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**Article**

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## The Jesuit Patriarchate to the Prete: Between Religious Reform, Political Expansion and Colonial Adventure\*

ANDREU MARTÍNEZ ALÒS-MONER

“Entreterey [a Sua Santidade] em pratica e em esperanças por não demenuir da opinião que por qua se tem do rey do Abexim ser poderoso e de Vossa Alteza o poder ajuntar contra o Turco pois pera a reputação tanto val o que he como o que se imagina e o mundo se governa pello que lhe fazem crer.”<sup>1</sup>

The Jesuit mission stands as an important *topoi* in the history of the Christian Ethiopian kingdom. Since the pioneering works of Conti-Rossini, and Girma Beshah and Merid Wolde Aregay<sup>2</sup>, up to the more recent studies by Ramos and Pennec<sup>3</sup>, the events related to this mission have, little by little, been unfolded. We now possess a more complex and dynamic picture of the

\* This paper is part of my doctoral research in History at the European University Institute (Florence, Italy). I would like to thank Elizabeth Fordham for her patience, insightful suggestions and skilled corrections.

<sup>1</sup> “I will occupy [the Pope] with news and hopes so the esteem in which the Abyssinian king is held does not diminish, and people continue to consider him powerful and Your Majesty able to ally with him against the Turk, since in maintaining the reputation the imagined matters as much as the real, and world’s affairs are indeed governed by what one tells them to be.”; Letter of Lourenço Pires de Tavora, Portuguese ambassador in Rome, to King João III, July 19, 1561, in VISCONDE DE SANTARÉM et al., ed., *Corpo diplomático português...* (Lisboa 1959–69), vol. IX, 300–03, here 303.

<sup>2</sup> CARLO CONTI-ROSSINI, “Portogallo ed Etiopia”, in *Id.*, *Relazioni storiche fra l’Italia e il Portogallo; memorie e documenti* (Roma 1940), 323–59; GIRMA BESHAH – MERID WOLDE AREGAY, *The Question of the Union of the Churches in Luso-Ethiopian Relations (1500–1632)* (Lisbon 1964).

<sup>3</sup> See MANUEL JOÃO RAMOS, “The Invention of a Mission: the Brief Establishment of a Portuguese Catholic Minority in Renaissance Ethiopia”, in J. MUCHA, ed., *Dominant Culture as Foreign Culture: Dominant Group(s) in the Eyes of the Minorities* (New York 1999); *Id.*, “Machiavelian Empowerment and Disempowerment: the Violent Struggle for Power in XVII<sup>th</sup> Century Ethiopia”, in ANGELA CHEATER, ed., *The Anthropology of Power. Empowerment and Disempowerment in Changing Structures* (London 1999), 191–205; HERVE PENNEC, *Des Jésuites au royaume du Prêtre Jean (Éthiopie): Stratégies, rencontres et tentatives d’implantation (1495–1633)*, Thèse de Doctorat (Paris, Université de Paris I – Sorbonne 2000).

activities carried out by the Jesuit missionaries and their Ethiopian contemporaries.

There are, however, some aspects that need further research. The foundation of the Patriarchate that accompanied this mission still remains largely in the shadows. The theological nuances surrounding this singular Catholic institution have remained, so far, untapped by scholars. As a contribution to this specific problematic, I will attempt here to shed some light on the genesis of this institution. Why did the Portuguese Crown decide, after more than fifty years of diplomatic relations with Ethiopia<sup>4</sup>, to begin a mission of conversion over a former political ally? Why did this African Church, once seen as a respectable member of the Christian “family”, become a target of the Jesuit proselytist zeal? How did this religious process of conversion take over the leading role, relegating the previous diplomatico-political movements to marginal phenomena?

In this paper I will try to offer some responses to these questions. The study will start rather far away from the Ethiopian highlands, in the tormented spaces of the Portuguese court, where the Jesuits took their first steps. The religious impulse that this newly-found order brought to the court will then be articulated within the geopolitical context of the *Estado da India*. However, neither the political strategies of the Portuguese monarchy nor the religious zeal of the Jesuit order can fully explain why a new Catholic Patriarchate was created. It is here that the figure and the polemic that surrounded the *mestre* João Bermudez takes on a new dimension. His forgery, often seen as a simple historical anecdote, becomes a key piece in the politico-religious projects that Catholic Europe prepared for Ethiopia.

### The Jesuit conversion of the (Portuguese) court

When the famous Portuguese military expedition of Christovão da Gama arrived in Ethiopia in 1541, the first generation of Jesuits was already active in Portugal. Similar to what happened in other countries where the Society maintained members, their success at the Portuguese court was rapid. Just a month after his arrival in Lisbon, Francis Xavier wrote to his colleagues in Rome that “despues que pasaron tres o quatro dias que llegamos en esta

<sup>4</sup> I use here the term Ethiopia to mean the Christian kingdom that ruled in the Ethiopian highlands from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It should be noted that this “Ethiopia” has little to do with the nation-state that nowadays bears the same name, which has a different economic, social and ethnic identity as well as much larger geographic borders. Similarly, to keep close to the forms used in the sources, I will also refer to Ethiopia and to its ruler as the *Preste*, and to the Ethiopian ruler also as the Emperor, a form that seems to have been introduced by the Jesuit missionaries.

ciudad, el rey nos mando llamar y nos recibio muy benignemente”.<sup>5</sup> The next year, after having spent the winter period with the court in Almeirin, he again wrote to Loyola to tell him about the progress achieved: “Envianos el rey muy favorecidos, y nos ha mucho encomendado al visorrey que este año va a las Indias”.<sup>6</sup> By march 1541, just a few weeks before the departure for the Eastern Indies, Francis Xavier could claim to have “reformed” the Portuguese court, gaining its full support as well as that of the forthcoming viceroy of the *Estado da India*, Martin Alfonso de Sousa. In their turn, the King and his ambassador in Rome, Dom Pedro Mascarenhas, were quick enough to obtain for him four pontifical briefs, where “se le nombra nuncio de la India Oriental y se le recomienda al rey de Etiopía y a otros príncipes orientales”.<sup>7</sup> The road to the Western Indies was therefore fully open to the Jesuit dynamism and capacity for improvisation.

Besides “reforming” the court and collecting its favours, Francis Xavier and Rodrigues were also introduced to some of its projects and dreams. It is probable that during the intense 10 months that Francis Xavier spent at the Portuguese court he knew about the Luso-Ethiopian affair. The year he arrived in Lisbon was indeed especially important for Luso-Ethiopian matters. It is then that the two most important 16<sup>th</sup> cent. accounts on Ethiopia were published. The *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João*, came to light in Lisbon the 22<sup>nd</sup> October, whilst its author, Francisco Alvares, was struggling in Italy to be received by the Pope. Damião de Goes’s *Fides, religio, moresque* was, on the contrary, published a month earlier and far from the Portuguese court, in Louvain. Both works were direct offsprings of some 40-years engagement between the Portuguese kings and the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty. They were also to some extent a sign of the open atmosphere and dynamic life that could be felt in imperial and metropolitan Lisbon. However, despite their qualities and public success, both publications were received with distrust by authorities. Alvares needed some 10 years to have his copy accepted: his book could only be printed after ecclesiastical and po-

<sup>5</sup> “After three or four days in this town, the king called us and we were warmly received by him”; Letter of Francisco Xavier to Ignacio de Loyola and Nicolas Bobadilla, July 23, 1540 (Lisboa), in FRANCISCO XAVIER, *Cartas y escritos de San Francisco Javier*, ed. FELIX ZUBILLAGA (Madrid 1996), 59–63.

<sup>6</sup> “The king dispatches us [to India] with much support, and he has recommended us to the forthcoming Vice king of the Indies”; Letter of Francisco Xavier to Ignacio de Loyola and Juan Coduri, March 18, 1541 (Lisboa), in FRANCISCO XAVIER, *Cartas*, 71–5.

<sup>7</sup> “He is named nuncio of the Oriental Indies and is recommended to the Ethiopian king and to other oriental princes”; FELIX ZUBILLAGA, “Introducción”, in FRANCISCO XAVIER, *Cartas*, 4.

litical censorship removed some disturbing parts. Goes's fate was even worse since he encountered the opposition of the *cardeal infante* D. Henrique, *Inquisidor-Geral* of the kingdom, who banned the circulation of his book. But somehow, our newly-arrived Jesuits also managed to play an important role in these polemics. Here, the dispute between Rodrigues and Goes moves to centre stage<sup>8</sup>.

From 1534 to 1538, Damião de Goes was taking courses at the University of Pádua. At the beginning of 1538, Rodrigues arrived there on a preaching tour typical of the first years of the Jesuit order. He came from Rome where he had been preparing with Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier and the rest of the first Jesuits, the official texts to be presented to the Pope. It was at this Venetian university that the two Lusitan personalities met, engaging in harsh disputes over Protestantism and religious orthodoxy. Whatever the actual contents of the dispute, it was enough for Simão Rodrigues to classify Goes as heretic and dangerous to the Church. Once he was in Portugal, empowered by his charge as provincial of the Portuguese Jesuits and confessor to the prince D. João, he denounced Goes to the inquisitors in Evora. The brilliant writer from Alenquer could thus hardly enjoy his return to the homeland. In 1545, the year of his arrival, an inquisitorial process was opened against him. When the process was frozen Goes was once again able to develop his courtly and literary career, but 26 years later the proceedings reopened and the Portuguese humanist, an old man by now, was sent to prison.

What were the actual reasons for Rodrigues to describe Goes as one who "praised the doctrine of Luther?" Why damage his brilliant career? Whether it was rivalry, since the important position of the *mestre de letras* to the prince was at stake, or pure religious zeal<sup>9</sup>, what interests us is the fact that the Jesuit who ruled the Provincia Lusitana for the first 12 years was a fervent enemy of one of the most important intellectuals that the Portuguese court had produced. But, Rodrigues was thus also opposing the humanist who best understood and reacted most warmly to Ethiopian Christianity.

Besides Rodrigues's particular character, a feature well known in the history of the Portuguese Jesuit province, there is room to suspect that there were other reasons for such hostilities. Perhaps they should be sought less on a personal than on a collective level. Since it was the Jesuits as an order who were entrusted with the Ethiopian mission by the Portuguese crown, does it

<sup>8</sup> The following facts concerning this dispute draw on two studies: FRANCISCO RODRIGUES, *História da Companhia de Jesus na Assitência de Portugal*, Tomo I: *A fundação da Província Portuguesa, 1540–1560*, Vol. II: *Tribulação – Colégios – Missões* (Pôrto 1931), Chapter I; and ORLANDO NEVES, "Damião de Góis, Escritor, humanista – 1502–1574", [http://www.vidaslusofonas.pt/damiao\\_de\\_gois.htm](http://www.vidaslusofonas.pt/damiao_de_gois.htm) (2002).

<sup>9</sup> RODRIGUES, *História*, 29.

not seem logical to look at how they approached the Ethiopian affair? An argument can indeed be made that Rodrigues's opposition to Goes was less isolated than it might at first appear.

### Revealing silences

Paradoxically, it is silence that furnishes here, if only partially, some keys to understanding the events. When looking at the texts, what is noteworthy is less Rodrigues's aggressive attitude toward Goes than the ostensible ignorance that Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier themselves displayed regarding both works, that of Goes as well as that of Alvares, as archival evidence suggests. How could the two most important diffusers of ideas about the *Preste* be so compellingly passed over in silence by those who were about to follow in their intellectual steps? What is even more intriguing is that the two Jesuits knew about the books. As Schurhammer informs us, Ignatius received an issue of the original edition of the *Verdadeira informação* in 1553<sup>10</sup>. Even earlier, during the 10 months spent at the court of D. João III, Francis Xavier may have known about such publications. Despite this evidence, however, I have not been able to find a single mention of either work in the correspondence of either Ignatius of Loyola or Francis Xavier.

The first Jesuits, those who inherited the Ethiopian "mission", were in fact acting similarly to the Portuguese and Papal authorities. The works of both Alvares and Goes were received with mistrust, if not embarrassment. Although they cannot in any sense be seen as apologies of Ethiopian Christianity, they appear even today rather tolerant, even generous towards this Church. Besides the ritual listing of the Ethiopian "errors", what they presented in their texts to the European reader was in fact, as Bataillon says, "l'expression d'un christianisme authentique"<sup>11</sup>, a Christianity with its own traditions, rites and forms, but nonetheless legitimate and true. The spirit of reform and paternalist attitude of both the Portuguese monarchy and the religious order could in no way welcome such a view of the things. In these years the Portuguese monarchy had put all its efforts into preparations for the Council of Trent, which was to reform the Church, its form and its contents,

<sup>10</sup> GEORG SCHURHAMMER, *Franz Xaver, sein Leben und seine Zeit*, Bd. 1: *Europa 1506–1541* (Freiburg: Herder, 1955), 659, note 6. See also JEAN AUBIN, "Le prêtre Jean devant la censure portugaise", in *Id.*, *Le latin et l'astrolabe: Recherches sur le Portugal de la Renaissance, son expansion en Asie et les relations internationales* (Lisbonne – Paris 1996), 183–210, here 208, note 99.

<sup>11</sup> MARCEL BATAILLON, "Le cosmopolitisme de Damião de Góis", in *Id.*, *Etudes sur le Portugal au temps de l'humanisme* (Coimbra 1952), 149–96, here 190.

for more than three centuries to come. The Jesuits, in their turn, had proved to be the most efficient instrument of this reform. Such masters of orthodoxy could only recognise Ethiopian monophysism if it were shaped according to the new Catholic dogmas.

Hence, what these mysterious silences seem to reveal is a certain complicity of the Jesuits with the dominant trend in Portugal and Rome. Instead of a compromise, both the monarchy and the order chose to take the hard line: Ethiopian Christianity was a heresy that had to be expurgated. The sending of a religious mission, something that only became possible in 1556, was simply the final outcome of discussions that had been going on in Lisbon and Rome since the times of Alvares and Goes. It is during these years of polemics and theological disputes that the idea of a global conversion of the Prester John was forged.

### The Jesuit conversion of the (Ethiopian) court

A letter sent by the *cardeal infante* D. Alfonso to the Ethiopian Emperor Ləbnä Dəngəl, as early as 1539, appears as the first document where a conversion of the *Preste* is hinted at<sup>12</sup>. In this long communication, the *infante* reiterates the list of “errors” that Alvares and Goes already mentioned in their texts. However, D. Alfonso goes much further. Focusing on what he considers as the three main deviations of Ethiopian Christianity, he lists methodically and with persuasive style the reasons to abandon circumcision, the practice of the Sabbath, and rebaptism. The document contains, in a synthetic form, the main preoccupations that would orient the 80 years of Jesuit action in Ethiopia.

But if D. Alfonso defined the main steps the Jesuits were to take, it was his nephew and successor as *cardeal infante* who actually set up the infrastructure they needed for their own expansion. The characteristic Jesuit mixture of religious devotion and pragmatic action fit in perfectly with the ideas hosted in the minds of people like D. Henrique. He was the one who called them to Evora to rule the newly-founded *Collegio de Artes* (1551). At the request of Francis Xavier, D. Henrique also installed the Inquisition in Goa (1560), where the Jesuits maintained a permanent chair.

It is around these two important figures that the idea of a religious mission to the *Preste* took form. They sponsored the newly arrived Jesuit order and sparked their interest in the Ethiopian affair. During the difficult decades of

<sup>12</sup> Letter of Cardinal D. Alfonso to “Davidem regem Aethiopiae”, March 20, 1539, in CAMILLO BECCARI, ed., *Relationes et Epistolae Variorum, pars prima, liber I, Rerum aethiopicarum scriptores occidentales inediti a saeculo XVI ad XIX*, vol. X (Romae 1910), 5–18.



the 1540's and 1550's the Jesuits found in these two powerful figures the necessary oil to speed up the wheels of the Portuguese and Vatican bureaucratic machinery. They provided the Jesuit order with a whole set of briefs, bulls, indulgences, privileges and permissions necessary for their movements and to fulfil their ambitious projects.

The beginning of a Jesuit engagement may be dated to the years of Francis Xavier's apostolate in India. As mentioned above, he travelled there with intentions to reach also Ethiopia. Hence, the words of the King "se le recomienda al rey de Etiopía". In a letter written from Punicale in 1544, addressed to his fellow Francisco Mansilhas, Francis Xavier fully expressed his desire to go to the *Preste*, "donde tanto servicio se puede hacer a Dios nuestro Señor, sin tener quien nos persiga".<sup>13</sup> As is well known, his intentions were never fulfilled. His deeds may however have been crucial for the trust and support that the monarchy offered to his order. Better than a simple missionary, Francis Xavier was a compulsive traveller and a chief organizer, and to a certain extent he showed the crown the potentialities of movement that marked the newly acquired domains.

However, the Jesuits would only be officially entitled with this mission after the outcome of one of the most controversial histories in Luso-Ethiopian relations, that of the Pseudo-Patriarch Bermudez. Usually seen by scholars as a simple trickster<sup>14</sup>, a typical profiteer of the ill-structured politics of Early Modern Europe, this self-claimed Patriarch of Alexandria and Ethiopia had nonetheless a fundamental role in the events.

### The Bermudez affair

João Bermudez had initially taken part in the embassy of D. Galvão/R. da Lima as its surgeon. When the main body of the embassy, including da Lima and Alvares, left for Lisbon in 1526, he, together with the painter Lázaro de Andrade, stayed in the country, half as guests, half as captives of the Ethiopian Emperor. The forthcoming ten years that the "Mestre João", as Alvares's narrative portrayed him, spent in Ethiopia would change completely his fate. It was then that Bermudez's Ethiopian career took off and that the surgeon became both ambassador and Patriarch of the *Preste*.

<sup>13</sup> "Where so high service can be rendered to Our Lord, without being molested"; Letter of Francisco Xavier to Francisco Mansilhas, November 9, 1544 (Punicale), in FRANCISCO XAVIER, *Cartas*, 146.

<sup>14</sup> This view is synthetized in the harsh and critical comments reserved to Bermudez in the nonetheless excellent official history of the Portuguese Province: FRANCISCO RODRIGUES, *História*, 568f.; see also: *Id.*, "Mestre João Bermudes", *Revista de História* 3, Lisboa 1919, 119–37.



Under the increasing strain caused by the rise of Aḥmad *Grañ*, whose power reached its peak precisely during the 1530's, Ləbnä Dəngəl seems to have seen in Bermudez a new opportunity for reaching his strongest European ally. Around 1535–36 he shipped the surgeon, now entitled ambassador, to Europe begging for urgent help. Judging by the rapid and decisive arrival at Massawa of Estevão da Gama's army, only 5 years after this mission was initiated, Bermudez's intervention could never have proved more decisive. He visited Lisbon in 1537, to lobby for the Ethiopian cause before the Portuguese ruler. In 1539, back in Goa, Bermudez laid the ground for what later became Christovão's famed army. It was there that, according to Gaspar Correa's account, Bermudez was to gather all the craftsmen that were to prove so decisive for the Luso-Ethiopian army in the Ethiopian highlands<sup>15</sup>.

However, as is well known, Bermudez did not content himself with his high position in Ethiopian "diplomacy". At the end of his first stay in Ethiopia he also tried to set up a more ambitious and dangerous career as a religious figure. In his own narrative he claims that shortly before his departure for Europe he was named Patriarch of Ethiopia by the dying Coptic Metropolitan Marqos. Later, during his visit to the Holy City in 1536, Pope Paul III also, it appears, made him head of the Alexandrian Patriarchate.

As most scholars have rightly noticed, these religious titles were probably only the product of Bermudez's imagination and perhaps, as well, of Ləbnä Dəngəl's political pressures. For, on the one hand, Ethiopia never had, nor would have until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> cent., an autonomous head. What Bermudez and later the Jesuits attempted, was in clear breach of the traditional ties that linked the Churches of Ethiopia and Egypt. Such a move could hardly have ever been attempted by any Ethiopian Emperor, and certainly not by a Coptic Metropolitan. On the other, no contemporary evidence has been found to prove Bermudez's assertions. If anything, his own European contemporaries faced his Patriarchal claims with much skepticism, or rather pure denial. It is in this sense revealing that at the Portuguese court he was

<sup>15</sup> Bermudez says in his own narrative that "ja em Portugal me fizera el Rey merce de com sua autoridade prover todos os officios necessarios pera a gouernança da gente que levasse commigo" (17, also 43); to it, Gaspar Correa adds interesting details on the composition of Christovão's army: "Antre esta gente [the soldiers] hião passante de setenta homens officiaes de todolos officios macanicos, a saber : besteiros, ferreiros, carpinteiros, pedreiros, çapateiros, armeiros, e outros officiaes que o Bermudes ajuntou pola India...", in: GASPAR CORREIA, *Lendas da India. Livro Quarto...*, (Germany 1976 [repr. anastatica of the edition Lisboa: Typographia da Academia Real das Ciencias, 1864]), 200.

solely received as the “embaxador do Preste”<sup>16</sup>, his religious “titles” being much an issue of disturbance for the King<sup>17</sup>.

This aside, Bermudez’s Patriarchate proved no less decisive than his diplomatic intervention in the crisis provoked by Grañ. To help grasp its full meaning, we shall look now to his later involvement in the military expedition to Ethiopia from a chronological perspective.

It was after his visit to the Papal and Portuguese courts, during his two year stay in Goa between 1539–41, and specially during the Ethiopian campaign, that ran throughout the 1540’s, that Bermudez’s “Patriarchate” seems to have taken shape. There, he appears indeed to have fully enjoyed for a short time the titles of “Patriarca da Etiopia” or “Patriarca do Preste”<sup>18</sup>, that never convinced his audience in Europe. The chronicle of Castanhoso, his rival during Christovão’s expedition and hence little inclined to praise, leaves few doubts about Bermudez’s religious role. According to this narrative, he actually acted, at least for a short time, as the religious leader of the Portuguese expedition. In February 1542, just before a battle, he is portrayed giving absolution to the Portuguese army; when the Portuguese take a hill formerly occupied by Grañ’s army, he appears again to consecrate a mosque, later renamed “Igreja do nosso senhor da Vitoria ...”<sup>19</sup>. These Ethiopian moments would indeed be the most glorious for his Patriarchate.

Bermudez’s Patriarchal take off in Goa happened, therefore, without the authorities knowledge and consent; his title, as was said above, embarrassed more than anything else the Portuguese authorities, who, although by the end of 1530 hosted plans to convert the *Preste*, never imagined such a straightforward move. But besides Bermudez’s actual personal ambitions, his “enthronement” as Patriarch seems to have been related to the popular religious fervor that the figure of the Prester John aroused in Portugal and India. Although there is no place here for a full development of the role played by this myth in Luso-Ethiopian relations, it is important to note that by the time Bermudez became a Patriarch, the association between the *Preste* and the

<sup>16</sup> See the above mentioned Letter of cardinal Alfonso to Lebna Dengel, 20 March 1539, in CAMILLO BECCARI, *Relationes*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> See FRANCISCO RODRIGUES, “Mestre”.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, DIOGO DO COUTO, *Da Ásia*, (Lisboa 1777–82), Década V, Livro VII, Capítulo IX; Década VII, Livro I, Capítulo I.

<sup>19</sup> MIGUEL DE CASTANHOSO, *História das cousas que o mui esforçado capitão Dom Cristóvão da Gama fêz nos reinos do Preste João com quatrocentos Portugueses que consigo levou* [1564], AUGUSTO CÉSAR PIRES DE LIMA, ed. (Pôrto 1936), chapter XII; see also ch. VIII.

Ethiopian Emperor was not only fully realized politically but also a vivid reality in the people's imagination.<sup>20</sup>

Bermudez's chameleonic transformation from simple surgeon to ambassador and later religious leader has much of colonial adventurism. He exploited to his own advantage all the possibilities that an Indian career offered him. He profited from or perhaps even genuinely participated in the politico-religious "fervor" surrounding the figure of the Prester John. Similar to Christovão da Gama and the other Portuguese and Spaniards that followed him to Ethiopia, he held millenarian and eschatological beliefs in the Prester John of Ethiopia. And like them, he was also tempted by the infinite possibilities that the colonial world, which Portugal was unfolding, promised. Indeed, as one of the responsables of the military expedition that was to rescue the *Preste* from annihilation, he found himself at the very core of this mythology. In a world where the borders between the secular and the religious were unclear, the step from political envoy to religious savior was, for Bermudez, a simple one to take.

### Improvising the policies?

Bermudez's deeds soon reached the court in Lisbon. By 1546 King D. João III was warning his ambassador in Rome of the danger that this figure represented. To remove the nuisance he proposed to quickly dispatch a new Patriarch, the Jesuit mestre Fabro. In the same communication the King reported the mysterious visit of a certain Paulos, an Ethiopian bishop who may have been sent by the Ethiopian court in search of a new Metropolitan<sup>21</sup>. There is much ground to doubt the veracity of this visit: shortly after D. João III's letter, around 1548, Ethiopia would receive the newly appointed Coptic Metropolitan, *abunä* Yosäb, that Gälawdewos had rushed to ask to Alexandria at the death of Grañ. Be it as it may, the news about Bermudez were disturbing enough as to press forward the project of a mission.

The same year, João III addressed a formal request to Ignatius of Loyola to send missionaries to Ethiopia<sup>22</sup>. A request repeated in December 1553. This

<sup>20</sup> See MANUEL JOÃO RAMOS, "O destino etíope do Preste João: a Etiópia nas representações cosmográficas europeias", in FERNANDO CRISTOVÃO, ed., *Condicionantes culturais da literatura de viagens: estudos e bibliografias*, (Lisboa 1999), 235–59.

<sup>21</sup> This is the well-known letter of King D. João III to Balthasar de Faria, 27 August 1546, in *Corpo diplomático português*, vol. VI, 69–72.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in FRANCISCO RODRIGUES, *História*, 571, note 1; see also Letter of João III to "governador-mor [Goa]", 1553, in Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, caixa 218, n. 94; and *Id.* to "Padre Ignacio", [1553] in *Id.*, n. 132.

time, however, the King, instead of proposing a candidate, left the decision at the hands of the Jesuit general. To respond to his request, between 1553 and 1556 Loyola wrote his well-known “Instructions to the missionaries” and the “Sumario delle cose necessarie per l’Ethiopia”.<sup>23</sup> In them he repeated, not surprisingly, the same ideas expressed 17 years earlier by the *cardeal infante* Alfonso in his letter to Ləbnä Dəngəl. Even the famous prudence Ignatius of Loyola requested of his envoys was not an original feature. He dealt with the *Preste* in a very similar way to how the *cardeal infante* had done. They were both thinking of the Ethiopian affair less as a matter of conversion than as a matter of expurgation. Ethiopian Christianity demanded less a complete transformation than a sort of “religious lifting”. Hence the idea of a pure Christianity that had been corrupted through contact with non-Catholic lands; of a church trapped in a land surrounded by heretics<sup>24</sup>. Loyola therefore presented this mission as a service offered rather than as a foreign imposition. Thanks to dispatching his priests there would be no more need for the Ethiopians to receive the Patriarchs from “tierras de moros ni de christianos scismaticos.”<sup>25</sup>

That the affair mattered much to Ignatius of Loyola can be clearly inferred by a letter he sent to his fellow Jesuit Diogo Miró in 1553. The Jesuit general, through his persuasive and upfront style, was trying to convince the newly-appointed provincial of Portugal to accept the important charge of royal confessor. Among the reasons he used, was the well-being of the Ethiopian project, which by 1553 was still under discussion:

Since you judge one instance by another, consider whether there could be a more important memorial left by a confessor than to bring to a conclusion the appointment of the patriarch of Ethiopia, which involves the salvation, not of many souls but of many cities and provinces. Whichever of you acts as his highness’s confessor, be sure that you do not fail to come to some understanding on this appoint-

<sup>23</sup>The first doc., “Minuta delle istruzioni che S. Ignazio diede ai suoi missionari d’Etiopia”, [1553] was published in CAMILLO BECCARI, ed., *Notizia e saggi di opere e documenti inediti riguardanti la storia di Etiopia durante i secoli XVI, XVII e XVIII. Rerum aethiopicarum scriptores occidentales inediti a saeculo XVI ad XIX*, vol. I (Roma 1903), 237–54; for the second, I rely on my own transcription from Ignatius of Loyola, “Sumario delle cose necessarie per l’Ethiopia”, [1556], *Archivium Romanum Societas Iesu*, Goa 39 I, 5r–v.

<sup>24</sup>It is interesting to note that such ideas are still quite present in scientific historiography. Marcel Bataillon would take a similar path when he spoke of “cette Éthiopie demeurée fidèle au Christ malgré de longs siècles d’isolement au coeur du continent noir”, MARCEL BATAILLON, “Le cosmopolitisme”, 183.

<sup>25</sup>Ignatius of Loyola, “Minuta”, 239.

ment, and every time you write to Rome be sure to mention this matter and let me know what you have done.<sup>26</sup>

“El negocio del patriarca” thus implied without hesitation something other than a simple mission; rather, it was believed, and would continue to be so in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to be the key to the conversion of the whole African continent.

By then Bermudez’s glory in Ethiopia and India had already waned. The arrival of the new Coptic Metropolitan left little room for him. The charge of “Patriarca dos Portugueses” that the Emperor henceforth offered him was little comfort for one who had dreamt to rule over an Empire. The dethroned Patriarch then put all his efforts in abandoning the country, only reaching Goa in May 1556.

A symbolic turning point came with his arrival in the Indian capital. The exiled “Patriarch” spent the following 10 months at the Jesuit college of St. Paul. It is there that he met D. João Nunes Barreto, the Jesuit Patriarch that the Papacy and the Portuguese crown had rushed to send from Europe precisely to replace him. Surprisingly, an apparently peaceful atmosphere surrounded these moments; Bermudez would later write that he was received with “muita honra e caridade”<sup>27</sup>. In addition, there is no trace in the literature of any polemic between the two Patriarchs during the near half a year they spent together in Goa. Such a strange benevolence was matched later by King D. Sebastião, who provided Bermudez, on his return to Lisbon, with a generous fund. Thus, instead of facing a trial to answer for his forgery, he will, ironically, spend his last years comfortably writing a hagiographical narrative of his own Ethiopian career.<sup>28</sup>

It could be argued that the hospitality that welcomed Bermudez both in India and at the Portuguese court was an acknowledgement of the role he had in the mission to the *Preste*. After all, he was the first to have attempted to introduce in Ethiopian Christianity a figure that this Church ignored. Besides, the royal fund that permitted him to live a comfortable retirement in

<sup>26</sup> Letter of Ignatius of Loyola to Diogo Miró, February 1, 1553, Rome, in: <http://www.georgetown.edu/centers/woodstock/ignatius/letter24.htm> (2002).

<sup>27</sup> JOÃO BERMUDEZ, *Breve relação da embaixada que o Patriarcha D. João Bermudez trouxe do imperador da Ethiopia vulgarmente chamado Preste João, dirigida a el-Rei D. Sebastião* (Lisboa 1875 [reprint of: Lisboa, Francisco Correa Impressor do Cardeal Inffante 1565]), 123.

<sup>28</sup> SEBASTIÃO GONÇALVES, *Primeira parte da historia dos religiosos da Companhia de Jesus e do que fizeram com a divina graça na conversão dos infieis a nossa sancta fee catholica nos reynos e provincias da India Oriental*, Vol. 2: *Historia da Companhia de Jesus no Oriente: (1546–1561)*, ed. JOSEF WICKI (Coimbra 1960 [1612]), 139ff.

Lisbon was certainly used to keep him away from the new project designed for the *Preste* by the Jesuits. However, it appears as well as an embarrassing tribute to the person who had opened the way for a politico-religious adventure that was to last for the following eighty years.

### A Baroque Patriarchate

Bermudez's genuine colonial forgery was replaced by a huge collective effort of imagination carried out by the Portuguese crown, the Jesuit order and the Papacy. The dispatch of the Patriarch was prepared with care. The new institution was shaped with outstanding parade and solemnity. In a way that recalls the subsequent interest of the Jesuit order in the arts, especially theatre and architecture, the Patriarch was to be enveloped in such wealth and beauty as to convince the Ethiopians of Catholic superiority. Loyola was precise in his recommendations, when he insisted several times on providing relics, "calices, cruces acetres que sirven al culto exterior".<sup>29</sup> Every detail mattered to give the Patriarch the colour and the dignity needed to astound the Ethiopians. An oversight in the correspondence not only of the Jesuits, but also of the Portuguese political authorities may offer an idea of the huge effort, economic, political and even emotive, that this project mobilised.

In a letter that a Portuguese Jesuit addressed to his superior in Rome, the author openly reveals his own astonishment whilst describing the huge retinue accompanying the Patriarch. His listing of the instruments and luxury the King offered to the Ethiopian mission ends up with a summary reference to the enormous economic investment at stake: "calices, hum bacio e huma cruz e dous baculos, de prata todos, e huma custodia com outras muytas e mui ricas peças. Deu tambem muytas cousas de ornamentos, assi como vinte vestimentos de damasco... causa grande espanto, porque muytos dezião que a armada da India atée o Preste João pollo mar avia de fazer de gasto cem mil cruzados."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> CAMILLO BECCARI, *Notizia*, 250f.

<sup>30</sup> "Chalices, a basin for the Mass offerings, a cross and two croziers, all of silver, and a custody with many other precious objects. [The King] also provided objects for ornamentation, as well as attires of damask...this all produces admiration and fear, since many people say that the armada from India to the *Preste* costed 100,000 *cruzados*"; Letter of Gaspar Calaça to "Praepositum Generalem S.I.", April 30, 1556, in: CAMILLO BECCARI, *Relationes*, 55–61, here 59. For more elements of this "appareillage", see FRANCISCO RODRIGUES, *História*, 580 passim. Another contemporary Jesuit account provides also vivid pictures: SEBASTIÃO GONÇALVES, *Primeira*, 215–21.

The retinue also involved a large number of missionaries. In the *armada* that left Lisbon in 1556, of the ten Jesuits on board seven were destined to the *Preste*<sup>31</sup>. Among them there was the Patriarch, João Nunes Barreto, and one of the two bishops, André de Oviedo. Oviedo, along with the second bishop, Melchior Carneiro, were the first holders of two titles, those of Bishop of Nicea and Hierapolis, that were also genuine products of the Catholic imagination. Two years earlier, five other Jesuits had already headed to India with the same goal. Interestingly, the embassy was also provided with a printing officer, a Jesuit lay brother named João de Bustamante. Among his first tasks in Goa was to print the *Doctrina Christãa* of Francis Xavier, a text destined to become the standard missionary guidebook for the coming 50 years in India, and that the Jesuits were planning to use in Ethiopia<sup>32</sup>. Bustamante's establishment would also become the first printing house in the whole *Estado da Índia*<sup>33</sup>.

### An Empire in difficulties

But describing the forgeries and beauties of the Patriarchs we seem to have lost track of our main and initial concern: what was changing when the Portuguese kings decided to invest in a baroque Patriarch and to convert the Preste? And besides that, why did they do so?

The sending of the Jesuit Patriarch reveals a change in the policies that had been guiding the *Conselho da Índia*. It sets the start of what could be called a missionary era in the *Estado da Índia*, an era that was to be strongly shaped by the style and the *ethos* of the Jesuit order. It is at this moment that the *Estado* changed its attitude towards its neighbours. The diplomatic embassies were little by little replaced by religious missions where Jesuit priests were in most cases in charge. These newcomers to the religious life undertook the tasks that the Portuguese monarchs requested them to carry out zealously, in a markedly different way from former religious orders.

Prior to the 1550's, the Portuguese crown had entrusted some diplomatic missions to religious orders: Augustinian monks for instance were sent on more than one occasion to Persia to meet with the Safavid rulers. But they hardly ever seriously attempted any conversion; the main purpose was always to set political alliances. In the new missions that the Jesuits organised this political aspect did not disappear. However, following the reform trends within the Catholic world, the Jesuits stressed the need to reform every soci-

<sup>31</sup> Letter of P. Gaspar Calaça, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Letter of Patriarch Nunes Barreto to "Aloisium Gonçalves", November 6, 1556, Goa, in: CAMILLO BECCARI, *Relationes*, 64.

<sup>33</sup> FRANCISCO RODRIGUES, *História*, 537, note 3.



ety the Portuguese crown was in contact with, to act upon alien religious practices and beliefs claimed to have been corrupted over time. The nature of the interactions between the *Estado* and its neighbours was therefore transformed. A certain verticality in interactions replaced horizontal ways of communication. Hence, allies such as the Ethiopian monarchs also became the targets of a religious reform that took on a global scale.

The Ethiopian mission came also at an important geopolitical moment. It is right around the 1550's that the building of the *Estado* was virtually completed. No other territorial possessions were acquired after the arrival of the Jesuits in India. The siege and capture of Diu in 1535 (only really concluded in the 1550's) marked the peak of the expansion. Still, since the initial years when Albuquerque visited the Red Sea in search for *rumes*, up to the years of the Patriarchate, the Ottoman Empire had also extended its reach to the Arabian Peninsula, seriously menacing the Portuguese self-proclaimed hegemony in the Indian Ocean. New challenges to this hegemony also came from Europe, where England and Holland were breeding their own expansionist dreams for the Eastern Indies.

Therefore, the *Estado* found itself at an impasse. Incapable of other important acquisitions and seriously menaced by other military powers, all it could do was to try to keep and administer its current possessions. The Jesuit order could have appeared to provide a solution, if only temporary, to such an impasse. Its attempt to reach the most exotic of the courts – from Ethiopia to Japan – may have strongly appealed to the Portuguese rulers. Perhaps with the religious subtleties of the Jesuit fathers the *Estado* might indeed reach further than through the hands of soldiers. Perhaps their zeal could be a solution to the chronic shortage of means, people and resources in an enterprise that had such great goals.

## Finale

Little of the wealth and beauties of the Patriarchate were, however, to be seen in Ethiopia. The 12 missionaries who in imitation of the Apostles, were to proselytize the country were reduced to three fathers and two lay brothers who tried to survive in the Tigray, in the north of Ethiopia, away from a hostile court. The Patriarch himself did not either reach “his” diocese; he remained in Goa until his death in 1562.

Goa *a velha*, the new and beautiful metropolis of the Portuguese Eastern dominions, enjoyed and assimilated most of this wealth. If one were able to walk during these years through the streets of Goa, one might see the Patriarch, “revestido com capa mitra e bago com muitos outros pes. que tambem

reuestidos com capas o acompanhauão”<sup>34</sup>, blessing the army of the governor Francisco Barreto before it went to fight the *Idalcão*, as one contemporary described. A walk into the cathedral would also reveal “ricos ornamentos pera o altar como de pontificaes, com a baixella necessaria pera os sagrados ministerios, e hum feroso sino”, originally a royal gift to the Patriarch and his bishops. And what about these “ornamentos e prata [que] ficou a igreja do collegio de Sam Paulo”<sup>35</sup>, once also part of the Patriarchal dowry?

The institution invented by Portugal and the Jesuits did not work any better than that created in the mind of Bermudez. Neither the neo-scholastic mastery of the priests nor the Baroque refinements proved successful in bringing Ethiopian Christianity “back” to Rome. This Church, on the contrary, remained up to our days faithful to its traditions and identity.

This Early Modern adventure remains, however, a captivating example of the politico-religious processes that shook the world during the era of the discoveries. It also shows that no colonial or missionary project, no matter how official it may have been, was free from its jokers. As the quotation opening this paper suggests, politics and religion were also arts of imagining.

#### Summary

In this paper I analyse the reasons that lead Portugal to send a Jesuit Patriarch to Ethiopia. Such a mission represented a radical break from the tolerant attitude the Lusitans had been showing vis à vis this African Church; the embassies that for decades flowed between Ethiopia and Portugal were suddenly replaced by a one-way attempt of conversion that deeply affected Ethiopian Christian society for more than a century. This mission is placed at the crossroads of both a process of spiritualization that the Portuguese court, under the influence of the Jesuit fathers and the cardinal *infantes*, endured, and of the political stagnation of the Indian colonial project. But the Catholic Patriarchate would only come to the fore, I contend, at the outcome of the Bermudez affair. This episode, which has largely been underestimated by historiography, was crucial for pushing forward the King João III, the Pope and the Jesuits in the Patriarchal adventure.

<sup>34</sup> “Covered with a cape, a mitre and a crozier, together with many other fathers, also themselves dressed with capes, who came with him”; anonymous, “Governadores Da India” [1579?], manuscript, in Archivium Romanum Societas Iesu, Goa 38II, 229r–242v, here 233v.

<sup>35</sup> “Rich adornments for the altar, like *pontificals*, with the tableware used for the Holy Orders, and a beautiful bell”; “adornments and silver [that] were given to the college of S. Paulo”; Both quotations taken from SEBASTIÃO GONÇALVES, *Primeira*, 215.