

Special Issue:

Cultural Encounters in Tranquebar: Past and Present

Guest Editors:

Esther Fihl

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Introduction : The study of cultural encounters in Tharangampadi/Tranquebar

Esther Fihl and Stine Simonsen Puri

Shipwrecked on the Coromandel: The first Indo–Danish contact, 1620

Esther Fihl

Abstract: This article focuses on the complications involved in the very first Indo–Danish cultural encounter leading to the establishment of the Danish trading station in Tharangampadi or Tranquebar as it was called by the Danes in 1620. The analysis is based on the report sent to the Danish King Christian IV by his envoy Ove Giedde on his return from India. It begins with a description of the voyage to the East Indies in order to introduce the reader to the troubles, aspirations and actors from the Danish side. The friction created when the Danes encountered the aspirations of Raghunatha Nayak of Tanjore and the role of the gift is analysed next. The conclusion is that the South Indian partner of the encounter is rather cross-culturally experienced and actually eager to make the Danes settle in the area. The analytical perspective on the encounter is concentrated on events described by Ove Giedde. The focus is on the actual meetings in 1620, of agents with disparate cultural backgrounds and aspirations and who in their grappling with one another create a contact zone of new forms of social interaction.

The Tranquebar tribute : Contested perceptions during the reign of Rajah Serfoji II of Tanjore

Simon Rastén

Abstract: With the establishment of Tranquebar as the first Danish trading post in India, the Danes became part of a complex political system in South India based on the reciprocal exchange of gifts and tributes between princely states. Until Tranquebar was sold to the British in 1845, an annual tribute was paid to the Rajahs of Tanjore, a payment that was closely connected to ceremonial honours and symbols at the court. Rajah Serfoji II (r. 1798–1832), who had been placed on the throne by the English East India Company, considered the receipt

of the tribute from a European power particularly honourable and received it in public with great ceremonies every year as an important symbol of his sovereignty. By closely analysing a dispute over the tribute which arose in the aftermath of the British occupation of Tranquebar in 1808–1816, the paper explores Indian, British and Danish perceptions of the Tranquebar tribute. The paper seeks to understand Tranquebar in a South Indian context by focusing on diplomatic relations and disagreements. It is argued that the right to define the significance of the tribute was constantly being negotiated and contested in this colonial encounter.

The schools of Tranquebar: An educational field of cultural encounters and conflicts

Keld Grinder-Hansen

Abstract: The arrival of the missionaries from the Halle Mission to Tranquebar in 1706 deeply influenced the educational development of southern India. Education was a central element in the pietistic strategy of the Danish-Halle Mission to convert the Tamils to Christianity. The mission established within a few decades an effective school system in Tranquebar and its territory, which made it possible for a broad segment of the Tamil youth to receive basic school education. The educational success of the missionaries soon spread from the Tranquebar area to other parts of South India, where the missionaries established a number of schools. The school activities of the missionaries among the common Tamil population were the first steps towards the creation of a general school system in India and a precondition for the development in the nineteenth century, where the public authorities took responsibility for the teaching of Indian children. The legacy of the Danish-Halle Mission is still evident in Tranquebar, not least in the field of education, where the town holds an unusually large number of private schools, including two teacher training institutes, of which all but one are owned and run by Christian organizations

Between consent and coercion: Danish Missionaries and Tamil parents in late nineteenth century South India

Karen Vallgård

Abstract: This article explores how parental authority was negotiated in a cultural encounter between Danish missionaries and low-caste South Indian parents in the 1860s and 1870s. It documents the subtle means of coercion, which missionaries employed to gain authority over Indian children and enforce a long-term separation of the children from their parents. This resulted in both confrontations and exchanges between members of the two internally heterogeneous groups, and it took place within an ambiguous cultural space organized by different social hierarchies. The article shows that while the encounters unsettled certain axes of power, others were left unchallenged.

The legacy of Tranquebar: The 'Ziegenbalg myth' and the debates on caste

Oluf Schönbeck

Abstract: The aim of the article is twofold: to illustrate aspects of cultural encounters, and to show how 'history' and 'history writing' may be enlisted with the purpose of providing

legitimacy, not least in the conflicts that sometimes are the result of cultural encounters. More specifically, the article shows how the foundation narrative of the Lutheran Church in South India, centred around the German missionary, Bartolomäus Ziegenbalg (the 'Ziegenbalg myth'), has been used till the present day with various purposes. This was also the case in the latter half of the nineteenth century when a harsh conflict broke out between the Lutheran missionaries who took a lenient and more accommodating stand concerning the caste institution, and the Protestant (Anglican) bishop and missionaries, who preferred to exclude people from the church rather than tolerate discrimination based on caste. The conflict thus was the result of cultural encounters on two levels: one between European missionaries and indigenous South Indians, and the other between two competing groups of European missionaries. Reference to Ziegenbalg was made by both parties of the latter, but for opposing purposes. Finally, it is argued that the high esteem Ziegenbalg holds till this day is not least a result of this returning reference to his name through the centuries.

'Written on leaves in the Malabarian manner': Print and the cultural encounter in eighteenth century Tranquebar

A.R. Venkatachalapathy

Abstract: This paper attempts to put together the dispersed information in the missionary archives to reconstruct the pioneering work of the Danish missionaries in bringing print to the Tamil country. The specific locus of the interaction was the small town of Tranquebar on the Coromandel coast. In the process of reconstructing the interaction, this paper seeks to know how a new technology of communication—the medium of print—encountered a culture with a long history of textual production. This cultural interaction entailed a dialogue between missionaries from the west who had deeply imbued a negative understanding of indigenous culture and were impelled by a desire to proselytise, and a native elite steeped in indigenous forms of cultural production and reproduction. The missionary access to knowledge was mediated by native intellectuals who held their ground. The quest for knowledge to understand indigenous culture also led them to seek out manuscripts. Not only the content but also the material artefact of the indigenous book written as it was on palm leaves posed a challenge to the missionaries.. It is to the credit of the Tranquebar press that they could adapt the technology of the Gutenberg movable type to the Tamil language. Evidence indicates that the printed material from Tranquebar was received by some native converts and made a profound impact on their worldview.

'Where once Dannebrog waved for more than 200 years': Banal nationalism, narrative templates and post-colonial melancholia

Kirsten Thisted

Abstract: This article focuses on Sophie Petersen's *Danmarks gamle Tropekolonier* (Denmark's Former Tropical Colonies) from 1946: an outstanding example of the Danish narrative about Denmark as a tiny benevolent and thoroughly humanistic nation, which ironically sacrificed its imperial potentials for the sake of justice, but thereby gained greater honour on a moral and ethical level. This narrative seems to have found its final form after the sale of the Danish West Indies, the last Danish tropical colony; perhaps as a sort of compensation and explanation for the 'loss' of colonial empire. However, at the same time,

the narrative played an important role legitimizing Denmark's claim on all of Greenland in the name of its people. It again gained relevance in connection with the German occupation of Denmark and the decolonization following World War II. Petersen's book was invoked again and again over the following decades. Even in the present day, the narrative of the benevolent Danish empire is still reproduced—also when the explicit goal has been to create a counter-narrative. A possible explanation is found in theories of nation, remembering and narration. Finally, the article discusses whether the continuing interest in the former colonies and the history of the past Danish empire should be seen (only) as a sign of post-colonial melancholia: a reaction against globalization, migration and altered geopolitical and racial balances of power, or whether it might (also) be seen in a more positive light as an effort to appreciate history and create new and more equal meetings across borders.

Tranquebar: A forgotten Danish colony?

Astrid Nonbo Andersen

Abstract: The following paper focuses on the present day encounters in Tharangambadi between various Danish actors and members of the fishermen community. Through three significant notes of convergence between the different versions of the past the question of cultural encounters are studied as encounters between different historicopolitical horizons and mnemonic modes of remembrance that are described in phenomenological terms. The main argument of the article claims that these preliminary differences result in difficulties of understanding the motives and acts of the other, and also result in new narratives influenced by the new encounters in Tharangambadi between local inhabitants and Danish visitors.

The fishing community and heritage tourism in Tarangambadi

Raja H Swamy

Abstract: The growth of tourism in Tarangambadi has benefited in several ways from the post-tsunami reconstruction efforts of the state government. While fisher people are being relocated to a new inland housing complex about 590 meters from the coast, the area of historic Tranquebar comprising the southern section of Tarangambadi is being claimed by a variety of tourism interests seeking to develop the area's 'heritage' sites. This paper argues that the cultural encounter embodied in the relationship between the growth of tourism and the displacement of the fishing community is centred on a process of silencing that is central to the hegemonic production of place in Tarangambadi. The state and central government's neo-liberal orientation provides a central basis for silencing the spatial claims of the fishing community by devaluing artisanal fishing as an activity, and promoting tourism as a means to expand the GDP. Simultaneously, the production of heritage involves a selective reading of the colonial past where the fishing community is conspicuously absent. A critical re-encounter with the historical geography of Tarangambadi's fishing community and the fishing complex it belongs to can provide a tentative direction towards unravelling this process of silencing.

Whose history? Transnational cultural heritage in Tranquebar

Helle Jørgensen

Abstract: Tranquebar has been declared a heritage town by the government of Tamil Nadu due to the presence of a significant number of historical structures dating to 1620–1845, when the town was a Danish trading colony. The remains of past cultural encounters attract wide public and private interest, both from Indian and Danish agents, who have in recent years initiated an unprecedented number of restoration projects; but whose heritage is being preserved in this present cultural encounter? Establishing Tranquebar as a heritage town is not simply a question of preservation of built structures. The changes in the townscape of Tranquebar, in which the historic buildings are a part, are subject to many interests ranging from social development to widely differing aesthetic ideals. The current development in Tranquebar may therefore be seen as a cross-cultural process of interpretation and negotiation, in which the material traces from the past comprised of the built environment are just not historical, but become so, as they acquire special significance by being treated as heritage. To capture the coexistence of differing experiences of historicity and uses of the same townscape analytically this paper proposes the concept of the heritage palimpsest.

The last *Vettiyan*: A musical tradition and a degraded low caste profession

Caroline Lillelund

Abstract: As the feudal, caste-based organisation of labour in village India has given way to capitalist market forces and wage labour relations, traditional low caste professions are beginning to disappear. One of these professions is the inherited, highly stigmatized office of funeral drummer and graveyard attendant, called *vettiyan*. In Tranquebar, only one person from the Paraiyar caste is still serving as *vettiyan*, and even he dreams about a better future for his son. This article examines the gradual disappearance of the *vettiyan* profession in Tranquebar and the neighbouring villages in relation to the general changes in the economic, social, and symbolic status of the low castes. It looks into the ambiguous symbolic meanings of drums and drumming, and compares the *vettiyan* profession to that of other drummers and musicians from the Paraiyar caste. The article focuses on the subtle cultural encounters between people, who belong to the same caste and share almost similar cultural backgrounds, but still define each other as 'others'. It argues that the few remaining *vettiyan*s are used by their Paraiyar caste fellows as symbolic repositories of the negative, degrading connotations of untouchability and impurity that are still associated with their existence and which they vehemently strive to escape.

Processions and chariot festivals in Tharamgambadi and Velankanni: Cultural encounters and marking

Peter B. Andersen

Abstract: This article addresses South Indian festivals on the basis of fieldwork in Tharamgambadi and Velankanni. In South India festivals and chariot festivals have been common since medieval times. Even if there is some agreement that ritual expressions in chariot festivals in India have developed with interaction between the different religions, they have recently been seen rather as expressions of the strength of the religious communities

than instances of collaboration, due to the present conflicts among different religious communities. This article argues for a more even approach as it will identify instances of cultural encounters among the different religious communities as they may be identified in the celebration of the various South Indian festivals. The article also considers how far the festivals are manifestations of separate religious communities and the ways in which they are manifestations of collaboration among them. The article at the outset considers observations of recent chariot festivals in Tharangambadi, where Hindus.

Between Jesus and Krishna: Christian encounters with South Indian temple dance

Stine Simonsen Puri

Abstract: One of the eight national dances of India, bharatanatyam, partly originates from the area around Tranquebar. During the time that Tranquebar was a Danish colony, devadasis were patronised by the Thanjavur royal court. In 1623, a Danish–Icelandic soldier routinely observed the devadasis dancing outside the Masilamaninathar temple which he was guarding. His accounts of the dancers are interesting at two levels. First, they provide us with unique data on the role of the devadasis at the village level in seventeenth century Tamil Nadu. Secondly, they shed light on a certain imagination and perspective on Indian religion grounded in European Christian thought at the time. Since the seventeenth century, partly out of encounters with westerners, the dance of the devadasis has been taken from its original setting to a national middle class stage on which girls of very different backgrounds learn bharatanatyam. A second part of the article is based on fieldwork done in a bharatanatyam dance institution situated in New Delhi, and deals with a Christian student and her experiences enacting stories from Hindu mythology in the dance. The focus is on how she reflects on Hinduism as well as Christianity through her dance practice. Though set in very different contexts, the two accounts shed light on Christian perspectives on Hinduism through their encounter with a dominant South Indian dance form.

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BOOK REVIEWS

K N NAIR and G GOPIKUTTAN

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