

Frugality, Wonder or Paganism. Representations of Nature in Jesuit Letters Written from Japan (Milan, 1599; Evora, 1598)

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1, Introduction

This paper is going to deal with the representation of Nature in several Jesuit letters written in Japan and published in Europe, in the last years of the 16th century. By doing so, this presentation is contributing to a collective research on the Western representation of Japanese Nature based at the University of Buenos Aires.

The European idea of nature changed remarkably between the last years of the Medieval Age and the Early Modern Times. Nature was no longer seen as God's domain, but it started to be thought of as an object to be studied, understood and also possessed. The division between human and natural orders had been well studied from different perspectives, such as cultural history (Debus, 1978), sociology (Latour, 1991) and ecological history (Arnold, 2001). The sources of Iberian explorations from the 16th and 17th centuries are especially abundant in this topic, at least because of two main reasons: (i) European travelers witnessed different kinds of relations between the inhabitants of the so-called "New Worlds", and their natural environment, which made them realize their own relation with nature (Grafton, 1992); (ii) the nature in those newly discovered places was soon conceived as a source of knowledge, wealth, power and scientific research (Greenblatt, 1991; Findlen, 1996; Smith y Findlen, 2002).

The Nature of Japan was no exception. In fact, it was depicted in a truly distinctive way by Portuguese and Jesuit sources in the 16th century. As this paper is going to show, that nature was represented in several different forms, being always related to the political order and to the official narrative about the Jesuit mission.

As it was mentioned before, this paper is the result of the discussions held in a research team on the topic of Western representations of Japanese nature between the 16th and 20th centuries, based at the University of Buenos Aires.⁽¹⁾ This team aims to re-think the way in which the relation between humans and the environment was linked to a certain European idea of *modernity*. My contribution to this project is connected to these early stages in the relations between the Europeans and Japan during the first half of the Jesuit mission. In this regard, this paper aims to study this topic in a corpus of Jesuit letters included in European letter-collections at the end of the 16th century, from a literary perspective. Here, the *representation* is conceived as a textual issue, a problem whose answer is related to the rhetoric. How did the European travelers express the new things that they were witnessing for the very first time (Schwartz, 1994)? Which words did they choose to construct a European imaginary about Japan and its nature? In other words, which kind of a "Rhetoric of Otherness" (Hartog, 2003) can be found in this Jesuit corpus?

In addition, this perspective from literary studies explains the way in which this corpus was built. The letters that are going to be commented here were all included in letter-collections published in the 16th century, which means that they all went beyond the confessional readings of the Society's members after a complex process of edition and correction (Pinto, 2004; Nelles, 2014; Hoyos Hattori, 2016). According to the main topic of this symposium, this research aims to stress that the edited sources of the Nanbam period are also relevant, as the edition processes built certain narratives, which allows new interpretations. The main source to study is a brief *codex* which

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main topic (as it can be read in the title) are the natural prodigies: *Trattato d'alcuni prodigii occorsi l'anno MDXCVI nel Giappone*. It was printed in octavo in Milan in 1599 and it is attributed to the famous Portuguese Jesuit Luís Fróis (1532-1597). As this paper aims to reach the early Jesuit discourse about Japanese nature in a broader perspective, the corpus is completed by earlier letters about Japan, included in the influential book printed in Évora in 1598, *Cartas que os padres e irmãos da Companhia de Jesus escreverão dos Reynos de Iapão & China aos da mesma Companhia da India, & Europa, desde anno de 1549 até o de 1580*.⁽²⁾

It is possible to define three different ways of portraying nature in our corpus. All three of them are deeply related to the construction of a certain narrative about the Jesuit mission in Japan. The three of them as well stress the dynamic relation between the human and the nature domains (Arnold, 2001). The Japanese nature is represented: (i) as perfect for a life of frugality and moderation; (ii) as prodigious; (iii) as pagan. The second and the third are deeply connected to earthquakes. And, as it will be shown, the three of them aim to protect and legitimate the presence of Jesuit priests in Japan.

2, Shortage or moderation

During the first years of the mission in Japan, its nature was depicted as a domain of shortage. Through lists and comparisons, the missionary Gaspar Vilela described it as a land “more poor and cooler than Portugal”⁽³⁾. Differently from the abundance associated with several places of the “New World”, Japan did not have “oil, butter, cheese, milk, eggs, sugar, honey, vinegar”, and “it was said that there is no saffron, cinnamon or pepper. Lastly, they do not have any medicine to give to the ill”⁽⁴⁾.

Francis Xavier (1506-1552) was the first missionary who interpreted that natural poverty as a positive attribute. He understood Japanese nature as ideal for a life of frugality and as a challenge for its inhabitants. In 1549, he states: “The people of this land live very healthy” and “there are many old people”⁽⁵⁾. The lack of food becomes positive for the spirit, because it inspires a life of abstinence: “In Japan, it can be easily seen that we can live with few things”⁽⁶⁾. This kind of representation of Japanese nature is related to an idealistic conception of Japanese people, and both (land and mankind) are “more prepared to receive our saint faith than any other people around the world”⁽⁷⁾.

The idea of a challenging land is present in other letters as well. Japanese buildings are also understood as the result of the adaptation to the environment:

in this land of Japan, houses are not built with stones and concrete, but wood, because of great tempests and storms. As there are many earthquakes, if the houses were made of stone, it would be dangerous. (...) The walls are doors that can be opened all at once, and then the house seems to be in the middle of the street, without any wall.⁽⁸⁾

Windstorms and earthquakes are seen as the main reason for the unusual Japanese building style. The walls can be moved and leave the house “in the middle of the street”, so they can be easily fixed in the case of a natural disaster. And this was a very eloquent example of the Japanese people’s adaptation ability.

This environment of severe weather, unpredictable earthquakes and scarce food was read both as ideal for a

(2) From now on, shorten as *Cartas de Évora*. After quotes, it will be referred the number of the volume (I or II), and the folio.

(3) “pobre, & mais fria que Portugal” (*Cartas de Évora*, I, 30r).

(4) “Carece esta terra de azeite, manteiga, queijo, leite, ovos, açúcar, mel, e vinagre: tambem dizem que não ha açafraão, canela, nem pimenta: & sal não ha (...). Finalmente, não ha cousa que por mezinha se dé a hum doente” (*Cartas de Évora*, I, 30r).

(5) “Vive esta gente desta terra mui saa”; “ha muitos velhos” (*Cartas de Évora*, I, 13r).

(6) “Bem se vee em os Iapoes como nossa natureza com pouco se sostem” (*Cartas de Évora*, I, 13r).

(7) “mais aparelhados para que em elles se prante nossa santa fe, que todas as gentes do mundo” (*Cartas de Évora*, I, 17v).

(8) “por causa das grandes tempestades de ventos que nesta terra de Iapão ha, [as casas] não são de pedra & cal mas de tavoado: e isto porque ha tremor de terra muitas vezes, & sendo de pedra, & cal ficavão perigosos. (...) as paredes são portas de paneis que se correm huas polas outras de modo que se querem abrir todas as portas fica a casa que parece estar na rua sem paredes” (*Cartas de Évora*, I, 320r).

Christian life of moderation, and as a great proof of its inhabitants' creativity. An old European tradition can be traced beneath these ideas, according to which difficult lands motivates hard-working peoples. As the Greek philosopher Hippocrates states, "in those places where the land is barren, dry and beaten (...), the inhabitants are strong and meager, they are intelligent, good handcrafters and brave" (cit. in Arnold, 22). Japanese land and Japanese people were represented as ideal for the future conversion to Christianity, in a convenient way aiming at legitimating Society of Jesus' presence and exclusiveness in that territory. The conversion of Japan in the times of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) (but before the anti-Christian persecution) seemed to be possible.

3, The earthquakes

According to several sources, certain natural events were interpreted as prodigies. These events couldn't be rationally explained, so they were commonly understood as God's signs. During the early modern times, they were considered as allegories of God's will, or anticipations of great developments (Daston & Park, 1998; Prieto, 2010).

Frois' letter collection published in 1599 announces its main topic from its title: the "Prodigies that Happened in Japan". They are explicitly connected to Toyotomi Hideyoshi's actions, as he can be easily recognized as the main character of the book. After portraying him receiving a Chinese Embassy, Fróis says:

These feasts and other opulent events that he organizes are made right away after he requests them, with no compassion to the poor, against the reason, making them work day and night under his rule. But God is showing him so many signs and prodigies with clear evidence, that everyone in Japan is scared and horrified.⁽⁹⁾

The rest of the book is a very detailed description of those seven prodigies. They are ordered in a *crescendo* of greatness and gravity until the sixth. Three of them are actually relevant for the topic of this paper: two cases of unusual rain and a terribly violent earthquake.

Let's start with the rains:

Last July 22nd (...), in Miyako, in its boundaries, and in the city of Fushimo, it rained ash. This ash, like snow, covered roofs, mountains and trees. And that day was sad and dark, and many suffered from headaches and their hearts were covered in melancholy.⁽¹⁰⁾

It started raining many white long hairs, which were just like the old woman's hair. Those who witnessed such a strange and extraordinary thing felt marvel and horror.⁽¹¹⁾

Both cases of odd rain affected their witness immediately causing "melancholy", "marvel" or "horror". Both cases of rain were indirect signs of God (in a very different way from the rain of stones that Yahweh drops on the enemies of Israel during the battle of Gabon in Josue, 10:11). With no possible explanation, the ash and the hairs are an anticipation of a radical Hideyoshi's change of mood, which would bring to an end the peace that he contributed to keep before.

Then, the sixth event is developed in thirty pages of a total of eighty. It is a singular earthquake: "The sixth prodigy was the most horrible and terrifying of them all. It was a terrible earthquake, which caused the biggest ruin

(9) "Hor stando egli [Hideyoshi] nel megilio de i maggiori preparatorij, feste, & altre cose esquisite, che ogni di ordina, che di nuovo si facciano, senza compassione alcuna verso i poveri, contra ogni ragione, facendoli suiscerare di giorno, e di notte per suo servizio; gli vâ mostrando Dio con evidenza chiara tanti segni, e prodigij, che à tutto il Giappone apportano non poco timore, e spavento" (Frois, 1599: 16).

(10) "alli venti due di Luglio del presente anno 96 (...), nel Meaco, e nei confini, e nella città di Fuscimo, piovē cenere minuta in gran copia, la quale à guisa di neve copriva i tetti, i monti, e gli alberi; e quel giorno fù tanto melanconico & oscuro, che cagionava à molti dolor di testa, e si copriva il cuori di malinconia." (Frois, 1599: 26).

(11) "cominciò a piovere gran copia di capelli bianchi, e lunghi, i quali in cosa niuna erano differenti da i capelli del capo di una donna vecchia, (...): il che cagionava non piccola meraviglia e spavento à quei, che vedevano cose tanto rara, e straordinaria." (Frois, 1599: 25-26).

ever seen or heard in Japan”⁽¹²⁾. Fróis includes in his other letters written from different places of Japan, which have news about the earthquake and its effects. He says, “in half an hour everything was in ruins”⁽¹³⁾ in Osaka; “It sounded as a demons’ battle under the ground”⁽¹⁴⁾ in Kyoto; “Night and day it was horrifying to hear men’s yelling, women’s screaming, children’s crying. They called for help, to be rescued from under the ground, where they were still alive and trapped under their houses”⁽¹⁵⁾ in Sakai.

From Fróis’ perspective, these three extraordinary facts are clear and extraordinary signs of God. However, which is their meaning? What are they anticipating? This is actually revealed not by Fróis himself, but by another Jesuit whose letter is included in the end of the codex. The main topic of that brief letter is the Embassy of Ming: the Chinese Emissaries wanted to achieve peace between Japan and Korea, after Hideyoshi’s attempt to conquer the peninsula in 1592 (Haboush, 2016). The ceremony had gone nicely, but suddenly and with no reason, the taiko “yelled and sweated so much that his head was smoking”⁽¹⁶⁾. At that precise moment, he decided to go back to war against Korea and to force the Ambassadors out of the country.

Thus, the prodigies caused “horror” to its witnesses while foreseeing the end of the peace. They are understood as signs of Hideyoshi’s change of mood, which evidences his lack of Christian values, such as constancy and compassion.

On the other hand, these events happened a few months before the first collective martyrdom of Christians in Japan, which took place in Nagasaki in February 1597. That famous martyrdom was explained in great detail by Fróis in a different letter published in the same year and in the same city: *Relatione della gloriosa morte di XXVI posti in croce*. Both books were published in *octavo* by the same house (Pacífico Pontio), with identical typography and design. The two of them can be read as an editorial series, which sheds new light into the prodigies and how they should be interpreted. Besides, both letters were included along with a third one (the *anua* of 1595) in a Latin book printed in Mainz in 1599 as well.

In addition, this was not the only time when an extraordinary earthquake was understood as a premonition of an imminent change. Ten years before 1596, in a letter included in Évora’s collection, Fróis says:

In this year [1586], there was the strongest and most terrifying earthquake that men had ever seen, heard or read in their stories (...). It made them oddly amazed and frightened⁽¹⁷⁾

This earthquake also announced Hideyoshi’s change of mind, which would bring the worst news for the Jesuit missionaries: the 1587’s Anti-Christian Edict. And also it announced a terrible war against Christian *daimyo* in Kyushu. Then, both earthquakes result to be extraordinarily destructive and premonitions of a crucial turning point for the mission’s history.

In this type of representation, nature is conceived as a pagan domain, as somewhere the Demon’s power has taken roots. In other letter by Fróis (also included in Évora’s collection), he describes it in a similar way:

This land is very poor, and the cold is unbearable, so much snow covering the houses, and the heat is terrible, and thunder and lightning and earthquakes are frightening. But if we consider that the demon here is obeyed and worshiped, and that all people are sinner and evil, it is not surprising.⁽¹⁸⁾

(12) “Il sesto prodigio, più horrendo e spaventoso de tutti i passati, fù un terribilissimo terremoto, il quale fece le maggiori ruine, che mai à memoria d’huomo si siano viste, ò udite nel Giappone” (Frois, 1599: 31).

(13) “Tutto andò in ruina nello spatio di meza hora.” (Frois, 1599: 33).

(14) “Pareva sotto terra vi fusse una gran battaglia trà le potestà infernali” (Frois, 1599: 36).

(15) “Era cosa degna di compassione udire si di giorno, come di notte, le voci degli huomini, gli strilli delle donne, i pianti de’ fanciulli, che per tutto si sentivano gridare, e dimandare aiuto, che li cavassero di sotto terra, dove stavano ancora vivi, & oppressi dalle case” (Frois, 1599: 47).

(16) “Gridava, e sudava tanto, che dalla testa gl’usciva il fumo” (Frois, 1599: 72).

(17) “Este anno de oitenta & seis, (...) ouve o mais estranho, & espantoso tremor de terra, que nunca os homens se lembrão ter visto, nem ouvido, nem ainda lido em histórias (...) pos estranho terror, & espanto aos homens» (*Cartas de Évora*, II, 185v).

The bad quality of the ground, the severity of the weather and the earthquakes are understood as proof of the paganism and the inhabitants' bad behavior. At this point, rough natural elements that had been considered as evidence of Japanese's adaptability to the environment previously, are now seen as coherent with the moral quality of Japanese people.

Nevertheless, both ways of portraying nature (as frugal or as prodigious/pagan) can be understood inside a certain frame of an official narrative about the mission. As an ideal land for Christian values, or as a pagan land that needs to become Christian, the representation of nature in Japan helps build that narrative, which main goal is strengthening the Jesuit identity and to legitimate their presence overseas.

4, Conclusion

In the last years of the 16th century, the ideas about nature developed in Japan and read in Europe were not always the same. The Jesuit authors described it in quite different ways, according to their own experience and knowledge, which as Stuart Schwartz (1994: 3) explained, also happened to all European early-modern voyagers. However, their membership to the Society of Jesus should also be seen as a fundamental influence on their writings, as well as the work of editors, correctors and publishers who contributed to shape the Jesuit discourse about the Japanese mission.

As we saw before, the earthquakes can be understood as announcements of war or terrible events for the mission: in 1586, the war against Christian *daimyo* and the 1587's Edict; ten years later, the war against Korea and the Martyrdom of Nagasaki.

On the other hand, the different ways of portraying nature in Japan (as evidence of frugality or paganism) have in common not only their relation to the official discourse about the mission, but also the fact that they are based on certain shortages: lack of fertile grounds; lack of food; lack of Christian's virtues. What is to say, their reference point is always Europe. A dynamic between humans and their environment was also stressed. Taking this concept to an extreme, it would be possible to say that the conversion of the inhabitants was going to *convert* nature as well. A Christian land, with any more demonic presence, would be morally constant and, maybe, free of earthquakes.

As I stated in the beginning of this presentation, this is only the result of my ongoing contribution to the collective research on the topic of Western representations of nature in Japan. As we have seen, in this first chapter of the relations between Japan and Europe, those representations are deeply related to the Jesuit religious view and to their building of an official narrative about the mission. In addition, the study of the edited sources resulted to be relevant, as they allowed me to interpret the Frois' prodigies in the broader context of the mission. In future presentations, I'm going to continue this path to delve into the relation between representations of nature and the European idea of *modernity*.

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(18) “esta terra he muito esteril (...) & os frios intoleraveis, & tanta neve, que cobre as casas, & calmas grandissimas, trovões, coriscos, relampados, & tremores da terra muito espantosos, porem bem considerada a cousa, não pode deixar de aver tudo em terra a onde o demonio he tao servido, e tão venerado, tão acatado, & onde os peccados, e maldades da gente he tanta” (*Cartas de Évora*, I, 330r).

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