

«FICTIONAL MISSIONS»: REPRESENTATIONS OF JESUIT
ENCOUNTERS IN PARAGUAY

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The Reductions of Paraguay, set up by Jesuit missionaries in 1609, were considered one of the most singular and unique experiments in the history of missionary activity. Generating a great deal of attention and controversy, they evoked either admiration and praise for their achievements or contempt for their collusion with the colonial powers. The controversy and debate surrounding missionary activity reached such a crescendo that it ultimately led to their expulsion from South America in 1768. Though the 150 years of successful missionary activity has been well-documented by Jesuit historians, there are few accounts of Guaraní responses to missionary contact or the political and religious context of the expulsion of the Jesuits from South America. In recent times, there have been attempts by ethnologists as well as historians to present accounts of not only these «encounters» but also the relationship between the Jesuit missions and the colonial powers of Europe to explain how the expulsion of the Jesuits was politically motivated. An important book in this direction is Barbara Ganson's *The Guaraní Under Spanish Rule in the Río de la Plata*¹, which looks at indigenous sources to show how the Guaraní Indians asserted their cultural autonomy and played an active role in shaping the cultural encounter with the Europeans. In the process it challenges hitherto representations of the Guaraníes as passive recep-

¹ Ganson, 2003.

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tors of European culture, as people without any agency, living in an idyllic world.

From the eighteenth century onwards, two images were created: A) a highly romanticised image of the idylls of this utopian land and culture was forged in order to critique the Old World's Enlightenment ideas. Such accounts, steeped in nostalgia, lamenting the destruction of indigenous cultures were responsible to a large extent for the construction of the myth of the noble savage. B) the second image is that of the Jesuits as powerful operators of an opulent state independent of the Spanish Crown who incited the Guaraní to take to arms to rebel against the Treaty of Madrid signed in 1750 between Spain and Portugal, a consequence of which was the Guaraní War or the War of the Seven Reductions from 1754 to 1756. This created a huge outcry against the Jesuits in Europe and led to their expulsion from South America and their disbandment in Europe in 1773.

In this paper, I have attempted a reading of a selection of fictional writing which deals with some of the issues outlined above. There is a significant body of literature on the Jesuit Missions in Paraguay from the Enlightenment period onwards. Some of these are the following: the French writer Voltaire's masterpiece entitled *Candide or Optimism* published in 1759; the British romantic poet and historian Robert Southey's long poem «A Tale of Paraguay» written in 1827; British author Robert B Cunnigham's *A Vanished Arcadia* written in 1900. More contemporary texts include Peter Mathiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1965), the widely acclaimed film *The Mission*, directed by Roland Jaffe, winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1986, based on a book by the same name written by Richard Bolt, and Matthew J. Pallamary's novel entitled *Land without Evil*, published in 1999.

In his inventory of «fictional missions» Richard Johnson² offers several reasons as to why reading of fictional mission accounts can be as or more useful than real missionary biographies and accounts: among the reasons he offers, the most important, in my view, is that «fictional missions paint missions on a bigger, and often more human, canvas than many traditional missionary genres. They are voices that, as human beings, we all need to hear.» They also present a plurality of voices —often providing a contrast between missionary view-

² Johnson, 2008.

points and those of the receiving culture. Further, Johnson says: «It often provides an articulate voice from the margins, or from the «underside», and can be an effective critique of the Western/colonial mentality which we all acknowledge has at times infected the work of mission agencies». Johnson argues that missionary biographies and supposedly «historical» accounts very often tend to wipe out, albeit unintentionally «unpleasant» facts and hence, fictional accounts may end up being more realistic or «truer to life».

However, an analysis of some of the fictional texts show that most of them do not critique western / colonial mentality, rather they perpetuate the same stereotypes —that of passive Indians who easily accepted European social political and religious institutions because they had none. Apart from this, not much attention is paid to historical details which then results in skewed representations of events.

The earliest literary representation of the Indians which is said to have had a repercussion on the political decision taken in Europe to expel the Jesuits from Paraguay is Voltaire's satirical work *Candide or Optimism*. Of all the literature and art produced during the Enlightenment period, this book became more successful than any other in terms of its reception and readership. Its popularity is borne by the fact that it appeared in multiple editions in almost every European language and continues to be read even two and a half centuries later. The novel juxtaposes two worlds, the Old and the New, through the picaresque protagonist's travels and travails. Candide is an innocent, almost «naive» young man, firmly believing in his tutor, Pangloss's dictum that

... things cannot be otherwise: for, since everything was made for a purpose, everything is necessarily for the best purpose. [...] Therefore, those who have maintained that all is well have been talking nonsense; they should have maintained that is for the best³.

Hence, Candide believes that he lives in the best of all possible worlds, in the castle of the Baron of Thunden-ten-Tronckh. His experience of «other worlds» begins with his expulsion from this «idyllic» world as a result of an act of indiscretion —that of falling in love with the Baron's daughter, Lady Cunengode. The novel is an

³ Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 16.

episodic account of the encounters between the naive and «innocent» Candide and the «real» world, but Candide is unable to draw any inferences till rather late in the novel when he realises that Pangloss's optimistic dictum is completely misplaced. It is only towards the end of the novel that Candide exclaims:

«Oh Pangloss», cried Candide. «This is an abomination you never dreamed of! It's too much: I'll have to give up your optimism at last». «What's optimism?» asked Cacambo. «Alas» said Candide, «it's a mania for insisting that everything is all right when everything is going wrong»⁴.

Candide's many trials and tribulations include a voyage to the New World, where he comes across the Jesuit Missions and *El Dorado*, after which he finally returns to Europe, hoping to be reunited with his lady love. Voltaire's satiric portrayal of the Old World is that of an authoritarian, hierarchical world, blissfully unaware of its deficiencies, believing that it is the best of all possible worlds. On the contrary, the New World, *El Dorado* is portrayed as the «enlightened» one, unaware of its wealth and oblivious to the fact that it is actually the best possible world. Voltaire's target was also all forms of organised religion but the Jesuits bore the brunt of his sharp attacks. In the novel, Candide tries to escape persecution from the inquisitors in Spain and reaches Cadiz where he finds:

A fleet was being fitted out there, and troops were being assembled to bring to the reverend Jesuit Fathers of Paraguay to reason, for they had been accused of inciting their tribes near the town of Sacramento to revolt against the King of Spain and the King of Portugal⁵.

On reaching Paraguay, he finds himself forced to fight on the side of the Jesuits instead of against them. He is surprised when his servant, Cacambo, tells him that he had earlier served at the Jesuit College of the Assumption. In a comment which is a mix of admiration and contempt, so typical to Voltaire's style, Cacambo explains to Candide:

⁴ Voltaire, *Candide*, pp. 68-69.

⁵ Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 36.

Their government is a wonderful thing. The kingdom is already more than seven hundred fifty miles across, and it's divided into thirty provinces. The Fathers have everything, the people nothing; it's a masterpiece of reason and justice. I don't know of anyone as divine as the Fathers: over here they wage war against the King of Spain and King of Portugal, and in Europe they're the confessors of those same Kings; here they kill Spaniards, in Madrid they send them to heaven⁶.

In effect, Voltaire in his novel presents the Jesuits as not only vile and cunning, but also as people who incite the Guaraní to revolt. Later, Candide escapes death at the hands of the Oreillons only when he is able to convince them that he is not a Jesuit. The people of *El Dorado* are portrayed as innocent, child-like, simple and pure. Candide and Cacambo tell one another:

«What country can this be», said one to another, «unknown to the rest of the world and do different in every way from anything we've ever seen before? It's probably the country where everything goes well, because there must be one like that somewhere. And, despite what Dr. Pangloss used to say, I often notice that everything went rather badly in Westphalia»⁷.

He further discovers that the people of El Dorado have preserved their innocence and happiness by deciding never to leave that land. This has also protected them from the rapaciousness of the European conquerors as well as those of the Jesuit fathers.

Hence, we find that the novel is not just a critique of the political and religious organisation of the Old World but also contains the underpinnings of the myth of the noble savage.⁸ This idea is a constant in many of Voltaire's works, especially in his *Essay on Universal History, the manners and the spirit of nations; from the reign of Charlemagne to the age of Louis*. According to Stelio Cro, in his book *The Noble Savage: allegory of freedom*⁹, Voltaire apparently lauded the efforts and accomplishments of the Jesuits of Paraguay but through the use

⁶ Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 49.

⁷ Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 61.

⁸ Voltaire was not the only one who propagated the myth of the noble savage. This myth propagated throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was echoed by many writers and thinkers of the period.

⁹ Cro, 1990, pp. 62-63.

of subtle irony and a contrastive style insinuated that «the intolerable presence of the fanatical monks» would only expand and increase their control over the monarchy. And that their expulsion was but a sign of progress¹⁰. Voltaire was believed to have influenced Campomanes, an important minister in Carlos III's rule, who in his *Dictamen fiscal de la expulsión de los jesuitas*, argued that the Reductions in Paraguay posed a threat to the monarchy for three reasons: a) their self-sufficiency; b) the language policy because of which they became the sole intermediaries between the colonial powers and the Indians and c) the growing tensions between the Church as an Institution and State political power. It is clear that the political reasons behind the suppression of the Jesuits are related to the representation of the Jesuits in novels like *Candide* as well as to the creation of the myth of the noble savage by important thinkers of those times.

In the literature written during the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century, the Jesuit contribution in South America was somewhat re-evaluated. Robert B Cunningham Graham in his book *A Vanished Arcadia*¹¹ gives a very favourable account of the Jesuit missions as a kind of socialist state, a utopian ideal which was destroyed upon their expulsion. A highly idealised image of the harmonious relationship between the Jesuits and the Guaraníes is presented, as if there was no conflict.

In a similar vein, the film *The Mission* too projects an idealised image of the missions. It not only contains several historical inaccuracies but it also perpetuates some stereotypical images of the Guaraníes in an attempt to project the «heroic» enterprise undertaken by the Jesuits against all odds and the greed of the colonialists. Set in the Paraguayan missions during the 1750s, it begins with Father Gabriel's (played by Jeremy Irons) superhuman voyage to Christianise the Guaraníes, which he manages with great ease by attracting the Guaraníes with European music. The Jesuits are welcomed because they protect the Guaraní from slavers like Captain Mendoza (played by Robert de Niro). Later, this mercenary becomes a Jesuit and joins Father Gabriel in the mission to atone for his sin of killing his brother. The mission is set up and soon became a paradisiacal land where the Indians unquestioningly accept the religion and practices of the

¹⁰ As cited by Cro, 1990, p. 69.

¹¹ Cunningham Graham, 1900.

of the Jesuits. The Jesuit missions invite the wrath of the colonisers while the signing of the Treaty of Madrid leads to a decision to move the Indians from the San Carlos Mission. The Jesuits too protest against this decision and «Altamirano» (Ray MacAnally)¹², a cardinal and papal legate who was once a Jesuit, is asked to adjudicate between the Jesuits and the colonialists. Though Altamirano is overwhelmed by the «beauty and power» of the missions, he decides in favour of the colonialists in order to save the Society of Jesus. In an article reviewing the film, James Schofield Saeger says:

When Altamirano visits San Carlos, he finds a «Garden of Eden», where Indians nevertheless lack personalities. At the mission, Joffé has them cheer, clap, whistle, dance, sing, wrestle, and reply in «Guarani» to Jesuits. These Guaranies have no myths, legends, or religious beliefs. They have no shamans. No leader challenges Jesuit authority, as did Tapé shamans Yaguarobia and Yeguacaporú in 1635, as they resisted Jesuit efforts to bring their people to missions. Movie Guaranis are cultural ciphers¹³.

The Indians decide to take to arms rather than give up their land. Love for the Guaraní people makes Father Gabriel decide to stay on in the mission while Mendoza decides to help arm the Guaraní to fight the war. The movie ends with the decimation of the Guaraní Indians and the killing of Jesuits, women and children as the San Carlos Mission is burnt down.

The film is replete with historical inaccuracies, which would not be so bad if it did not lay any claims to being a true account of the events of the 1750s. Many of the incidents narrated above are not borne out by historical sources. Firstly, the film glosses over the fact that early Guaraní Spanish relations were cordial as it was in the interests of the Guaranies to become allies of the Spanish in order to defend themselves from attacks from other tribes from the nearby Chaco area. In the sixteenth century, the Guaranies first accepted Catholic missions in the Rio de la Plata largely for economic reasons in the form of steady supplies of iron tools like hatchets and knives

¹² This figure corresponds to an Andalusian Jesuit, Father Luis Altamirano, who went to Paraguay in 1752 as Jesuit General Ignacio Visconti's appointee to oversee the transfer of territory from Spain to Portugal.

¹³ Saeger, 1995, p. 405.

that revolutionized their lives. On the other hand, the colonialists accepted the establishment of missions to help spread Christianity and to prevent Portuguese expansion in the north and the area between the Parana and the Uruguay rivers¹⁴. Though the Guaraníes fought against the Spanish kings, they re-established cordial relations when the war was over. It is commonly believed that the missions ceased to exist with the expulsion of the Jesuits, but historical evidence is to the contrary. Many missions continued to exist till the nineteenth century¹⁵.

Secondly, the difficulties that the Jesuits faced in convincing the Guaraníes to accept Christian practices are not communicated in the movie. It is almost as if evangelisation of the Guaraní was an easy business as they were «ignorant» of religion. But Jesuits accounts of the period tell us a different story; that though the Indians were willing enough to listen to their preaching, they were resistant to changing their social habits. For example, the Guaraní were a semi sedentary nomadic tribe who were used to moving frequently from one location to another – sometimes the missionaries would be extremely frustrated to find that a community that they had been working with had suddenly disappeared into the forest; they also lacked a central political authority which also made conversion difficult. Some indigenous practices like cannibalism, polygamy, marriage within kinship inherently went against the tenets preached by the missionaries and it was not easy to make them give up these customs.

Thirdly, the film-makers use a fifteenth century debate about the treatment of the Indians while discussing the transfer of missions. It is not explicable how the Valladolid debate between Bartolomé de Las Casas¹⁶ and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda¹⁷ (1550-1551) reflecting opposing attitudes about the nature of conquest could be transported to the 1750s when the issue at hand was a completely different one. In fact, it is confusing here whether the real issue was the Treaty of Madrid and its consequences. What is debated in the film is not whether at all the missions should be evicted but what would become of the Indians who live there. It is also not clear as to why the Indians are

¹⁴ Langer and Jackson, 1995.

¹⁵ Ganson, 1990.

¹⁶ A staunch advocate of peaceful and persuasive conversion.

¹⁷ A prominent humanist and Greek scholar who justified conquest and evangelization by war.

so attached to a mission so recently set up when they were anyway used to nomadic ways. Moreover, it is also ambiguous about the role of the Jesuits in the Guaraní War. Historical evidence about this period¹⁸ shows that the Jesuits had no role in the war; they never fought against the Spanish and Portuguese forces. On the contrary, they feared for their lives as some of them were taken hostage.

Finally, the Indians have practically no voice in the film. They play an important role in the film, no doubt, but are incidental as their voices are not heard. There are no subtitles provided and when the Indians speak, it is through the Jesuit priest, Father Gabriel.

These historical inaccuracies make the film inadequate despite the beautiful music and cinematography (Chris Menges) for which it won an Academy award. The film has also won a Christopher Award, a Gold Angel from the Los Angeles-based Religion in Media, two Golden Globes (best screenplay and musical score). Responses to the film have been variedly extreme: it has been criticised for reinforcing neo-imperialism, paternalism and a dangerous form of Otherness while pretending to be historically accurate and Indian-friendly¹⁹. The well-known Pulitzer Prize winning American critic Roger Ebert says about the film:

The Mission feels exactly like one of those movies where you'd rather see the documentary about how the movie was made. You'd like to know why so many talented people went to such incredible lengths to make a difficult and beautiful movie — without any of them, on the basis of the available evidence, having the slightest notion of what the movie was about²⁰.

The Jewish film critic Michael Medved²¹ has gone to the extent of calling the film anti-religious, as it focuses on cowardly eighteenth-century ecclesiastical officials who sold out idealistic Jesuit missionaries and their converts to profit-minded Portuguese imperialists and slave traders. Yet in 1995, the papal committee compiling

¹⁸ Scholars like Barbara Ganson and James Schofield Saeger have studied this aspect in their work.

¹⁹ Llorca, <http://www.mllora.com/mission.doc>

²⁰ Greydanus, <http://www.decentfilms.com/sections/reviews/mission.html>

²¹ Greydanus, <http://www.decentfilms.com/sections/reviews/mission.html>

the Vatican film list²² numbered *The Mission* among fifteen films noteworthy for special religious significance. Yet another scholar, Michael Dempsey is ambiguous in his praise for the film. Skirting issues of historical accuracy, or of idealised portrayals of the Guaraní Indians, he says: «Addressing the ambiguities of idealism amid greed and power politics, *The Mission* and the circumstances of its production also embody them. Like *El Cid*, it is a moving eulogy for a brand of heroism that, beautiful and uplifting though it may be, is almost certainly a historical dinosaur»²³.

To conclude, most representations of Jesuits missions, however well-intentioned they may be, fail to engage with the Indian perspective as they reinforce stereotypes about the «civilizing mission» undertaken by the Spanish. In the process, they are no different from earlier accounts which denied the Indians any cultural agency or autonomy and regarded them either as child-like, innocent people ignorant of any religion» and the Jesuits as «heroic» men who took «civilization» to these people at great odds. At the same time, the complexities of the political and religious debates of the eighteenth century are over-simplified.

A notable exception is the Matthew J Pallamary's novel *Land without Exile*. Set in the eighteenth century, it tells the story of a Guaraní's struggle to preserve his peoples' culture from civilizing Christian mission. The protagonist of the novel, Ava-Tapé is torn between his father, the *shaman*, who continues to live in the forest not wanting to forsake his way of life and beliefs for Christian ones and Father Antonio, the missionary who initiates him to Christianity and wants to make him a religious example for his people. This spiritual and religious dilemma is resolved as Tupa comes to Ava-Tapé in his visions and he is convinced that he is the chosen one who must save his people from the threat of the white man, and lead them to the promised land-without-evil. In the author's note, Pallamary reflects on the reasons that compelled him to tell this story and which has resonances even in our times.

The situations referred to herein dramatise timeless human truths that cross social, racial, cultural and historical lines. The fears, concerns, in-

²² Emerson, <http://cinepad.com/vatican.htm>

²³ Dempsey, 1987.

justices, and patterns of human behaviour that we acted out a quarter of millennium ago carry the same immediacy and consequences today²⁴.

Though the depiction of the Guaraní sometimes comes rather close to that of «a noble savage», the extensive research that informs the novel about indigenous customs, practices, cosmology and theology make it a pleasure to read. In fact, juxtaposed against the Roland Joffé's film, Pallamary's novel reveals Guaraní people with an autonomous cultural perspective, reflecting the moral dilemmas when two world-views, so different from one another, enter into unequal relations of power.

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²⁴ Pallamary, 1991.

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Paraguay remains the most Catholic country in Latin America: 90 per cent of the population are Catholics, according to the Pew Research Center of the US. Of the rest, 7 per cent are Protestant, 2 per cent other faiths, and only 1 per cent describe themselves as having no religion – the lowest proportion in the continent. The priests came from Europe but believed strongly in speaking the language of the people. In terms of tourism, the stone ruins of the old Jesuit mission of Trinidad is Paraguay’s most precious jewel. It can be poignant to take the illuminated night walk, hearing the soundtrack The Mission of Jesús de Tavarangue as an architectural expression is characterized by the combination of architectural styles. The Mudéjar (Christian-Arab) style is especially reflected with the use of the trefoil arch. There are no other architectural examples of this style, from the Jesuit era, in the region that formerly constituted the Province of Paraguay or Paracuaria. In 2003, an interdisciplinary expert team visited Jesuit Missions in Paraguay as well as in Brazil and Argentina. The report presented to the World Heritage Committee identified several challenges to the series of properties including the potential for tourism pressure, the lack of capacity in conservation techniques, lack of financial and human resources and the lack of management including legislation. Jesuit, member of the Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic order of religious men founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola and noted for its educational, missionary, and charitable works. Once regarded by many as the principal agent of the Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits were later a leading force in modernizing the church. More Jesuits were to be involved in missionary work than in any other activity, save education. By the time of Ignatius’s death in 1556, about 1,000 Jesuits were already working throughout Europe and in Asia, Africa, and the New World. By 1626 the number of Jesuits was 15,544, and in 1749 the total was 22,589. Get a Britannica Premium subscription and gain access to exclusive content. [Subscribe Now.](#)