

Just as in Tamilnadu and along the Konkan and the Malabar coasts, when Catholic exorcist practices met healing rituals that used possession, the two tended to borrow from each other. Therefore, the Oratorian fathers were very busy exorcising their own Catholics who continued to be attacked by the local

Ritual. Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil (Minneapolis, 1944); Gananath Obeyesekere, “The Idiom of Demonic Possession: A Case Study”, *Social Science and Medicine*, 4 (1970), pp. 97-111; id., *Medusa’s Hair. An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Chicago, 1981) and many other contributions.

¹⁰⁰ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 590.

demons (*yakku*) against whom the priests proposed new names and explanations and new, more efficient, treatments¹⁰¹. It is no wonder that those who were most impressed by the priestly powers of exorcism were those gentiles or Catholics who themselves performed similar functions in society. One apostate Catholic who used to “invoke the devil by dancing and with musical instruments and horns... and who used to receive him (the devil) in his body in order to have the power to foretell the future and to manifest hidden things” reconverted after hearing the sermon of Good Friday. “He courageously resisted all the devices and stratagems with which the heathens, both ordinary people and the *Vanniyas* (who are like governors or petty rulers of these regions), tried to prevent him from giving up the darkness of heathenism”¹⁰². It is possible that this local religious specialist considered it profitable to align himself with the priests who introduced certain practices and publicized them as more efficient than those available on the local market of magical tricks. For example, they persuaded the king that the image of St. Anthony could be used for exposing theft¹⁰³.

The ability to control magical and supernatural powers was an important skill in the missionaries’ struggle to reconvert Christians who had gone over to the Protestants, precisely because the Dutch ministers took only scant interest in staging supernatural performances. Sick, disturbed and possessed people were often brought to the fathers in order to be cured. As they insist in their letters, they never refused anybody and never charged for their services, in contrast to the Dutch custom of collecting fees and money in the church.

Moreover, in order to cure the possessed, the *endemoniado*, the priest had to have a good command of Tamil and/or Sinhala, because dialogue with the devil was an integral part of the treatment. The Dutch ministers were aware of the need to learn languages, but never properly managed to learn them themselves. In the long run, however, the schools for local boys created local men who were well versed in Protestant doctrine and who were able to speak, write and proselytize in local idioms¹⁰⁴. Oratorian missionaries had very limited means, personnel and time to set up schools, but compensated for this by

¹⁰¹ For Catholic demonic possession in contemporary Sri Lanka and ways of dealing with it, see R. L. Stirrat, “Demonic Possession in Roman Catholic Sri Lanka”, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 33/2 (1977), pp. 133-157; id., “The Shrine of St. Sebastian at Mirisgama: An Aspect of the Cult of the Saints in Catholic Sri Lanka”, *Man*, new series, 16/2 (June 1981), pp. 183-200.

¹⁰² Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 589.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 587. Jesuit missionaries in Madurai were also renowned for their ability to find stolen or lost objects. See my *Disputed Mission*.

¹⁰⁴ Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power*, p. 235.

emphasizing community discipline administered by the church, the priest, the catechist and the elders.

The exorcism that the missionaries performed was therefore often a public and collective affair in which the priest played a major role, though not the only role. Basílio Barreto told a dramatic story of a Christian Vannia Panthagantty of Pejally [Pessalai] who was possessed by the devil for a whole year¹⁰⁵. The evil force burned the face of his daughter, and since the missionaries were prevented from visiting the place because of Dutch persecution, the family started employing soothsayers and other magicians in order to cure her. While the Father was on his way from Kottiyar to Mannar, he passed close by the village and the Christians brought him to the house of the possessed without telling him the source of the problem in advance. As soon as Barreto understood the problem, and in full view of the community, he put on his surplice and stole and with the “discipline” (a whip) in his hand started the exorcism. What follows is a “duel” conversation between the Devil inside the man and the priest. The devil cunningly also addressed the audience in order to win them over to his side: “Look here, this land belongs to the Dutch and the Catholic priest has come to kill this man”. Before the people, who all trembled with fear, the father continued his conversation without giving in to the devil’s demands. The devil basically forced the father to promise to take care of the man after he left him alone and asked him to give him his hand, “for without it he could not go away”. As soon as the priest touched the hand of Vannia Panthagantty, he prostrated himself on the floor, unconscious, and was cured with some relics applied to his body and with the sprinkling of holy water. In a few days he was fully integrated back into his local Christian community. This story reads as an almost transparent critique of missionary neglect of the community. From the letters, we know that some places were left without a priest for up to five years because of the lack of missionaries, Dutch persecutions or some other reason.

Sometimes the devil appeared and engaged in conversion in the form of a local deity or goddess. Thus in a story that followed in the same report, Basílio Barreto told of his conversation with the powerful goddess Patragally (Bhadrakali). It all started with an agricultural disaster, a pest that fell on the field of nanchiny or palava (small grain). The Velalla (Belala) family who tended the field gave an offering to “the devil” for sparing its fruits. A Christian son of the family collected some of the infested leaves and brought them to the father, obviously trying to combine local religious skills with those of the Christians fathers¹⁰⁶. However, as the man went to sleep, a goddess appeared to him in a dream, blinded him and possessed his spirit. The father was called to

¹⁰⁵ Nunes, *Documentação*, pp. 496-497. *Pattankatti* is a title of a village headman.

¹⁰⁶ Nunes, *Documentação*, pp. 496-497.

intervene and speak to Bhadrakali and started to “discipline” the body of the man. With the first stroke of the whip, the man opened his eyes and with a few more the She-devil fled and he reclaimed his sight. The next day the insects disappeared from the field.

The missionaries knew very well that the nature of the local powerful beings was ambiguously coded as both inflicting and curing illnesses. For example, the goddess who may be called Bhadrakali, Durga, or Kali, among other names, was both the cause of and the cure for the most deadly illness of the period - small pox. The description of the epidemic that suddenly appeared in September 1697 in Kandy, and within a year swept throughout the island, shows a striking resemblance to descriptions written by the Jesuit missionaries in India. It was commonly attributed to the anger of the Goddess who contaminated individual bodies with her heat¹⁰⁷. Since the illness was highly contagious, the only way to escape was to abandon houses and the patients, or to remove them to the “woods” on the outskirts of the city or village. In India and in Sri Lanka, the missionaries were quick to point to the “uncharitable” behavior the epidemic provoked in the community and in families. Thus, a wife abandoned her husband and children, and children abandoned their parents¹⁰⁸. For the Oratorians, the “scourge” (*peste*) as it was often called, was an occasion to show both their social altruism and their superior magical powers of healing. Instead of fleeing the area like everybody else, the two missionaries, José Vaz and José de Carvalho, stayed in Kandy. Among those who quickly packed and left the island was an embassy of the Buddhist priests from Siam who were invited by the king to ordain and consecrate *gânes*, the Buddhist monks residing in the kingdom of Kandy¹⁰⁹. According to José Vaz there were “thirty three bishops” and “two principal heads” and they cut their visit to only two months in order to escape the small pox epidemic¹¹⁰. José Vaz, on the contrary, remained and took care of the patients who were left on the outskirts of the town. He brought them *canja* (a mildly spiced lentil broth) two times a day, according to José Carvalho’s report in 1698, and he even built some huts near

¹⁰⁷ José de Meneses, Puttalam, 16 July 1698, BA, ms. 51-IX-34, f. 235v. The “female devil” was, according to José de Meneses, in each sick person.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ They managed to ordain 120 Sri Lankan Buddhist monks and 33 obtained the title of “bishops”, according to Vaz. José Vaz, 10 September 1697, BA, ms. 51-VII-27, ff. 263r-v. On exchanges of embassies of Buddhist monks between the Arakan and Kandyan kingdoms see Catherine Raymond, “Religious and Scholarly Exchanges between the Singhalese Sangha and the Arakanese and Burmese Theravadin Communities: Historical Documentation and Physical Evidence”, in Om Prakash and Denys Lombard, eds., *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1800* (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 87-105.

¹¹⁰ We know that six of them died, but it is not clear if their deaths were due to small pox.

the church for their protection¹¹¹. Those who were left unattended died of hunger and were at times devoured by wild animals. In town, the dogs were seen feeding on the corpses of the abandoned patients¹¹². Faced with a situation of complete social collapse, and with no community left (even the king moved to another town) Vaz and José Carvalho behaved as perfect members of a *misericórdia*, a confraternity with an excellent reputation in Portuguese Asia¹¹³. Besides feeding, consoling, curing and burying the victims of the epidemic, they also profited by converting and baptizing as many souls as possible. As the epidemic began spreading in the region of Puttalam, José de Meneses belatedly organized penitential processions in the three most important villages of the region in order to counter not only the disease, but also the processions and sacrifices “in honor of the devil” that were being financed by the gentiles and Muslims¹¹⁴. With his own hands, he punished by flogging (*açoute*) all the Christians, “small and big”, who, “*ignoranter ou scienter*”, participated in gentile ceremonies. According to his report, the three villages were spared the epidemic. Some other regions such as Vanni, ministered by Pedro Ferrão, were spared the contagion altogether.

Although missionary aid and selfless service during the illness was appreciated by everybody and brought admiration from the king of Kandy, as normalcy returned, this success quickly soured¹¹⁵. Some enemies of the Christians tried to persuade the king that more Christians had died since the fathers visibly began attending the funerals, while others accused them of taking care of the dying in order to inherit their belongings¹¹⁶. There was more. One of the king’s advisors resented the fact that the missionary *hospitalzinho*, consisting of individual huts for the sick, was built near his house and he ordered the huts’ destruction. To justify this act and what ultimately amounted to a land grab, he also complained to the king about the Christians’ disrespect of the caste laws¹¹⁷. Thus, a Christian woman of Somenos caste, a former slave, failed to take off her head veil outside the church and she did not give way to

¹¹¹ José de Carvalho, 22 May 1698, BA, ms. 51-IX-34, ff. 237r-238r.

¹¹² The role of the Oratorians during the small pox epidemic was confirmed by the local manuscript source, *Vijitavelle Rajavaliya*, see Perniola, *The Catholic Church*, vol. 1, p. 156.

¹¹³ *Misericórdia* was an institution that accompanied, as a kind of social security or welfare, the early modern Portuguese overseas expansion. See Isabel dos Guimarães Sá, *Quando o rico se faz pobre: Misericórdias, caridade e poder no império português, 1500-1800* (Lisbon, 1997).

¹¹⁴ José de Meneses, Puttalam, 16 July 1698, BA, ms. 51-IX-34, f. 235v.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ José de Carvalho, 22 May, 1698, BA, ms. 51-IX-34, f. 137v.

¹¹⁷ José Vaz, 28 May 1699, BA, ms. 51-IX-34, ff. 231v-132r.

the king's advisor when she crossed his path on the street¹¹⁸. The missionaries rejected these accusations as pure slander, because, they argued, they always insisted on respecting the "customs of the country", which were clearly separate from the "divine laws". The decoupling of the "social" and "religious" was part and parcel of the accommodationist missionary approach which inspired the Oratorian mission in Sri Lanka. In the late 17th century, however, this distinction was accepted without much ado, while only half a century earlier, Jesuit missionaries in Madurai had to fight a bitter struggle for and against it¹¹⁹.

Accommodation: Noble Christians in Goa, Demons in Sri Lanka

One of the problems with the method of accommodation was that its downfall came at its moment of greatest success. The more a new religious system – ethics, world view, customs, theology and social imagination – penetrates another, it necessarily changes the first from within. This process was usually called laxism and had already been condemned, in 1679, by Pope Innocent XI. The Jesuits in particular were targeted by their opponents for their permissive attitudes towards the social practices of non-Christian people, and for incorporating some of them into Catholic rituals. Although these were all purely political and social rites, according to the accommodationists' theological justification, these should be open to the neophytes (at least as long as their faith was in the process of maturation). The problematic part was to understand what constituted "purely" political rites. The answer provided by the rich and intricate patristic and scholastic theological tradition was that one had to know the sources and the purposes of the actions, and in particular, their inner "intention". According to the most general argument, all intention which comes from or is directed to (the true) God is intrinsically good. The action directed by such intentions is, according to this interpretation, permitted.

Beyond the theological debate raging from the start of the Protestant scission and the beginning of the overseas expansion, the missionaries in their often solitary and dangerous missions experimented with whatever was at their disposal in order to survive and to make their missions prosper. What the Jesuit missionaries found in India, among the St. Thomas Christians, at the Mughal court or in the continental Tamil Nadu was similar, but not identical, to what the Oratorians found in Sri Lanka. A Sri Lankan king lived in a political situation that was quite close to that of a hostage to the coastal colonial power, in this case the Dutch. This helped the Catholic mission initially establish itself

¹¹⁸ *Somenos* caste probably stands for *hammaru*, i.e. tanner, shoe-maker according to Perniola, *The Catholic Church*, vol. 2, p. 181.

¹¹⁹ Županov, *Disputed Mission*.

in the kingdom, but it was also one of the important causes for the first expulsion of the missionaries from the kingdom of Kandy in 1742.

The cultural distance that the Italian and Portuguese Jesuits must have felt in India among their gentile and Christian neighbors was certainly infinitely smaller than the one experienced by the Oratorian missionaries in Sri Lanka. This is one of the reasons why their reports in Portuguese remain moderately interesting for ethno-historians¹²⁰. On the other hand, through the description of their travels, the reader can almost picture the imposing natural and geographical constraints of the island. The details of their itineraries were seen as potentially functioning as a map for future missionaries, or even as strategic information for a possible Portuguese reconquest. A seemingly stereotyped reporting of the pagan customs observed in Kandy and elsewhere on the island was also a self-conscious and self-imposed censorial choice. In no way did the writers of these narratives desire to surprise or bewilder their audience with their profound knowledge of pagan institutions.

While Jesuit writers in the 17th century produced treatises on Indian idolatry, copied boldly by Dutch ministers such as Baldaeus, which excelled in erotically charged analogies combined with Christian demonological tradition, the Oratorian missionaries, some of whom like Jácome Gonçalves had obvious literary talents, reined in their imagination when dealing with this subject. In the eighteenth century in particular, with the advent of the new and enthusiastic missionary orders sent by the Propaganda Fide to India, such as the Discalced Carmelites and the Capuchins, the minute descriptions of social customs and religious rites were expanded into “scientific” discussions that became the core definitions of a *Catholic Orientalism*. The particularity of the “native” Catholic writers was a certain restraint of imagination when dealing with “pagan” customs. All spectacular rites that attracted the Europeans are toned down and given a mechanical, matter-of-fact treatment. What is emphasized instead are “native” Catholic virtues and success. In the 18th century the native Catholic elite would go as far as to write “revisionist” histories of Goa and of Indian tradition and literature in order to inscribe its own origins into the origins of Christianity.

Thus, at the very source of Christian and human history, according João António Frias, a Goan Brahman priest and one of the first biographers of José Vaz, there were no Portuguese or any other Europeans, but there was a Brahman, a Magi king¹²¹. This particular effacement of the Portuguese can be

¹²⁰ The Oratorians’ literary production in Sinhalese and Tamil is yet to be studied properly and may provide new insights into Oratorian missionary practice.

¹²¹ António João de Frias, *Aureola dos Índios & Nobiliarchia Bracmana, tratado historico, genealogico, panegyrico, politico, & moral* (Lisbon, 1702), p. 35. The manuscript of his biography of José Vaz has disappeared. Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 581.

found in all missionary literature in vernacular languages. For example, Henrique Henriques, a Jesuit missionary among the Paravas on the Fishery Coast, across the Gulf of Mannar, began his *Flos Sanctorum*, printed in Tamil in 1586 with a statement, “in the beginning there were no Muslims, only Tamils and Jews”¹²². The ambiguity inherent in the translation was part of the missionary strategy of conversion. However, Frias and other elite Goan writers added another layer of “strategic opacity” to their genealogical texts in Portuguese¹²³. In the colonial situation, as permanent subalterns to the metropolitan Portuguese, they established their identities as *convertible double-occupancy* of an appropriated Christian tradition filled in with re-constituted regional “caste” folklore¹²⁴.

When they found themselves in a role of “spiritual colonizers” in Sri Lanka, they were for the first time able to experience, at least to a degree, the weight of the dark, predatorial side of colonial authority. On the other hand, except for words of praise, the same colonial administration in Goa and Lisbon provided minimal, if any, backing to the Oratorian Sri Lankan mission. Back at home, in Goa, the members of the Congregação do Oratório de Santa Cruz dos Milagres had to fight a bitter battle to survive and to have their congregation validated first by the Archbishop of Goa, then by the King of Portugal, and finally by the Pope. In fact, the only reason the Congregation was finally approved was its mission in Sri Lanka. In 1699, the Overseas Council advised Dom Pedro II, the King of Portugal, to endorse the foundation of the Congregation only if its missionary activity became its duty (*obrigação*) and its members became “true missionaries”. If they ceased to be so, the Congregation was to be dismantled¹²⁵. One of the recurrent complaints about funding religious orders in Goa, let alone allowing the creation of a new one, was that the *Estado da Índia* needed *seculares* who produced money and not *eclesiásticos* who spent it. In 1711, four year after the final Papal approval, João Telles da Silva, one of the members of the Overseas Council, expressed the

¹²² Županov, *Missionary Tropics*, ch. 7 (“Twisting a Pagan Tongue: Portuguese and Tamil in Jesuit Translations”).

¹²³ Stephen Greenblatt is responsible for introducing the concept of “strategic opacity”, when writing about Shakespeare’s hidden Catholic persona. See his work *Will in the World, How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York, 2004).

¹²⁴ Double-occupancy is Alexander Henn’s term by which he defines the religious conquest in Goa as a “space-filling project”: “Substitution of local deities by Christian monuments and saints not only replicated the ancient spatio-religious system of the Hindus, but also prepared the ground for its eventual duplication and synthesis”. See Alexander Henn, “The Becoming of Goa; Space and Culture in the Emergence of a Multicultural Lifeworld”, *Lusotopie* (2000), p. 335.

¹²⁵ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 164.

opinion that one should not allow “the religious to get rich and the inhabitants of (Portuguese) India to get poor”¹²⁶. This remark was prompted by the Oratorian demand for a subsidy for the Sri Lankan mission and their insistent campaign to be allowed to own landed property (*bens de raíz*), which was indispensable for the upkeep of the missionaries¹²⁷. The decision seemed to have been endlessly postponed by the authorities in Lisbon and the Oratorians kept on demanding the same well into the mid-18th century. Another battle which they ultimately partly lost and partly won regarded the question of being officially assigned the use of the former Carmelite monastery after the Propaganda missionaries were expelled from Goa. The king gave them the monastery in 1707. At that point the Italian Carmelites in Lisbon and Rome strongly objected and managed to rally important figures to their cause. Among these were the Pope and the Queen of Portugal¹²⁸. Hence, the Oratorians who occupied the monastery were constantly threatened with eviction.

In 1720, the head of the Oratorians in Lisbon, Francisco Xavier, wrote to the fathers in Goa that they should not allow themselves to be bullied into giving back the convent during the passage of Monsignor Mezzabarba, the Patriarch of Alexandria, who had been sent by the Propaganda to China via Goa¹²⁹. One of the arguments against financial aid to the Oratorians in Goa, often invoked by the Overseas Council and the Council of the Missions, was that they all came from rich Brahman families and were able to secure funds for their own upkeep. When entering the Congregation they brought their own patrimony and allowance (*património* and *côngrua*), in addition to generous financial support given to them by the communities and municipalities of Salcete, Bardez and Ilhas¹³⁰. Seen from the top of the metropolitan administration, one more religious order to subsidize was an economically unsustainable burden, and since Oratorians had already proved that they could subsist on independent means, there was no immediate need to change the policy. Oratorians were, therefore, caught in a catch-22 situation. In order to found the Congregation, the Goan priests had to prove that they were

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 406, 514.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 642-646, 659-660.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 417-422. The consultation in Lisbon in 1713 regarding the petition of the Carmelites to have their property returned to them in Goa and in Diu revealed the extent of Portuguese hostility to the Propaganda Fide, the Carmelites, and to all foreign religious in their overseas territories. The Carmelites were described as “perpetual spies of the Propaganda”, while all foreign missionaries were deemed detrimental to the State. The case of the French Capuchos in Brazil is quoted as an example. “If you admit Italians in India, France could ask to have French Barbonios admitted too”.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 576.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 515, 604.

financially independent and able to raise funds for the missions. This initial success proved to be a disadvantage when their membership and activities diversified and they had to apply for government aid. When a stipend came, it was insufficient. As they wrote to Dom João V in 1723, the sum of 25 *xerafins* that each missionary received was not enough to buy tobacco¹³¹.

Finances apart, as natives permanently under the suspicion of inconstancy and as members of a local elite mistrusted for its “cunningness”, whatever they did, the Oratorians had to overcompensate their status as inferiors. Thus, they had to work harder. They had to be more pious and more zealous while at the same display complete humility. When the Archbishop of Goa delayed the confirmation of the Congregation for a decade, Vaz wrote from Kandy that it was a wise decision because it “makes the desire grow” and that the anticipation would produce in these “green woods or our cold hearts the blaze of fire of divine love”¹³². In the meantime, while negotiating approval and membership in the Congregation of the Oratory of São Filipe Neri, the Brahman priests who lived in the cubicles attached to the church of Santa Cruz dos Milagres, on the southern hill overlooking the city of Goa, conducted secret deliberations with the Society of Jesus in Goa¹³³. A famous Jesuit historian, Francisco de Sousa, wrote a couple of letters endorsing this underhanded project, of which, ultimately, nothing resulted.

By the middle of the 18th century, the Oratorians were in demand as missionaries from various sides, including the authorities of the *Estado da Índia*. In a 1726 letter, Gabriel de Sá apologized to the Secretary of State, Tomé Gomes Moreira, for not being able to procure cinnamon buds and clove seeds from Sri Lanka. He notified the fathers there, he insisted, but they were not able to respond due to Dutch control of the borders¹³⁴. More onerous were, however, the relentless demands to send missionaries to the parishes in Goa and elsewhere. From 1705 to 1723, they were invited to Solor and Timor and finally accepted an ill-fated mission to the island of São Lourenço in 1726.

The second half of the 18th century and the early 19th century saw a decline in the Oratorian mission in Sri Lanka, mostly due to a new set of political circumstances and actors. The loss of protection from the Kandyan Tamil Nayakkar rulers, who were under pressure from the Kandyan aristocracy and the Buddhist *sangha*, was a serious first blow to the Catholic missions in Sri Lanka¹³⁵. In Goa, on the other hand, their reputation as helpers of the parish

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 642-646.

¹³² José Vaz, 25 July 1695, BA, 51-VII-27, ff. 9v-10r.

¹³³ Rego, *Chronologia*, pp. 171-172.

¹³⁴ Nunes, *Documentação*, p. 649.

¹³⁵ In 1742, Vijaya Rajasinha (r. 1739-1747) expelled Jácome Gonçalves from Kandy. In 1760 another king, Kirti Sri (r. 1747-1782), welcomed the Oratorians back in order to

priests during the Easter celebrations was at its height. According to Sebastião do Rego, the Oratorians conducted confessions and gave inspiring sermons in Konkani. That the native priests took charge of the Goan native Christians with excellent results should not come as a surprise. Noteworthy is the fact that the Oratorians were exclusively recruited from the Goan Brahman (Sarasvat) lineage and that most of the missionaries were related to each other. In this light, the Congregation resembles the local family or caste structure, rather than a pious Catholic order. Parallel and intersecting with the establishment of the Congregation in Goa was a movement of indigenous Christianized elites to position themselves on the local and metropolitan chessboard of honor and power. The ability to take on roles of authority, command and dominance was for the local elites the only way out of a subalternity which had been imposed by two centuries of Portuguese colonialism in Goa. Since the initial conversion to Christianity enabled the elite Brahman communities to safeguard and maintain their economic prerogatives and advantages within local society, by the end of the 17th century their aspirations turned to honor and nobility. The voice they appropriated to speak about themselves was that of pious Christians, zealous missionaries and “natural nobility”. The medium was written and, soon enough, printed word¹³⁶. The missions in Sri Lanka as well as in Canara, Goa, Diu and Daman corroborated and authenticated Catholic Brahmans’ noble genealogy and saintly inspiration¹³⁷.

The missionaries’ reputation in Goa, however, had no bearing on their status in Sri Lanka. Their combined status as Brahmans from the north and Portuguese priests was already an asset in the local hierarchy both at the Kandy court and in the lowlands. However, it was also a source of resentment on the part of other religious specialists, especially the Buddhist *sangha*. Although the Buddhists rarely opposed the Catholic priests, but rather politely or indifferently avoided them, José Vaz mistook their civility for friendliness, which raised his hopes for imminent conversion¹³⁸. The embassy of the Buddhist priests from Siam in 1697 appeared to have shown interest in both Christianity and the work and presence of José Vaz. The situation changed radically in the second half of the 18th century when the Sri Lankan Buddhist

muster the support of the Catholics against the Dutch. A final blow came from Goa with the suppression of all religious orders by the Portuguese Government in 1835. See Richard Fox Young, “ ‘Carpenter-Preta’: An Eighteenth-Century Sinhala-Buddhist Folktale about Jesus”, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 54/1 (1995), p. 53.

¹³⁶ This is an important point made by Ângela Barreto Xavier in her article “David contra Golias”.

¹³⁷ The process for canonizing José Vaz was started in 1740s, but had to be abandoned due to problems collecting necessary materials and the lack of financial means.

¹³⁸ Fox Young, “ ‘The Carpenter-Preta’ ”, p. 51.

monks, provoked by the presence and success of the talented preacher and Christian writer Jácome Gonçalves, fought back, and some of their ideas percolated down and blended with anti-Christian folk tales. The folk tale about the *Carpenter-Preta*, studied by Richard Fox Young, reveals to what extent Oratorian teachings were taken seriously in Sri Lanka. The story re-tells the life of Jesus from the Buddhist point of view, and each and every detail or event is interpreted within the context of a Buddhist mythology and explanatory system. Instead of divine incarnation, the Carpenter-Preta is a trickster sent by the Great Deluder, Mara. He is born from the grave and is thus defined as a ghost or goblin, *preta*, and his cronies (*rahats*) are dressed in black and fly with attached wings¹³⁹. The latter bear an obvious resemblance to the Oratorian missionaries.

It is possible that the more the Oratorians insisted on their skills in fighting and expurgating demons, the more they were, by homology, seen as close to them, or were even identified as malignant spirits themselves. The Goddess who provoked small pox was herself the best cure against it. As they tried to fit Christianity into another set of religious beliefs and practices, missionaries in Sri Lanka, as had occurred in India earlier, found that in the interstices of transition anything is possible. The receptor culture may fatally shatter, but the smithereens might engender new, unpredictable religious unities¹⁴⁰. It can also, in fact, gain the confidence and vocabulary to respond and defeat foreign ideas and practices. In the case of Sri Lankan Buddhism, the way to victory took another two centuries and, according to historians and anthropologists, it was Protestantism that helped it in finding its voice of “revival”¹⁴¹. The Oratorians did not exist any more, but some of their demons and saints remained to haunt first the British and then historians and anthropologists. Thus, an anthropologist found that among the Catholic Sri Lankans, “St. Anthony is frequently said to be the same being as Kataragama; only the names are different”. Pattini is viewed as an alternative form of the Virgin Mary. “St. Sebastian is considered to be the younger brother of the goddess Mari Amman (or Kali)”¹⁴². The Oratorians also left a saint on the Sri Lankan soil. In 1995, Pope John Paul II beatified José Vaz at a public Mass in Colombo.

¹³⁹ *Arahants (rahats)* are Buddhist demigods endowed with supernatural powers (*ibid.*, p. 62).

¹⁴⁰ The same may be argued in the case of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, under pressure from the new currents and interpretations of Christianity.

¹⁴¹ Gananath Obeyesekere, “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon”, *Modern Ceylon Studies*, 1 (1970), pp. 43-63. Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900* (Berkeley, 1976).

¹⁴² Stirrat, “The Shrine of St. Sebastian at Mirisgama”.