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# BETWEEN ACCOMMODATION AND INTRANSIGENCE

## JESUIT MISSIONARIES AND JAPANESE FUNERAL TRADITIONS

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*ABSTRACT - Jesuit missionaries landed in Japan in 1549, six years after the country was discovered by Portuguese merchants. They quickly succeeded in converting a small part of the Japanese population, especially in the southern regions of the country. But this nascent Japanese Christianity faced many challenges. A significant stumbling block was the centrality of traditional funeral rites in Japanese society. Wary of upsetting social norms, the Jesuits opted for a strategy known as the 'accommodation policy', by which they tried to identify Japanese ritual elements that could be incorporated or adapted into the Christian liturgy without threatening its doctrinal integrity. This meant understanding precisely the nature and purpose of Japanese funeral rites. Were they, for example, an embodiment of Buddhist beliefs, or were they mere lay traditions and thus compatible with the tenets of Christianity? The Jesuits set out to interpret and classify accordingly the rituals of the many Buddhist sects in Japan. However, as Japanese Christianity gained a stronghold in some regions the accommodation policy made way for a new strategy of differentiation, as evidenced by the introduction of European tombstones.*

1 Alessandro Valignano, *Les Jésuites au Japon*, trans. Jacques Bésineau (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1990), 81: "Finalement, tous leurs rites et leurs coutumes sont si différents de ceux des autres nations qu'on ne peut facilement les comprendre et les apprendre en peu de temps." [translation by the author].

### INTRODUCTION

"In fact, all [Japanese] rites and customs are so different from those of other nations that they cannot easily be understood and learned in a short time."<sup>1</sup> This

remark in 1583 by Alessandro Valignano, the Japanese mission's most senior official, underlines how difficult it was for European missionaries to understand Japanese society. Adapting their evangelization strategy to the country's cultural specificities proved quite challenging, as indicated in the way the Jesuits tried to deal with Japanese funeral traditions. Indeed, the Jesuits gradually understood that the latter were very important to the Japanese, and that a successful introduction of Christian ways and beliefs in this area would require an acute understanding of how the native rituals related to various Buddhist doctrines the missionaries knew little about.

Francis Xavier was the first Jesuit to settle in Japan in 1549, six years after the discovery of the country by Portuguese merchants. Xavier was also a primary figure of the Society of Jesus, since he founded the religious order together with Ignatius de Loyola. Sanctioned by Pope Paul III in 1540, the Jesuits were intended from the start to serve as the missionary spearhead of the Counter Reformation. Although they acted immediately to christianize new territories discovered by Europeans, the Japanese mission only began in earnest during the 1580s under the leadership of Alessandro Valignano, who supervised the oriental missions. Japanese Christianity made the strongest inroads on the southern island of Kyushu, and it also developed around the capital Miyako (now Kyoto). However, Christians continued to be a minority throughout this period, and were forced often to coexist with the Buddhist majority. According to Charles Boxer, by 1614 the Christian community comprised about 300,000 Japanese, roughly 2% of the population,<sup>2</sup> when Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu outlawed Christianity. The number of missionaries was far from proportionate to that number – there were only 116 of them in Japan in 1614.<sup>3</sup> This understaffing had consequences for the converts' religious practices, which missionaries could control only on occasion.

From the beginning, the Jesuits viewed the Japanese mission as promising and particularly suited to the policy of accommodation. In Biblical exegesis, 'accommodation' refers to the process of adapting the interpretation of a –

<sup>2</sup> Charles Ralph Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 320-321.

<sup>3</sup> João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, *O Japão e o cristianismo no século XVI* (Lisbon: SHIP, 1999), 45.

presumably divine – text or doctrine in light of new circumstances.<sup>4</sup> The Jesuits were historically among the strongest proponents of this principle. Following this logic, they reasoned that the Asian ‘heathen’ could retain major cultural practices, such as ancestor veneration in China or the caste system in India.<sup>5</sup>

Adaptation was carried out with the goal of making Christianity more appealing to a society that was just discovering it. Implementing an accommodation policy required missionaries to learn local customs in order to decide whether they could be compatible with Christian doctrine or if they had to be rejected outright. This meant distinguishing benign cultural elements from religious – hence problematic – ones, which was difficult due to the ambiguity of indigenous practices. The accommodation policy became a major point of controversy among all of the Asian missions. Not surprisingly, funeral rites and practices related to the veneration of the dead, being fundamental aspects of both religion and culture, featured heavily in the debates, although the Jesuits did not immediately realize how important these rites were socially.<sup>6</sup> This article assesses the process through which Japanese funeral rites were interpreted, classified and accommodated, looking in particular at the way the Jesuits justified their opinions and decisions. But first, it is necessary to consider the way the Jesuits perceived and understood Buddhist doctrines about death, which shaped their understanding of Japanese funeral rites.

### MAKING SENSE OF BUDDHIST DOCTRINES AND ASSERTING CHRISTIAN DIFFERENCE

The missionaries in Japan were quickly confronted with local funeral traditions and various Buddhist doctrines. The Buddhism they encountered – mostly the Zen, Amidism, Tendai and Shingon sects – is part of the Mahayana branch, which places less emphasis on the figure of the Buddha and more on the role of the *bodhisattvas* – beings that have reached Awakening who nevertheless, out of compassion, refuse to enter Nirvana until all humans have escaped the cycle of

4 For this understanding of accommodation, I rely on Ines G. Županov, “Accommodation,” in *Dictionnaires des faits religieux*, ed. Régine Azria and Danièle Hervieu-Léger (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010).

5 On what Roberto de Nobili did in India, see Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Missions: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth Century India* (Oxford/NYC: Oxford University Press, 1999). Among the many works on the Chinese mission, see Nicolas Standaert, L’« autre » dans la mission, *Leçons à partir de la Chine* (Bruxelles: Editions Lessius, 2003) and Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: the Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

6 Jesús López-Gay, *La liturgia en la misión del Japón del siglo XVI* (Rome: Libreria dell’università Gregoriana, 1970), 196-240.

birth and death. The *bodhisattvas* gradually evolved into saviour-like divine figures, believed to be rulers of a paradise promised to the faithful. But beyond those general traits, Japanese Buddhism was divided among a number of sects with different beliefs about death and salvation. The missionaries contended with four main branches, each of which were further divided into various sects.<sup>7</sup> Their theories about death and the afterlife often, but not always, differed radically from Christianity's. Some sects were obviously very different from Christianity in their understanding of death, such as the Tendai and the Shingon sects, who purported to help believers escape from *samsara* through perfect knowledge. For the Zen sects, notions of heaven or the afterlife were entirely absent. Conversely, 'Pure Land' Buddhism (Amidism) presented a challenge due to its apparent similarities to Christianity. Amidism centred on the idea of salvation, granted by Amida through rebirth on the 'Pure Land'. Not only could a parallel easily be drawn between the single saviour figures of Christ and Amida, but Amidism's terms could be seen as more generous, as salvation was promised at the mere cost of reciting the name of Amida or simply trusting in his goodness.<sup>8</sup>

One of the first challenges for the Jesuits was to learn about the many Buddhist doctrines about death in order to better explain the Christian canon to converts. Another problem lay with the rites themselves: funerals were a central component of Japanese society, and the Jesuits were concerned they would provoke rejection by imposing radically different practices. The Jesuits therefore chose to impose Christian doctrine gradually by preserving or adapting various rituals in Buddhist ceremonies. This entailed distinguishing elements that were pure reflections of Buddhist beliefs from the benign expressions of lay customs. Missionaries worked to expose Christianity's different message and to explain that salvation beyond the grave could be reached through baptism, faith, and good deeds. This message was sometimes difficult for the potential converts to accept. Amidans, for instance, often felt it was unfair that no redemption was possible for the souls in hell, or that people who were not baptized were among them.<sup>9</sup> Francis Xavier underscored how upsetting this was for newly converted

7 Richard Bowring, *The Religious Traditions of Japan, 500-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

8 Although there were several other sects in Japan, I shall not discuss them here as missionaries gave them less importance.

9 Letter by Francis Xavier to the Jesuits in Europe, Cochin, 29 January 1552, in *François Xavier, Correspondance 1535-1552*, trans. Hugues Didier (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2005), 368.

Christians: “[The converts] ask me if God can rescue them from hell, and the reason why they must ever remain in hell. [...] they cannot stop weeping when they see that there is no remedy for their ancestors.”<sup>10</sup>

The Jesuits hence succeeded in conveying specific Christian tenets to the converts. But persuading the converts to incorporate Christian principles into their rituals proved to be a much more complex task, as the meaning ascribed by the Japanese to funeral practices was not always apparent to the missionaries. The Jesuits’ need to develop an understanding of such customs was all the more pressing as converts often asked missionaries if they could keep various traditions.

### THE PROBLEM WITH FUNERAL RITES IN JAPAN AND THEIR INTERPRETATION BY THE JESUITS

The Jesuits established a classification system of Japanese funeral practices that was essentially a response to the many setbacks they encountered in their pastoral work. While there never was any intention of undertaking an ethnographic study of Japanese society, knowledge about Japanese society was gradually amassed by the missionaries as more issues emerged in the process of adapting Christianity. Eradicating all Japanese traditions was not an option for the Jesuits. Instead, they had to find an adequate balance between the long-term goal of fully integrating Japanese Christianity into the Catholic Church – imposing Christian rites as defined in the European context – and the more immediate need of adapting Christianity to a specific cultural environment in order to help the conversion process – which remained the mission’s *raison d’être*. Following the logic of the accommodation policy, the Jesuits tried to distinguish theological from cultural components of the funerary rituals, in order to clarify for both converts and missionaries which practices could be accepted, if only temporarily, and which had to be rejected in accordance with Christian doctrine.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 378: “Ils me demandent si Dieu peut les retirer de l’enfer et la raison pour laquelle ils doivent toujours rester en enfer. [...] Eux, ils ne s’arrêtent pas de pleurer en voyant qu’il n’y a aucun remède pour leurs ancêtres.” [translation by the author]

The classification effort was a gradual and tentative process that developed

after years of presence in Japan, and it consolidated as the missionaries improved their understanding of the various rituals and increasingly deliberated over accommodation procedures.<sup>11</sup> No specific personnel was assigned to the task: classification decisions resulted from numerous discussions between the missionaries in Japan and the Jesuit Curia in Rome.

Various groups competed to impose their understanding of what characterized religious versus cultural concerning each ritual, prompting intense debates across the oceans. Historians can reconstruct the classification process on the basis of two main types of Jesuit sources, chronicles written by missionaries and administrative documents.

The chronicle of the Jesuit Luís Fróis, *Historia de Japam* (1583-1597), remains a key source for understanding how the Jesuits perceived Japanese society and implemented accommodation. Fróis' knowledge was considerable, due to his long presence in the country from his arrival in 1563 to his death in 1597. During this time he was tasked by Valignano to create a chronicle of the mission, in which he recorded several descriptions of Christian funerals. Administrative documents produced by the Society, both in Japan and Europe, consisted of the mission's regulations (*Obediencias*), which were drafted by Valignano and his successor Francisco Pasio, and the correspondence between the Jesuits in Japan and their superiors in Europe. The mission regulations are valuable because they provide critical insight into the institutional aspects of the Jesuit project, and they demonstrate the considerable effort of the missionaries to coordinate accommodation policies within the mission beginning in the 1580s. The correspondence reveals changes in strategy ordered by the Jesuit authorities in Rome for adapting funerary rites. A reconstruction of the process through which the Jesuits classified funerary rites is useful as it suggests that distinguishing religious from cultural practices sometimes proved puzzling to the missionaries. The Jesuits in Rome, for instance, did not always have the same perceptions of Japanese customs as the Jesuits in Japan, and often suggested either less or more liberality in accepting native rituals.

11 Alessandro Valignano, *Il cerimoniale per i missionari del Giappone*, "Advertimentos e avisos acerca dos costumes e catangues de Jappão" (Rome: Storia e letteratura, 1946).

Broadly, there were five categories of classification for Japanese funerary rituals, which helped the Jesuits determine how to proceed with accommodation and conversion. Some rites were perceived as completely contradictory to Christian doctrine, which were rejected outright. Ancestor veneration was a practice that fell into this category. Adhering to Buddhist customs, Japanese Christian converts asked for prayers to be said for their dead, but the request was denied by Francis Xavier, who reported: “Many weep for their dead, and they ask me if there is any remedy for them through alms and prayers. I tell them there is no remedy for them.”<sup>12</sup> In the Japanese mission, ancestor veneration was systematically classified as a religious ritual and not as a social practice of paying respect to the deceased.<sup>13</sup> Francis Xavier was aware that his censure of this rite could slow the progress of conversion, and that the converts would have much trouble coming to terms with severing all ties to their ancestors. Nevertheless, the custom was condemned for breaching the First Commandment, which forbade the worship of anyone or anything but the one true God.

Other rituals were seen as purely social and thus unproblematic, such as the *obon*, or banquet, that was usually held for the *bonzes* (Buddhist monks) and the congregation who attended the funeral. The practice of holding banquets or festivals was not condemned, because no religious implications were identified: the *obon* was held not to venerate the dead, but to thank the *bonzes*, which did not breach Christian doctrine. The Jesuits, aware of how important these celebrations were for the Japanese, allowed them to continue. Nevertheless, even such approved Japanese rituals required adaptation, since the Jesuits could not accept monetary contributions from laity and lavish spending at funerals was considered immoral. They therefore attempted to reorient the practice into one that complied with Christian perceptions of decency and morality. For instance, Dom Bartolomeu (born Ōmura Sumitada), the first lord to convert to Christianity in 1563, expressed soon after conversion his desire to change the way the *obon* was held in Japan. According to Fróis, great celebrations and banquets provided an opportunity for the *bonzes* to enrich themselves, and much money was donated to them.

12 Letter from Francis Xavier to the Jesuits in Europe, Cochin, 29 January 1552 in François Xavier, *Correspondance*, p. 378: “Beaucoup pleurent les morts et me demandent s’ils peuvent bénéficier de quelques remèdes au moyen d’aumônes et de prières. Mais moi, je leur dis qu’il n’y a pas de remède pour eux.” [translation by the author]

13 Haruko Nawata Ward, “Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan,” *Sixteenth Century Journal XL/4* (2009): 1045-1067.



Likely at the suggestion of the Jesuits, Dom Bartolomeu decided to use this money not to hold an *obon*, but to feed two to three thousand poor instead.<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that the Jesuits did not discourage the converts from participating in the Japanese funerary festivals, as they did not want to isolate them from the rest of society.

A third class of funeral rituals included practices that, although clearly structured by Buddhist beliefs, were considered so important to the converts that they could not easily be suppressed. These customs were particularly debated as the missionaries searched for ways of cleansing them of any Buddhist elements. An especially problematic custom was the use of monetary donations to alter the spiritual fate of the dead after they had perished. Melchior Nuñez Barreto, head of the Indian mission, visited Japan in 1556 and reported in 1560:

The Fathers in Japan have accepted that Christians donate money for the souls of their forefathers who died as pagans, because the *bonzes* are convinced that money is needed to rescue the dead from hell; the Fathers, to prevent such idolatry as the *bonzes* are causing, conceded to this superstition.<sup>15</sup>

The head of the Society in Rome, General Diego Laínez, allowed the practice, but urged that the converts be warned that the money had no magical value and that it would not be of any help to those trapped in hell. In 1577, Laínez's successor Everard Mercurian banned the ritual altogether because the missionaries were no longer allowed to receive money from the faithful. For Mercurian, the real issue was not the risk of endorsing superstitious beliefs among the converts, but the practical problem of having the alms managed by the Jesuits in Japan.<sup>16</sup> Later in the sixteenth century, General Claudio Acquaviva settled for a compromise solution, acknowledging that Japanese Christianity was in its infancy and that the practice of holding banquets was a source of great relief for recent converts. Acquaviva therefore deemed it acceptable to receive donations in the name of the dead, but only on the condition that the Jesuits accept the money as donations

14 Luís Fróis, *Historia de Japam*, ed. Anabela Mourato et al. (Lisbon: Biblioteca virtual dos descobrimentos portugueses n°10, 2002), volume 1, part 1, chapter 47, fol. 146 v°: "[Dom Bartolomeu] disse ao Padre que determinava dar naquelles dias de comer a dous ou tres mil pobres." [translation by the author]

15 Joseph Wicki, ed., *Documenta Indica IV (1557-1560)* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1956), 513: "[...] Nos Padres do Japão [...] consentião aos christãos rezar e offerecer polas almas de seus pais e avoos que morrerão gentios, e isto porque os bonzos persuadem aos japões que lhes tirarão seus antepasados do inferno com dinheiro que lhes dão; os Padres, pera que os christãos se não vão a falsa idolatria dos bonzos, consentim-lhes a superstição." [translation by the author]

16 Jesús López-Gay, *La liturgia*, 211.

for the poor. Additionally, this was to be only a temporary arrangement, and the missionaries were to encourage newly converted Christians to progressively give up the practice.<sup>17</sup> This transitional strategy of substituting a Buddhist practice for a Christian one can be seen as the expression of what Jesús López-Gay calls a ‘principle of substitution’.<sup>18</sup>

A fourth type of ritual comprised elements that were common to both Buddhism and Christianity, such as the use of tombstones in cemeteries. The main difference between these was one of shape. Traditional Japanese tombstones could take many forms, but they were always oriented vertically rather than horizontally (Fig. 1). The progressive nature of the accommodation policy can be seen at work here as well, as the Jesuits initially did not take any measures against the use of



17 “Ordens tiradas de algumas cartas que N P Claudio Acquaviva escreveo aos Padres Gaspar Coelho e Padre Gomes, Viceprovinciaes de Japão”, 1 May 1607, in Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, *Japsin* 3, fol. 26 v°.

18 Jesús López-Gay, *La liturgia*, 209.

Fig. 1  
Five-tiered Buddhist tombstones  
Hélène Vu Thanh

vertical tombstones for Japanese Christians. The distinctive traits of the earliest tombstones – mostly found in the Kyūshū and Kansai (now Kyōto/Ōsaka) regions, where the missionary effort was most concentrated – consisted of a vertical construction with Christian inscriptions, such as crosses or the trigram IHS of the Society of Jesus. Indeed, it appears that traditional European tombstones, the style of which was completely unfamiliar to the Japanese, were only introduced at a later stage.<sup>19</sup> The earliest horizontal tombstone extant in Japan, for example, located in the former fief of the Arima clan in Datenomoto (now Unzen City), dates to 1604. This suggests that the shift in tombstone orientation was a practice that was established gradually during the second half of the sixteenth century (Figs 2 and 3). The change was probably initiated as the missionaries sought to render the tombstone's Christian function more visible, while also ensuring that converts distinguished the two faiths to discourage the reintroduction of Buddhist customs.



Fig. 2  
Nishitabira Christian  
tombstone  
Hélène Vu Thanh

Fig. 3  
Nishitabira Christian  
tombstone (detail)  
Hélène Vu Thanh

According to Kazuhisa Ōishi, by the beginning of the seventeenth century the missionaries became adamant about enforcing the use of horizontal tombstones. Ōishi purports that this new attitude derived from the desire to

19 Kazuhisa Ōishi, “Les pierres tombales des premiers chrétiens et la tradition japonaise des monuments funéraires”, *Histoire et missions chrétiennes* 11 (2009): 67-108.

demonstrate visually that Christian rites were superior to Buddhist practices. Above all the Jesuits wanted to communicate clearly a Christian understanding of death, and more particularly one that promoted inhumation rather than cremation.<sup>20</sup> Such distinctions were expressed through both the Christian funeral rituals and the use of horizontal tombstones. Therefore, the adaptation of Buddhist tombstones was temporary and only persisted in the regions where Christianity made fewer inroads. As soon as widespread conversion appeared feasible, the missionaries imposed European traditions on the creation and placement of horizontal tombstones, with the intention of making them appear more prominent.

Finally, the missionaries also introduced entirely new rituals in Japan, such as the raising of banners during funerals. This was not part of traditional Japanese funerary customs, as Valignano and Pasio noted in the *Obediencias*.<sup>21</sup> The practice originated in Europe, in particular in the use of banners at funerals by Christian confraternities. The introduction of the practice in Japan was intended to make burial ceremonies more solemn, in order to match the importance granted to funerals in Japanese Buddhism.

The Jesuits hence created an extensive classification system for funerary rites in Japan, and their efforts centred on the identification and isolation of religious and cultural principles in each custom examined. The more a practice was seen as a material expression of Buddhist doctrine, the stronger its rejection by the missionaries. Conversely, if the latter could detect only social implications, the rite would be seen as mere lay custom. In this case, the Jesuits often were inclined to accept the practice, possibly with some modifications. But between these two ideal positions, there was a wide range of situations in which the missionaries had to consider preserving certain funeral rituals most valued by the Japanese while introducing Christian customs gradually.

20 Interestingly, the transition from cremation to inhumation does not seem to have troubled the converts much. There is no mention of the issue in the writings of the missionaries.

21 Biblioteca da Ajuda, *Jesuitas na Ásia* 49-IV-56, fol. 37-38.

Such reflections compelled the missionaries to create a funeral liturgy for Japan.

One of the earliest testimonies on the subject was written by Father Gago in 1555, who described the progression of a funeral in Japan:

When a Christian dies, [...] many Christians gather and immediately they start building a coffin or a crate made of planks used as a coffin where the body is placed. And those who are poor and cannot afford it do so thanks to the alms given by [other Christians]. The coffin is covered with a piece of silk cloth and it is carried away by four men and a brother, who wears a cross and a surplice, and a servant, who carries the holy water. As to me, I hold a book and I sing a litany, and the Christians respond “Ora pro nobis”. And on every side many lanterns are raised to illuminate the procession, something that the Gentiles appreciate greatly and say is characteristic of the Christians’ law.<sup>22</sup>

There was no mass – the deceased converted Christian only received a benediction. The Jesuit Gaspar Vilela, who started the mission in Miyako, felt that this manner of burial was a way of educating the non-converted.<sup>23</sup> Fróis describes how Vilela organized such a procession in 1565 for the burial of a Christian noble in Miyako:

And, as Father Gaspar Vilela was intrepid, filled with zeal for the glory of God, and as he knew how important this business was – for it was the first public burial ceremony that was done with solemnity – he went dressed in a brocade cape, carried on a red lacquered litter in the company of numerous Christians who were tonsured like *bonzes*; some were wearing the surplice, others, the alb.<sup>24</sup>

The account continues with descriptions of objects that were carried along the procession, including crosses, retables representing Christ the Saviour, and silk banners on which the symbols of the Passion were displayed. Fróis then describes the Japanese public’s reaction:

22 Letter from Baltasar Gago to the Jesuits in India and Portugal, 23 September 1555, in Juan Ruiz-de-Medina, *Monumenta historica Japoniae II, Documentos del Japon, 1547-1557* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1990), 559: “Quando algum falece [...] ajuntão-se muitos christãos e ordenão-lhe logo huma tumba ou caixa de távoas que pera isso têm, com a qual enterrão o corpo. E aquelles que sam pobres, que não têm pera isso, fas-se das esmolos dos outros. E cuberta com hum pano de seda levão-no quatro homens, e o irmão com hum crucifixo e sobrepelis, e hum moço com ágoa benta. E eu com hum livro então huma ladainha e os christãos repondem “ora pro nobis”. E de cada banda levão muitas lanternas altas com lume, do que estes gentios se convencem muito, e dizem que não á outra cousa senão a lei do christão.” [translation by the author].

23 Letter from Gaspar Vilela to the Jesuits in Portugal, 29 October 1557; *Ibid.*, 700.

24 Luís Fróis, *Historia*, volume 2, part 1, chapter 66, fol. 226-226 v°: “E como tambem o Pe Gaspar Vilela era intrepido e zeloso da honra de Deos e sabia quanto isto importava, por ser o primeiro enterramento publico que se fazia com solemnidade, foi em huma liteira acharoadada de vermelho, com huma capa de borcado e muitos christãos rapados que parecião bonzos, huns com sobrepelizes e outros com alvas.” [translation by the author]

And as the city of Miyako likes to see novelty, the attendance of the people was considerable; it included men, women, children as well as *bonzes*, and it can be said that, counting both Christians and Gentiles, there were more than ten thousand souls. [...] As they walked, the Christians were reciting loudly the Christian doctrine, and this caused amazement among the Gentiles, for whom the sound of prayers in Latin was something truly foreign and novel.<sup>25</sup>

Funerals therefore appear to have been an important way to render the Christian faith more visible in Japan; its spiritual force could be demonstrated by all the pomp deployed for the ceremony. Moreover, the inclusion of Christian liturgical elements was an effective way to make the ceremony distinct and different from its Buddhist counterpart. The goal of the missionaries was not to transform the funeral liturgy as it was defined in Europe, but to make it appear more solemn, in order to appeal to traditional Japanese conceptions.

These characteristics persisted at the same time that Valignano and Pasio were trying to codify the funeral liturgy with greater precision. In his *Obediencias*, Valignano insisted on the importance of funerals in the eyes of Japanese.<sup>26</sup> In order to compromise, he suggested adding more or less solemnity to the ceremony according to the social rank of the deceased. In the case of an ordinary funeral, the priest was to go alone to the residence of the deceased, and to wear informal attire. In the case of a high profile funeral, the priest was to put on his surplice and to be accompanied by brothers and *dōjukus* (catechists).

The type of burial place varied according to the regions' degree of Christianization. In Takastuki, which was governed by a Christian lord, a Christian-only cemetery was laid out outside the city fortress.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, where the Christians were a minority, they were buried along with non-Christians.

25 Ibid. fol. 226 v°.: “E como o Miaco hé muito propenso ha ver novidades, foi grande o concurso da gente, homens, mulheres, meninos e bonzos, que affirmavão todos os christãos e gentios que se acharião alli mais de dez mil almas. [...] Os christãos hião rezando em voz entoada a doutrina christã, que ainda cauzava nos gentios maior admiração, por lhe ouvirem recitar tanto a ponto orações em latim que para seos ouvidos era couza tão peregrina e nova.” [translation by the author]

26 Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, *Japsin* 2, fol. 145 v°-147 v°.

27 Luís Fróis, *Historia*, volume 1, part 1, chapter 103, fol. 378.

## THE LIMITS OF ACCOMMODATION AND FUNERAL RITES

According to the historian Jesús López-Gay, the Jesuits tried to adapt to Buddhist funeral rites by incorporating and redefining them as Christian.<sup>28</sup> While this theory does apply to a number of practices, it cannot be considered as a general principle, and López-Gay himself notes that some Japanese elements simply could not be integrated or adapted. If we look closely at the kind of elements that were indeed assimilated, such as the practice of giving alms during funerals, it appears that they had only a minor role in the liturgy. The funeral liturgy itself was not significantly accommodated – with the exception of making burials more or less solemn in accordance with the rank of the deceased.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, major changes in the accommodation policy were implemented, and a new emphasis was placed on the assertion of Christianity's superiority and specificity. At this point, Japanese Christianity had stronger foundations – at least in some regions, such as Kyūshū – and the adaptation of indigenous customs was seen as no longer necessary (Fig. 4). This is when horizontal tombstones began to appear and also the use of banners at funerals was introduced. Japanese Christianity asserted its distinct identity among the country's other religious traditions by introducing European practices that were unfamiliar to the Japanese. Nicolas Standaert describes this process as the 'amplification of difference', a process which resulted in the rejection of elements that were deemed too similar to other religions.<sup>29</sup> Since the Christian community was still a minority in Japan, the Jesuits tried to consolidate and assert the cohesion and identity of the Christians in its stronger bases by suppressing even the most trivial element that could be correlated to the country's non-Christian religious traditions. The converts, in turn, tried to define clearer and stronger boundaries around their communities.

In regions where Christians were in the minority, on the other hand, many converts appear to have continued practicing Buddhism in tandem with Christianity. Fróis,

28 Jesús López-Gay, *La liturgia*, 209.

29 Here Nicolas Standaert is citing Vernon Ruland, discussing the case of the Chinese mission. Nicolas Standaert, *The Interweaving of Rituals, Funerals in the Cultural Exchange Between China and Europe* (Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 90-91. This analysis is also valid for the Japanese mission.



Fig. 4  
Jesuit establishments in 1604  
Hélène Vu Thanh

30 Luís Fróis, *Historia*, volume 1, part 1, chapter 38, fol. 113.

31 Ikuo Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 38.

for instance, reported the case of a Japanese Christian who kept reciting *Namu Amida Butsu*, the prayer to the Amida Buddha.<sup>30</sup> Fróis informed the man that he



had converted and that such practices had to be abandoned forever. The convert replied that he had once been a great sinner, and that if Christ did not want to save him in the afterlife, he hoped that Amida would accept him in his paradise, hence his recitations. By relying on both Christian and Buddhist symbols and practices, Japanese converts sought to increase their opportunity for having their wishes granted. When they found that a symbol did not work anymore, the converts would use another one, a practice that Ikuo Higashibaba called the 'spiritual insurance system'.<sup>31</sup> This example indicates that the missionaries encountered significant challenges in their efforts to protect the integrity of the Christian doctrine. The religious dispositions of the Japanese, shaped by the tradition of Buddhism, made it difficult for notions as fundamental as the exclusive nature of Christianity to take root, especially in regions the missionaries could rarely visit. Moreover, Christian symbols and rituals could be spontaneously given unorthodox meaning by the Japanese, who first experienced them as Buddhists, rather than as Christians. Although the missionaries were aware of these issues, controlling – let alone reforming – such perceptions and behaviours was often beyond their means.

## CONCLUSION

The Jesuit method of accommodation in Japan reveals their careful consideration of the religious and cultural nature of Japanese funeral rites and liturgy. While they immediately rejected distinctively Buddhist notions of death, the missionaries understood that it was impossible to completely eradicate Japanese funeral rites, due to their social importance. This accounts for their choice in accommodating funeral rites, but it does not imply an adaptation devoid of analysis and modularity. In fact, accommodation was only implemented after it had been determined whether a specific practice was religious or social, and what aspects of each ritual were to be accepted, adapted or rejected. Such distinctions were made gradually and tentatively, because the Jesuits realized that they could not afford to go against strong cultural habits, even when in some cases

they hinted at Buddhist beliefs, as in the case of the alms for the souls of the dead. The Jesuits found a flexible and temporary solution, considering carefully both the religious and social dimensions they identified, but not before intense discussion between missionary circles and the Jesuit authorities in Rome, whom they consulted. Indeed, the accommodation policy was not a static aspect of the Japanese mission but rather a dynamic programme, the dimensions of which were highly debated among the missionaries. It was shaped by the competing missionaries, who frequently disagreed about what should or should not be adapted. The Roman authorities, who often felt concerned or hesitant with the decisions of the missionaries in Japan, also had an important role here.

A growing desire to visibly assert Christianity's religious difference occurred at the turn of the seventeenth century, illustrated by the changes in tombstone styles. The strongest Christian communities thus seem to have affirmed themselves culturally as distinct from the rest of Japanese society, demonstrating that the Jesuit accommodation policy was meant only to be transitory. This cultural assertion eventually aroused the concern of the *shogunate* about Japanese Christian loyalty, and played a part in the outlawing and official persecution of Christianity in Japan.

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