

# SOME 16th AND 17th CENTURY INTERPRETATIONS OF JAPAN AND SIAM Fróis–Álvarez–La Loubère–Gervaise: A Layman's Comparative Reading

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## INTRODUCTION

The "dialogue of cultures" is one of the most fascinating intellectual undertakings. In the Far Eastern context, potential research is endless indeed.

Early interpretations of the *Oriens Extremus*, mainly by ecclesiastics, captivated Renaissance Europe. Their echo is still relevant today.

I would like to venture briefly into that area, conscious that my effort is that of an amateur dwarfed by figures literally "larger than life," of tremendous dedication, knowledge and intellect.

Here is the framework of my approach to the subject:

First I shall single out two countries of the East, Japan and Siam, not because others are less important but because I treat the former as the starting point of more extensive research which hopefully may follow.

I propose first to examine the famous *Tratado*, the *Treatise* by the Portuguese Jesuit Luís Fróis, written in 1585, which is in essence an epigrammatic comparison between behavior and customs in Europe and Japan.

I will then cross-examine it against the input of another contemporary Portuguese Jesuit, Jorge Álvarez, who is also trying to analyze Japan.

By doing this it does not mean that I have exhausted the materials and sources of early interpretations of Japan. The archives of the Jesuit Mission; of the Universities of Coimbra, Évora, and Madrid; of that unique outpost Macao, and so many other centers of historical learning, are full of relevant information. By omitting, for instance, the testimony of Alessandro Valignano, it does not mean that I am less appreciative of this

colossus dominating the Christian Century of Japan. But the frame of this layman's undertaking is limited by definition and so I shall only indicate some points of reference rather than play with the illusion that I can view the whole panorama.

The above being the first part of my effort, I shall consequently turn my attention to the historic landscape of Siam, attempting a new comparison, identifying similarities or differences with the previous interpretations of Japan.

The points of reference will be the testimonies of a French ecclesiastic-diplomat, Simon de La Loubère—co-leader of the famous second Embassy of Louis XIV to the Court of King Narai—and of an enlightened French Jesuit, Nicolas Gervaise. The dates here are about one century later, around 1687 and 1688 respectively, but not so distant as to deprive the comparisons of their legitimacy. Omissions of other testimonies should be viewed in the light of what I have just mentioned with relation to Japan.

It will be observed that in both sections the main emphasis will be put on religion. All four early interpreters of culture had themselves a religious background and it is only natural that their main focus was the beliefs of the new peoples they came in contact with. Their basic approach was the one of pure believers, animated by a most fervent missionary zeal to save those heathens from their ignorance and beliefs in "idols." Yet, there were several nuances of analysis here worth our attention. After all, there was evolution of thinking in this matter even by each interpreter individually, as is shown for instance in the case of Valignano, who was at first more inclined to the idea of an indigenous clergy, but later distanced himself from it (Fróis 1993 (1585), 128).

## JAPAN

### LUÍS FRÓIS (1532–1597)

Fróis was born in Lisbon in 1532. At the age of sixteen he left his native Portugal to start his missionary activities which brought him to India, Macao and Japan. He was fortunate enough to come to know some of the most illustrious personalities of his times, like St. Francis Xavier, the famous Portuguese adventurer Fernão Mendes Pinto, the monumental figures of sixteenth century Japan, Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, as well as the giants of his Order, Francisco Cabral, Alessandro Valignano and Gaspar Coelho.

Trained basically as an interpreter, he attended some of the most crucial meetings of the history of the times. Drawing from all these experiences, he left behind a monumental work composed mainly of correspondence, his *History of Japan* and his *Tratado* of Japan. He thus secured for himself the position of the main interpreter of Japan for the period between 1563 and 1597, standing almost at the very origin of a long line of "interpreters" of such a different and inaccessible culture as that of the country of the Rising Sun.

The famous text of Fróis's *Tratado*, written in 1585, was discovered only recently, in 1946, in the archives of the Academy of History in Madrid by the German Jesuit Josef Franz Schütte.

It constitutes an epigrammatic comparison of the customs, beliefs and ways of life in Europe and in Japan. The text is divided into fourteen chapters, dealing with men and women, children, monks, temples and religion, eating and drinking customs, arms and warfare, horses, diseases and medicines, writing and books, houses and gardens, boats, theater, music and dance and a final general chapter on whatever escaped the previous classification.

Reading this text, I think I may fully concur with the remarks of José Manuel García in his foreword to its new French translation (Fróis 1993, 38–39) that it is a work of "comparative cultural anthropology" in the contemporary sense of the term and is "the major missing discourse about the meeting of occidental and oriental cultures at the dawn of modern times."

The first, basic observation after reading this text is profound admiration for the comparative abilities of its author. I have counted 611 brief paragraphs from beginning to end, each composed of one remark on Europe juxtaposed to a relevant situation or idea in Japan. The precision of the author's analytical and observant mind and the multitude of topics he can identify and focus on are striking indeed. Consequently, this method produces a style original and unique, with brief but concise sentences, almost like "reverse *koans*" where question and answer are given simultaneously, as there is no metaphysical riddle but only sketches of cultural antithetical landscapes to be contemplated and addressed. In 1600, João de Lucena, as quoted by José Manuel García (Fróis 1993, 39)

perceives the Japanese as in the antipodes, not so much geographically but culturally. This idea also characterizes every "distich" by Fróis, as if to provide the foundation of the broader idea so cursorily epitomized centuries later by Kipling about the "twain" which will never meet!

Talking about the originality of the style, I hasten to admit that I should slightly modify the above statement: Valignano's famous *Sumario* written four years earlier, in 1581, also contains some similar antithetical remarks, but here the point of reference is not Europe but China and the differences between the Chinese and Japanese worlds.

My second impression is a feeling of a negative critical attitude permeating the whole text, although not too blatantly, with the superiority of European values implied if one reads between the lines. At this point I cannot agree with J. M. García who finds Fróis displaying, in general, "a serene objectivity" except in matters of religion (Fróis 1993, 37). I may concede that several "distichs" are colorless, impartial and "flat," simply pointing out differences without any negative implication—for instance, when Fróis contrasts the color of Death, black in Europe, white in Japan (p. 47, No. 30), or the way of burial, by inhumation in Europe, by cremation in Japan (p. 71, No. 22), etc. But in most other cases, the second part of the "distich" always has a negative connotation for the Japanese world or a similar sense of irony. For instance: characterization of Japanese nunneries as "bordels" (p. 55, No. 43), arbitrary aesthetic appreciation regarding paintings in churches and temples, "beautiful" in Europe and "horrible and terrifying" in Japan (p. 69, No. 8). Also, when he maintains that treason is rare in Europe and quite common in Japan (p. 82, No. 41), I doubt whether there were so few cases of turncoats in the Europe of his times. Again we see arbitrary aesthetic values when he praises Europe's cult for jewelry and condemns Japanese appreciation for "ancient and broken porcelain" etc. (p. 98, No. 9). A parallel subjective dismissal is of Japanese music as "the most horrible to hear" (p. 108, No. 15) in contrast to the suave qualities of European choral music. There is a total inability to grasp the esthetics of the tea ceremony as if this Japanese ritual is not "precious" in the European sense (p. 113, No. 22). Then comes this aphorism which, perpetuated up to modern times, marks the chasm of incomprehension between the two cultures: "In Europe we love clarity of speech and avoid ambivalence; in Japan the latter belongs to superior language and is greatly appreciated" (p. 114, No. 37). We are a long way indeed from the opposite attitude of another Jesuit, Organtino, writing in 1577 to Rome on the Japanese: "You should not think that they are barbarians, for apart from our religion, we ourselves are greatly inferior to them ... " (quoted in Cooper 1971, 137).

We are also a long way from the same Fróis, writing much earlier, in 1565, to his companions in Europe, to have them share his enthusiasm about the Japanese capital Kyoto: "In their culture, behavior and manners [the people of Miyako] are superior to the Spaniards in many ways and one is ashamed to admit it. If these people [the Portuguese] who have come from China do not have esteem for the Japanese, this is due to the fact

that they only had contacts with merchants who are not very courteous and live on the coast and who, compared to those of Miyako, are very inferior and called here barbarians" (Fróis 1993, 124).

So far, I have underlined the negative connotations of Fróis mainly in areas separate from religion. When we reach these grounds, there are no more "connotations" but clear, unequivocal, critical statements. This is of course not astonishing, given the sincere missionary spirit of the times and the fervor of those heroic figures, like Fróis, who risked so much for so long and so far from their native lands.

The whole of chapter IV on bonzes in particular is a series of strong and unveiled accusations against the indolence of the monks, their ostentatious dressing in silk robes, their sinful lives, the bellicosity of the soldier-monks and so many other vices and weaknesses. There is also a categorical statement about lack of hatred among various sects in Europe contrasted with the opposite picture in Japan.

Of course, many of these biased observations can be easily refuted: On the reference to the silk dresses, one is reminded of the exhortations of that extremely rigid Jesuit, Father Francisco Cabral, to Fróis himself, to renounce the habit of wearing silk robes! As for the military exploits of the *nengoros*, it should not be forgotten that the missionaries also acquiesced in activities by Christian *daimyos* to persecute the Buddhist monks or demolish their temples (Fróis 1993, 146). Regarding hatred among sects, a look in the direction of Europe at the time would not have produced a very different conclusion. The same goes for the often-raised accusations, regardless of time or space, against vice and hypocrisy among monks. There always have been and always will be saintly figures as well as weak characters in monastic communities. Degrees of depravity may vary according to places and historic periods but nowhere can one claim that he has established a monopoly of virtue.

These brief observations stem from our focusing on the *Treatise* only and may overemphasize religious bias on the part of Fróis. But if we were to expand our research to other areas of his writings, the historical in particular, we would find a much more objective witness of events: a historian daring to write "Now I was not an eyewitness to this, but this is what they say about it"—a chronicler of the martyrdom of the twenty-six Christians at Nagasaki in 1597 underlining that "Above all, this work attempts to declare the pure and simple truth, for this is the principal ornament and foundation of all historical writing" (Cooper 1971, 102, 103).

## JORGE ÁLVAREZ

Jorge Álvarez (in Flores 1993, 5 ff.) is a name well known to those attracted by the early chapters of Luso-Japanese relations, considered as one of the pioneers, immediately after the year of the historic encounter, 1543. Captain, adventurer, trader, personal friend of St. Francis Xavier, he also became a writer, the first ever European chronicler of Japan. The seventeenth and eighteenth chapters of his "Livro que trata das cousas da

India e do Japão" constitute this first testimony, requested by St. Francis Xavier. It is surprising for its meticulous grasp of the new exotic realities, and covers religion, landscape, material life, language, food, etc. Amazing indeed how these "sea-wolves" like Álvarez, coming from a completely different background, managed to approach, befriend and understand so alien a people as the Japanese and how they expressed their impressions in writing. For a text dated 1547 it is still pleasantly vivid, reflecting Japanese realities of the times, although sometimes in a form too naive for the taste of modern readers. Álvarez thus comes to us as a symbol of that extraordinary symbiosis between Jesuits and traders in sixteenth-century Japan, so necessary and profitable there and so misunderstood and frowned upon in Iberia and Rome (Leitão 1993, 23 ff).

The style here is different from the *Treatise* of Fróis—plainer, without seeking continuous comparisons with the aim to point out differences, but more descriptive, reflecting some inner pleasure when occasionally even similarities are traced.

Examining the then-favorite topic of monastic life, Álvarez does not find particular grounds for criticism except a hint on sodomy.

Further on, talking about the drinking habits of the Japanese, Álvarez categorically states: "I have never seen anyone so drunk that he lost his mind. When they realize that they have had enough, they lay down to sleep" (in Fróis 1993, 167). This is in clear contrast to a relevant remark by Fróis: "In our world it is humiliating and disgraceful to get drunk; the Japanese rejoice about it and when you ask them: 'How is Tono?' they answer: 'He is drunk' ... " (Fróis 1993, 76, No. 38).

More generally, Álvarez finds the Japanese sensitive and proud, as well as eager to know about the distant Western world, and especially European religion. This point, corroborated by so many other contemporary testimonies, eludes the analysis by Fróis. (The Italian Jesuit Nicolas Lanzilotto, for instance, writing one year later, in 1548, also testifies that "everybody in Japan would gladly become Christian") (in Fróis 1993, 179).

By touching briefly upon some of the ideas of men like Fróis and Álvarez I am conscious that I have just lifted the curtain of the missionary conceptualization of Japan at the time of the historic encounter between Europe and that mysterious "world elsewhere." An overall study of the missionary approach to converting Japan is yet to be written. In my view, concepts vary with Francisco Cabral at one end, expressing utmost rigidity and dismissal of any effort to adjust to local ways, and Father Organtino at the other, flexible, adjustable, precursor of the Portuguese writer of the turn of the nineteenth century Wenceslau de Moraes in making an attempt at total "Japanization:" "I am more Japanese than Italian because the Lord through his grace has transformed me into a citizen of that nation" (in Fróis 1993, 126). The happy medium is perhaps better symbolized by that colossal figure of an Italian visitor, Alessandro Valignano, and his median approach to the degree of "Japanization" of the Catholic church in Japan.

## SIAM

## SIMON DE LA LOUBÈRE

Turning our attention now to Siam and to the early interpretations of that country's ways and customs, we have to concentrate, about a century later, on French ecclesiastics, some doubling as diplomats as well.

In this context the name of Simon de La Loubère comes first and foremost.

Basically a Jesuit priest, he later became involved in a series of diplomatic assignments, the greatest of which was his co-leadership of the second Embassy to Siam, entrusted to him by Louis XIV. This happened in 1687, two years after the first historic Embassy led by the Chevalier de Chaumont. The other co-leader of the mission of 1687 was Claude Céberet du Boullay, an astute director of the French East India Company. It is worth noting that La Loubère's *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam* (1969 [1691]) examines almost everything except the very mission led by its author, whereas Céberet's account is by contrast an examination of related events, without any attempt at presenting a picture of Siam (see Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992).

La Loubère's work is widely considered to be one of the most valuable sources of information about Siam in the late seventeenth century (see John Villiers in his introduction to the 1989 edition of Gervaise's *The Kingdom of Siam*) or even "probably the best account of seventeenth century Siam," according to historian David K. Wyatt (1984, 116).

Having focused on events in Siam at the time of La Loubère for different historical research purposes, I have always regretted the fact that his monumental work, "the only durable fruit of the expedition," according to another historian, Dirk Van der Cruysse (1991, 105), leaned so heavily on the description of the country rather than serving as a narrative of such a crucial historical period in the Franco-Siamese abortive romance of the time. But this was perhaps a blessing in disguise, since customs, beliefs and manners of the Siamese thus occupy center stage, analyzed by a most meticulous pen, glorifying detail to an incredible point, so that descriptions transcend time and remain relevant even today.

The text opens with a chapter on the geographical description of Siam. Paragraphs short but rich in material cover almost everything on the geographic situation, from frontiers to cities, gardens, rivers, mountains, the etymology of Siam, islands and coasts, even the Buddha's footprint.

The next chapter on the history of Siam reflects, as throughout the book, the author's meticulous preparation and research which, in his own words, counterbalances the shortcomings of his short stay there. He freely refers to many other writers, among whom are Gervaise, Van Vliet, Ferdinand Mendes Pinto, Le Blanc, etc.

Then come elaborate chapters on the woods and trees of Siam, its mines, the fertility of the land, husbandry, the alternation of seasons, gardens, liquors, tea, betel leaves and plenty of other similar topics which capture the author's attention.

Descriptions here again are detailed and presented in a plain style.

The second part of the text examines the manners of the Siamese, their houses, furniture, carriages and boats, their amusements and distractions, their married lives and children, people's education and knowledge, art and trade, and the like. Style here is once more descriptive, unbiased, flowing, as if a camera were moving from various angles, held by someone eager to immortalize the scene as it is without adding his own sketches in between. No preconceived ideas or degrading comparisons are noted here but only the cool, discerning look of an extremely gifted observer, anxious to absorb as much as possible from this alien, exotic culture. Talking for instance about Chinese comedy, La Loubère says that he "would willingly have seen [it] to the end, but it was adjourned" (1969, 47). In other words, no *a priori* dismissal of strange, alien artistic forms as we have seen before in the case of Fróis. Even when La Loubère is confronted with a situation different from his own world, for instance polygamy, he is careful and objective: "The rich who have several wives do equally keep those they love not and those they love" (1969, 533). He also concedes that the polygamic tendencies of the rich are "more out of pomp and grandeur than out of debauchery" (1969, 52).

Irony is almost totally absent from the text, and even when it occasionally surfaces, it is used in support of Siamese ways and not to belittle them. This is the case, for instance, when he explains suffixes added to denote feminine gender, for example "Young Prince, instead of Princess," where "it seems that their [Siamese] Civility hinders them from thinking that Women can ever grow old ... " (1969, 55).

The chapter dedicated to the Siamese character in general is of particular interest as it leaves the area of mere description, entering into a realm of psychological interpretation. The Siamese are good men, is the first remark, and the rarity of adultery is one more positive observation. The Siamese are highly advanced in dignity, he continues. Naturally, Siam is not an ideal paradise full of virtues with no vice. Thieves exist there and forest robbers too, but they rarely resort to killing. "In general," he concludes, "they have Moderation more than us ... They act only by necessity" and "They have the good Fortune to be born Philosophers" (La Loubère 1969, 76). Objective analysis is here again the key word with reference to the author.

Part III of the work attempts a closer examination of Siamese manners and conditions: slavery, titles, mandarins, governing system, judiciary, trial by fire, trial by water, appeals, punishments, a whole panorama of other aspects of the inner lives of the Siamese. Speaking on Petracha, the strong General of the Elephants who in 1688 led the famous Revolution against King Narai and Phaulkon, his Greek protégé, La Loubère states that "he appears moderate" and courageous. Just a sentence later, he proves how astute his diplomatic mind was when he correctly foresees, on the basis of information collected, that either Petracha or his son Sorasak might pretend to the Throne of Narai.

The narrative now takes on greater historical relevance as La Loubère investigates the weakness of the Siamese by sea, the role of the famous "barkalon," a sort of minister of foreign affairs

and foreign trade, the royal seal, the palace and its guards, etc. In this context I shall quote an entire paragraph which so eloquently epitomizes early Japanese involvement in Siam (La Loubère 1993, 97):

Anciently the Kings of *Siam* had a *Japanese* Guard, composed of six hundred men: but because these six hundred men alone, could make the whole Kingdom to tremble when they pleased, the present King's Father, after having made use of them into invade the Throne, found out a way to rid himself of them, more by policy than force.

A whole real historical episode, involving the deeds of an adventurer like Yamada Nagamasa in Siam just a few decades before La Loubère's visit, is covered by the above brief paragraph.

At times the historic mood is interrupted by some remark in fine irony, as for instance when La Loubère writes on the extramarital activities of the King: "... [he] has few Mistresses, that is to say eight or ten in all, not out of Continency but Parsimony. ..." (La Loubère 1993, 101).

Then comes a chapter on the inner functioning of the royal palace, exemplary for the very faithful image that the author manages to extract despite the shortness of his stay in the country.

The analysis of the life of the monks is quite different from the corresponding one by Fróis which we have already examined. Impartial description is again the main characteristic here, free from religious preconceptions and value judgments. One gets the feeling that the chapter might have been written by an academic writer interested in religious phenomena in Siam, such as Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1986) or Kenneth Wells (1975) or Ulrich Pauly (1992), etc.

Even when matters move from description of monastic life to the beliefs of the "Talapoins," efforts at comparison or a derogatory attitude are almost absent. The phrase "... in their opinion" appears repeatedly, demarcating the beliefs of the Siamese and separating them from those of La Loubère. Transmigration, metempsychosis, soul and death are the perennial metaphysical topics touched here with no trace of superior angles and complexes, only the reserved distance of someone who observes calmly without subscribing or admiring.

Then we come to chapter XXV, perhaps the most important of all. The title is "Diverse Observations to be made in preaching the Gospel to the Orientals." What we have here are just four pages of extremely intensive and thought-provoking writing, where Christian fervor is combined with and covered by the astuteness and flexibility of the diplomat.

In essence, La Loubère maintains implicitly the superiority of his Faith, attributing "ignorance"—but "sensible ignorance"—to the Siamese. He stresses the importance of starting by conveying to the heathens the true idea of a God Creator and then proceeding to the teaching of other facets of the Faith which would be otherwise unintelligible. "Every one knows the trouble which the Japponneses expressed to St. Francis Xavier upon the

Eternity of Damnation, not being able to believe that their dead Parents should fall into so horrible a Misfortune for want of having embraced Christianity" he writes (1993, 141). He admits the basic tolerant spirit of the Orientals and he impartially states that "in every country the Ministers of the Altar do live on the Altar" (1993, 142).

There could not be a more appropriate summarization of this chapter than La Loubère's epigrammatic approach: Proceed with caution when preaching: "Thoroughly convince a sick person that the Remedy which he uses is not good and he will immediately take yours" (p. 143). The aphorism is lenient indeed in the context of missionary zeal in the Orient. And yet, it shows rigidity as it is founded on the assumption that the other party is "sick" indeed, an anxiety not always shared by the Orientals in question.

Be that as it may, these ideas may perfectly offer a comparative point of reference to those of Valignano mentioned earlier, although La Loubère abstains from entering into the crucial subject of choice between a European or a native clergy as the best prescription for the spiritual health of the East.

The second tome of the *Relation* deals with some specific points of Buddhism, offers translated materials from the Siamese, deals with days and years, monsoons, fruits, the alphabet, astronomy and a variety of other specific topics treated in an equally scientific way. It is also interesting but less so than the first part and could perhaps offer an autonomous, separate reading.

This is briefly the outline of this magnificent work, written mostly in the cabin of the Embassy's co-leader, as a kind of reaction against the intrigues and interference of the "gray eminence" of the mission, Father Tachard (cf. Van der Cruysee 1991, 436). If this was in reality the case, we may fault the Father for obstructing the political aims of the Embassy, but feel grateful to him because he has thus indirectly bequeathed to us the basic interpretation of Siam at the end of the seventeenth century and one of the best works of this character in general.

## NICOLAS GERVAISE

Nicolas Gervaise was born in Paris around 1662 (this date is not entirely certain), was ordained a priest, and joined the *Société des Missions Étrangères*, i.e. the other distinguished branch of missionaries, apart from the famous Jesuit Order. In 1683 he was sent to Siam where he spent four years, learning the language and studying the country's customs. The culmination of this study was his *Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam*, published in 1688 in Paris and dedicated to Louis XIV.

As John Villiers writes in his introduction to the 1989 reprint of the work, "With the possible exception of Simon de La Loubère's *Du Royaume de Siam*, the *Histoire Naturelle et Politique du Royaume de Siam* is the most authoritative of the numerous French accounts on Siam published during the last twenty years of the seventeenth century ..." (Gervaise 1989, xiii).

Gervaise later travelled to Rome and South America and was killed in 1729 by Carib Indians in what was then Spanish Guyana (now Venezuela).

The first part of the work deals with "the situation and the nature of the country, its trees, plants, fruits, mines, animals etc." This area of interest is reminiscent of some of the initial chapters of La Loubère's book, but perhaps with more details here on natural history.

Three consecutive chapters dedicated to Juthia (Ayudhya), Louveau (the "Versailles" of Siam ...), and Bangkok provide vivid descriptions of urban life in the country at the time.

A short chapter on the Siamese character is precious for its psychological insights, written with a balance of praise and contempt, but certainly without obvious overtones of European superiority.

Then Gervaise deals with the foreigners established in Siam at the time, including the famous "Greek adventurer," Constantine Phaulkon, for whom he has a reference of praise.

The second part of the text goes more deeply into the way of life of the Siamese, their form of government, their customs and so on. The style is plain, descriptive, with no value judgments, like a precociously invented camera exploring the scenery serenely and dispassionately. Comparisons with things European are not in abundance but appear only when necessary, without preconceived notions: "Siamese goldsmiths," he writes for instance (Gervaise 1989, 108), "are scarcely less skilled than ours." Adjectives attributed to the Siamese like "excellent," "admirable" etc. are also present.

The third chapter is dedicated to religion and consequently, as we have seen in all previous discussions, is the most delicate topic of all.

Gervaise begins by trying to give an account of Siamese religious beliefs, mainly regarding the idea of transmigration of souls. The attempt is generally fair, but soon we come across the more or less inevitable indirect dismissal of these erroneous beliefs of the heathens, something to be expected from the pen of a man of *Missions Étrangères*. "The monks," he writes, "who are the depositories of this doctrine, cloak it in a thousand myths so that it may inspire more reverence by virtue of its obscurity" (1969, 129). And just below, he dismisses the whole ideal of religious tolerance as a simple product of the "theology" of the king and his courtiers.

As the discussion proceeds, Gervaise slips into more vigorous negative characterizations: "ridiculous" Buddhist articles (p. 135), generalized conclusions about the infringement of the law by the monks (p. 136), irony (p. 137), "ridiculous charity" (p. 138), and so on. A little further he does not even refrain from resorting to the classical general condemnation of Siamese "mistaken beliefs" (p. 140). But be it as it may, Gervaise has to be given credit for the absolute personal sincerity of his statements: he really believes that the poor Siamese live in error, and in concluding his narrative on the Buddha, he writes: "I considered that it was sufficient only to relate the spiritual qualities which the Siamese attribute to this remarkable person and to reveal the source of the errors that have tainted this people for so many centuries" (p. 142). As in the case of Japan, we see the same approach: to be praised as an article of faith, to be at the same time criticized as inability to invent a different missionary

approach, less dependent on total negativism. And yet, in the case of Gervaise there are, in my opinion, times of more detached judgment, of freer acknowledgment of similarities of weaknesses in Eastern and Western religious institutions. Talking about the privileges of the high Buddhist hierarchy, he states "Since it is an honourable office and one in which one can lead a very comfortable life, it is as coveted as our best bishopricks" (p. 145).

In another chapter, Gervaise appears too honest an observer not to admit the extremely tolerant attitude towards religion of King Narai. Be it because of political considerations or not, the king accepts all religious activities in his kingdom, except when they exceed some accepted norms, as in the case of the Mohammedans. In this context it should be noted that Gervaise uses harsh words for fellow Christians, Calvinists and the English and Dutch Lutherans who have admitted to their communion "two or three heretic Frenchmen ... and some Indians whom they have led into error" (p. 176). As for Siamese Buddhists, error is attributed here to Christians who are not "Catholic."

Thus ends this part on religion which shows, according to John Villiers in his introduction, more scorn "... for the way in which the Siamese practised their religion, rather than for the doctrines of the religion itself" (Gervaise 1989, xvii).

The last part of the work deals with King Narai and the Royal Court and is complemented by some historical background on the country's allies and enemies at the time. The style recovers once again its neutral, descriptive pace since there are no religious reefs to trouble the course and the conscience of the writer.

## CONCLUSIONS

What could be said in general now that the moment of summing up has come?

The first remark would be that both the Japanese and Siamese worlds fascinated those gifted and observant figures who reached such faraway shores. The encounter of the exotic with an interpretive talent produced some pages which have and will continue to challenge the wear of time.

The ecclesiastic—in most cases—background of those early interpreters provides and legitimizes a certain particular angle of examination which naturally focuses more on religion. Whereas in the other areas of survey their style is descriptive, neutral and plain, in the religious realm several personal feelings are bound to surface. We should not lose sight of the fact that the writers were imbued with sincere missionary zeal and their main task was to proselytize. We should consider their religious values as a product of their times and justify them in that precise time context. Examined, though, with hindsight and from the scientific angle of our own period, it is no wonder that they appear too one-sided, unable to come to terms, to grasp and conquer the religious "swamp" of Japan, as is so brilliantly demonstrated by the whole work of such a literary giant as Endo Shusaku. (Siam could also be substituted for

Japan, although the country's contemporary literature has not yet produced a Siamese Endo.)

And yet, there are degrees and nuances of interpretation. Fróis appears in his *Tratado* the most rigid, ironical and negative. (Needless to repeat that his *Tratado* is not his only contribution to the history of sixteenth-century Japan.) Álvarez is a more modest observer, less prepared to enter the analytical depths of Fróis.

Simon de La Loubère set out to write a most detailed general study of Siam, and in pursuing this he is so absorbed that he intentionally omits to chronicle the historic Embassy which he himself had led to the court of King Narai. His treatment of religion is the most pragmatic and dispassionate, although in showing so much understanding and almost tolerance, he never denies his own deep Christian moorings. Finally, Gervaise comes forth as a parallel of La Loubère, with the main

emphasis on presenting an overall painting of Siam where religion also occupies a part and is treated with less "thunder" than Fróis, but with perhaps a little more missionary vigor than La Loubère.

I have just tried to open up a bit the curtain of sixteenth and seventeenth century Japan and Siam. The curtain is large and heavy and there are possibly additional spots from where one can try to lift it up, additional "interpreters" to guide us through such a fantastic panorama. Moreover, we should not forget that the Far East of those years was protecting its mystery and fascination with many other such curtains, covering places like the Middle Kingdom, Indochina, Burma, Korea, and others. It would require much more than my own modest present undertaking to attempt the challenge of identifying other similar "interpreters" who tried to penetrate the endless mysteries of the *Oriens Extremus*.

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