

# Intelligence and Creativity at the service of the Society of Jesus in 16th century Japan: the contribution of father Luís Fróis

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## Abstract

The sixteenth century brought new worlds to the old world that was Europe, which now also struggled with internal political and religious changes. The Society of Jesus was one of the tools that Catholic Europe used to combat the advance of Protestantism and to deal with the new geographical and cultural realities, and in 16th-century Japan, this religious congregation resorted to intelligence and creativity to advance Catholic evangelisation in a new space.

Intelligence to understand the complexity of Japanese society, creativity to overcome this obstacle through unconventional methods; intelligence to adapt to change, creativity to create a very own form of adaptation - *accommodatio*; intelligence to learn new cultures, creativity to face them without clashing with the directives of the Catholic Church; intelligence in the use of feelings and emotion, creativity in the balance between duty and action.

Father Luís Fróis is one of the best examples of these abilities, revealed both in his vast literary work and in his life of almost 35 years in Japan, using intelligence and creativity to advance with evangelisation and ensure the survival of a small number of European missionaries in a space with many obstacles. We highlight the *Historia de Japam*, the *Tratado*, and the various letters in a corpus of documents – *Cartas de Évora*-, epistolography which we will analyse in greater detail here.

**Keywords:** Japan; Jesuits; Intelligence; Creativity; Fróis

## 1. Japan in the second half of the 16th century

Japan, which has received Europeans since 1543, is the Japan of warriors, with its own code of honour - the *bushido*<sup>1</sup> -, where everyone fights against everyone, and where the political scenario is characterised by a conception of power that is strange to the Western world, shared between the warrior aristocracy, the imperial court and religious institutions.

The Japanese Middle Ages (between the 12th and 16th centuries) is a turbulent period of political chaos and feudal anarchy, with a fragile central power, internal wars and the predominance of relationships of personal dependence, and therefore the preponderance of warriors. Concerning that, three elements converge and coexist:

the old principles of imperial centralisation, the old primitive traditions of semi-tribal organisation and

the networks of personal fidelities (Reischauer, 1973:69)<sup>2</sup>.

Power is based on the prestige and mobilising capacity of a warrior, depending on the alliances and loyalty achieved.

Curiously and even paradoxically, we will see that the rivalries between the various Japanese lords - *dáimios* - ended up bringing some advantages to the missionary activity of the Jesuits, - who, quite intelligently, for example, played with the Japanese interest in participating in trade with Macau (increasing their power over their rivals). Father Luís Fróis is aware of this circumstance when he writes that:

One thing is different in Japan from almost all other kingdoms (...) & is that to be better able to expand the law of God, & to have better entrance into kingdoms in which in the time of peace it is not possible, when wars arise then one begins to negotiate better this spiritual fishery (CE, II, 17 October 1586, fl.184v)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Bushido* - Literally the path of the warrior. A code that established the rules of conduct of the samurai. Fruit of the religious syncretism proper to the Japanese, it was based on the cultivation of seven virtues: honour, fidelity, courage, goodness, politeness, truthfulness, righteousness and self-control.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from non-English sources are the Author's

free translations.

<sup>3</sup> In 1598, the largest collection of letters (209) from Jesuit missionaries concerning Japan was published in two volumes in Évora; in this work all citations in the text of this printed source are referenced as follows: CE - Letters from Évora -, the volume (I or II), the date of the letter and the folio/page.

The Christian century or Namban century<sup>4</sup> witnessed two parallel and complex processes of which the Portuguese and the Jesuits were observers, and even privileged participants:

openness to the outside and unification, having contributed decisively to the transformation of the medieval, anarchic and feudal country into a modern, peaceful and centralised state (Costa, 1998:11).

Trade is thus an essential means of getting closer to the local authorities and of helping the missionaries to survive and "a symbiosis between Portuguese merchants, Jesuit missionaries and Japanese magnates - a tripartite union of mutual interests" (Pinto, 2004: vii) is visible, and the religious themselves actively participate in trade.

It was a reality that the Jesuits, very intelligently, used the Portuguese boat and objectively served what were then the interests of Portugal, as a nation conqueror and missionary, and as a Christian people. (Lourenço, 1992: 50)

We point out that the Portuguese Empire is formed and developed in the new worlds through a very close relationship between the Sword, the Stock Exchange and the Cross, which subjects its participants to the successes and vicissitudes of the action of the military, the merchants and the religious.

As far as the sacred is concerned, the divine in Japan has a very close relationship with everyday life, and certain rituals mean more than manifestations of religious fervour; Braudel (1989) considers that in this country "the religious is confused with all forms of human life: the state is religion, philosophy is religion, morality is religion, social relations are religion" (pp.169-170).

16th century Japan is the Japan of Shintoism and Buddhism, allied to a philosophy of life, Confucianism, which governs social, political and administrative life, sharing the religious scenario with Taoism. Therefore, there is no single, binding religious tendency, and one cannot speak of a single religion or a national religion, even though Shintoism - the path of the gods - often presents itself as such.

It is to this Japan, which lives a pragmatic religiosity, with a practical approach to religions, that Christianity arrives in the middle of the 16th century.

The inexistence of a single religion and the multiplicity of sects facilitated the work of the Jesuits and Fróis makes a curious reading of this fact, taking advantages for the dissemination and

acceptance of Christianity:

It was a great thing that in Japan there was a great diversity of sects, & contrary opinions, to introduce, & to manifest the law of God our Lord, because if all were unanimous in one worship, & adoration was very difficult to receive our doctrine (CE, I, 6 March 1565, fl.179v).

## 2. The Society of Jesus

In Japan, the Society of Jesus emerges as an instrument of a Catholic Europe that is confronted with changes in its own terrain, with the advent of revolutionary and innovative evangelising strategies, and with the diversity of the new worlds discovered, opening

space for the recognition of difference and diversity, something fundamental to the primacy of the concept of adaptation in Jesuit evangelisation (Correia, 2009:76).

The new generation of ecclesiastics that is now being prepared has a more consistent and rigorous theological formation but, mentally and culturally, the transformations are slower. The discipline and union of the Church of Rome are emphasised in the face of the danger and threat of Protestantism.

The reason, intelligence, experience and knowledge must be present in the relationship of the Church with the worlds in which it moves because we are aware that "the Christianity of the modern is not that of the old and the missionaries are the first protagonists of this cultural revolution" (Gasbarro, 2006:75).

Above all, the Church - through the Society of Jesus - must seek to be tolerant, to adjust to the situations in which it is inserted to guarantee its survival.

In the modern age, this congregation knew, in very creative and diverse ways, how to put into practice the definition of intelligence which, centuries later, is given to us by Stephen Hawking: Intelligence is the ability to adapt the change!

The Society of Jesus,

as a norm, required its members to have undergone an elaborate process of intellectual preparation, which made them privileged observers, endowed with a keen inquiring spirit and an extraordinary capacity to assimilate novelties (Loureiro, 2008:39)

The truth is, more than a conquest of a new world:

It is [the Society of Jesus] greatest prodigy was that of being conquered by it. They were not the only ones who in the presence of the "other" tried to understand him, to evangelize him better or to dialogue with him (...) but no one like them (...) drew

<sup>4</sup> The designations "Namban century" and "Christian century" refer, indistinctly, to the period between 1543 (official arrival of the Portuguese) and 1640 (official date of expulsion). The term *Christian Century* was vulgarized by C. R. Boxer, in the 50s of the 20th century, to indicate the period of about one hundred years of institutional contacts

between the West (represented by Christianity) and the Far East. Currently, the historiographical trend privileges the term Namban Century because the contacts and interactivity that was generated is mainly cultural, surpassing religion.

from the European matrix and became "other", so that (...) "God was all in all (Lourenço,1992: 50).

The acceptance of diversity, the conviction that the general must be adapted to the specificities of Japanese society and the use of wit and intelligence to achieve positive results in evangelization, are ideas practiced by Francisco Xavier and expressly defended in the *Ceremonial, the Advertimentos* and in the *Apology of Alessandro Valignano*, Visitor of the Society of Jesus.

Not being an utterly innovative attitude – the defence of accommodation - the Society of Jesus knew how to be original and creative in the ways it conceived and realised it.

The Jesuits defend an acculturation project:

the pagan societies had to transform themselves without deforming themselves, Christianization had to change only the social practices that clashed head-on with the Gospel, without the subversion of local habits (Franco, 2003:15),

capable of developing the adaptation of Christian doctrine and practice to the specificities of Japanese culture: the adaptation of concepts, terms, rites, dress code and encouragement of the formation of native clergy.

The expansion of Christianity in Japan, since the beginning in the hands of this congregation, and the very Portuguese presence in this territory, must be seen under multiple perspectives: the osmosis of conquest - trade - religion, assumed and practised by the Portuguese in the space of the Empire, and the political, economic and religious evolution of the Japanese territory.

We can say that:

the period in which the Jesuits arrived - of widespread chaos and lack of links, particularly trade links, with China - was decisive for the easy acceptance of the priests, who took advantage of the disunity of the Japanese elites and played a very skilful and intelligent part in Japan's political power play (Resende, 2017:283-284).

Pinto (1986) says that is difficult to separate temporal interests and mystical values, basic components of Western penetration and, in this space, the missionary strategy of the Society of Jesus is elaborated intelligently, conditioned by local realities (political, military, social and religious). That led to an approach to the elites and the evolution of evangelisation is directly related to the political support that the congregation receives in various parts of the Japanese territory.

### 3. The role of father Luís Fróis

Father Luís Fróis is a Jesuit born in Lisbon, in 1532,

who does his intellectual and religious training in the East, after 1548, having arrived in Japan in 1563, and lives there, almost uninterruptedly, until the end of his life, in 1597.

Historian and participating observer, because he is an eyewitness who reports everything he sees and is involved in the radical changes that Japan is experiencing in the second half of the 16th century. The many years he lived in Japan gave him know-how and exact knowledge of the political reality, allowing him, very intelligently, to draw lessons from political events that can influence the work of missionaries.

For example, he clearly explains the advantages of associating Christian acceptance and commercial presence, when he comments the option of Father Cosme de Torres when he

sent Luis de Almeida with two Japanese (...) to secretly put on the island of Tagoxima (...), and to see if there was a way to make some of the lords of Ximo Christian, giving them hope that the ship of the career would go to their ports, if they had accommodated them (HJ, II:270)<sup>5</sup>

Fróis reveals great intelligence in his reading of the Japanese political scene, presenting us with a very high contrast between the figure of the emperor, in a very weakened position and almost a figurative element in the political scenario, and the decisive role of the *bakufu* (military government), an active force until the appropriation of power and unification by the two warriors who effectively dominated the Japanese political and military reality in the second half of the 16th century: Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

The Father, during the several years of power exercised by Nobunaga, had the opportunity to be in close contact with what was one of the leading figures in the history of Japan - "made me enter the same room, twice told to give me his tea in his china" (CE, I, 01 Junho 1569:fl.262) - and, in the various letters in which he mentions him, lets us understand the admiration that he has for this warrior, despite criticising some attitudes, especially in the final years of his life.

His writings reveal an evident literary vocation, an unusual - for the time-analytical capacity and curiosity to capture and transmit what is different, genuinely meeting European Humanism.

In his works, we can see "the rare sharpness and brilliance of intelligence, the fair observation, the rich imagination, the complex description" (Janeira, 1988:118).

We highlight the *Historia de Japam*, a valuable

5 The *Historia de Japam* is a monumental epic work of Fróis, which follows a chronological line, presenting a chronic structure, and focuses mainly on the history of Japan - politics, society, religion - but obviously always accompanied by the history of Jesuit missionaries in the

archipelago. The complete edition of this work, in Portugal, was only achieved in the second half of the 20th century, between 1976 and 1984; in this work all citations in the text of this printed source are referenced as follows: HJ – *Historia de Japam*, the volum, page.

contribution to the knowledge of the sixteenth century Japan, a vast work that confirms the analytical capacity and a curiosity to capture and transmit what is different; *The Tratado das Contradições*, a real anthropological treaty; and the many letters he wrote at the service of the congregation that show Europe the face of Japan. At the end of the 16th century (1598), the most extensive collection of Jesuit letters about Japan was published in Évora: 209 letters of multiple authorship, 481 folios in the first volume and 267 in the second (without pagination) and Fróis have the most significant contribution (53 letters).

It should be noted that only in the writings of Fróis (especially in the letters and *Historia de Japan*), of all the Jesuit texts known from the 16th century, are described in detail Japanese places of worship, because the other sources are very laconic about it.

Parallel to his missionary work:

Fróis was genuinely interested in the most varied aspects of Japanese civilisation and sought to gain an understanding of the social, cultural and religious practices of the Japanese people (Loureiro, 2008:47).

He understands that accommodation was more than an adaptation: it would be a transformation of oneself and is born

first of an attentive observation of the other, [and] consists in finding the gateway that allows evangelisation and the incorporation of the culture of others (Bernabé, 2012:108),

The position of Fróis (and of Valignano and some other missionaries) is to condescend as far as not to interfere with the principles of the congregation.

He maintains that accommodation, at least externally, must be accepted and above all practiced and understands that only by becoming Japanese, in the outward appearance, can Jesuits have a chance to provoke internal changes in places because "the way of life of the Japanese is in everything so different from the way of living, & the laws, & customs of Europe" (CE, I, 25 Agosto 1580: fl.478) and

we need a complete transmutation of nature in terms of eating and customs and way of living because everything is the opposite and very different from how it is done in Europe (HJ, III:130).

One aspect that Fróis emphasises in his letters is the care to be taken with the exterior appearance and the clothing with which priests present themselves to the local chiefs because the traditional vow of poverty of Western religious orders is not understood in a positive way here.

Thus, the missionaries adopted the use of the Japanese kimono, in combination with more opulent Western costumes and, on his first visit to the capital, in 1565, Fróis refers that Father Gaspar Vilela, to be received by the shogun, dressed rigorously:

because the Japanese do not cherish people more

than by the outside apparatus, the priest would not enter the palace going as we usually walk, it was necessary (...) to put the priest on pontifical. The first two times he visited him was with a stole, & surplice & a red hat on his head, and the other two with good kimonos, & cloth mantle from Portugal on top (CE, I, 20 Fevereiro 1565, fl.178v).

Valignano's visits to Japan have an impact on the determinations as to the behaviour to be adopted about the diversity of the Japanese community and Fróis makes it very clear that the Visitor specifies:

the way we should have about the customs and ceremonies, and the manner of proceeding of the land, to be well and well regarded among them [and] commanded that in all things we should proceed in our fields according to the proper and accustomed way of Japan (HJ, III:179-180).

Although accommodation to Japanese life is accepted and even defended to achieve the conversion of the elites better, it is also a reality that this position does not always have consensus, mainly because of the difficulties in tracing the limits of this "compromise", worrying the Society and Rome.

The reduced number of European missionaries raised practical problems and led the Society in Japan to have many brothers, together with a smaller number of priests, as opposed to the rest of the missions in the East, something that raises another question: that of the formation of native clergy - predominant from 1588 forward, leading Costa (1999) to state that:

At the end of Five Hundred, nowhere else in the overseas world controlled by autochthonous powers, completely disconnected from European political-military influence, was there such a large Christianity and served by a team of religious with a mostly native «face»(p.43)

As far as this native face is concerned, in the idea of Fróis, the native clergy is appreciated and praised, especially for the advantage of knowing the language and the cultural and religious habits. A specific case that refers, in the centre of the territory, in the Miyako area, in the year following the death of Oda Nobunaga, the Jesuit mentions:

a Japanese brother of 40 years old, is called Vincent, great preacher, & insigne in the phrase, & elegance of the language, very instructed in the knowledge, & news of the sects of Japan, thing in extreme necessary to our preachers to confront in the arguments the errors, & false opinions of the Bonzos, & more gentiles(CE, II, 2 Janeiro 1588, fls.91-91v).

Another critical issue, which was resolved with creativity, was the obstacle of the language and the lack of vocabulary in the local language that could be used to express Catholic ideas and teachings. The Jesuits had two solutions: either they invented new words, or they used Western words, modifying them to resemble those of Japan.

There are religious terms, proper to the Christian

lexicon, with a different meaning from those used in Japan to designate, for example, God, Hell, Soul or Paradise, and the option that prevailed was the adaptation of Western terminology to the phonetics of Japanese.

The importance of Japanese language learning by the missionaries had been emphasised from the beginning by Francis Xavier, who considered it a priority for evangelising success since he understood that "language thus becomes a companion of the faith, its main weapon" (Laborinho, 1994:378).

Fróis proves to us the effort made by Jesuits in this task, visible also in the development of grammars and catechisms, and recognises the need and importance of providing missionaries with study materials and help in learning the native language:

because in Japan until now [1564] there has been no art according to the order of the Latin language, which was detrimental to learning the language, Brother João Fernandes determined to do it with his conjugations, syntax, and more necessary rules with two vocabularies in order of the alphabet, one that begins in Portuguese, & the other in the same language (CE, I, 3 Outubro 1564, fls. 146v-147).

Brother João Fernandes' role in learning and spreading the Japanese language is thus understood to be vital for the progress of Jesuit evangelization because this initiative "was one of the most necessary things that were needed here, so that the language can bear fruit in souls" (CE, I, 3 Outubro 1564, fl.147).

This strategy reveals a long-term vision and enables the Jesuits to have more effective contact with the locals and more in-depth knowledge of the Japanese language. For example, the Japanese used in the capital and palaces differed from what was spoken by most of the population in the more rural world of the rest of the country.

Intelligence is what Fróis also reveals when he decides what he writes and makes it public because however tolerant and open, what he writes is limited by superior indications of the Company, and we perceive in his writing failures or evasions about some issues that could be controversial because they clash with the principles of Christianity.

The strategy of selecting what is disseminated is a form of intelligence and omitting or minimising certain aspects requires some creativity in the way they are exposed to the Western world and even to the Society of Jesus itself.

We refer, for example, to the existence of concubines (polygamy) by some *dáimios*; the easy end of marriage unions, with repudiation being accepted and practised by both parts; and the

practice of *seppuku*<sup>6</sup>, a ritual of suicide that would hardly be understood or accepted by the Western Christian mentality.

#### 4. Closing remarks

The missionaries made an effort to deal with the peculiarities of Japanese society - the strong bonds of fidelity between the chiefs and the vassals, the appreciation of ostentation, the family connections - and to overcome the vicissitudes - the almost permanent state of war, the commercial interest of the lords, the insufficient number of European religious, the language barrier, the rigours of the climate and, above all, the doubts of those on the ground who were faced with situations not yet regulated by the congregation.

The position of the missionaries in contact with the Japanese reality is that of adapting the rules of the Society - and of the Holy See - to the peculiarities of Japanese society, circumventing the problems and finding solutions for each case and each situation.

Remember what Janeira (1988) wrote:

Only a few missionaries had the capacity of discernment to perceive that a careful, intelligent dialogue, capable of accommodating the Christian religion, as far as possible, to the gears, mindsets and habits of those peoples (...) could be the only way to penetrate a society cemented in a lofty and well aware notion of the greatness of its culture (p.16).

The ideas and practice of the Jesuits advocate the acceptance of diversity, a sign of intelligence because they recognise that this is more successful than forcing a change in Japanese cultural practices.

The flexibility they use in dealing with differences allows them to develop creative methods of approaching the Other and of evangelisation, in a very pragmatic way.

The priests revealed here two fundamental characteristics for the success of the mission: accommodation and resilience:

accommodating themselves by adapting to local customs but at the same time without bending the constitutive principles of their religious and pedagogical thinking (Ieiri et al., 2011:2).

The Jesuits, and especially Luís Fróis, revealed intelligence to adapt to change, creativity to create a very own form of adaptation - *accommodatio*; intelligence to learn new cultures, creativity to face them without significant value judgments; intelligence in the use of feelings and emotion, creativity in the balance between duty and action.

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<sup>6</sup> *seppuku* - "honorable death", suicide ritual, usually referred to by *harakiri* (literally, incision in the belly). More than an institutionalized practice in the warrior elite, it is a

ritual that guarantees the honour of the warrior and his descendants and that has significant social and cultural implications.

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