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Jesuit Mission Strategies and Their Impact: A Comparative Study of Japan and New France (16th - 18th Centuries)

Cizvit Misyon Stratejileri ve Etkileri: Japonya ve Yeni Fransa'nın Karşılaştırmalı Bir Çalışması (16. - 18. Yüzyıllar)

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the practices of Jesuit missionary activities in the geographies of Japan (16th–17th centuries) and New France (17th–18th centuries) from a comparative perspective. These two mission experiences, which took shape in different cultural, political and religious contexts, show significant differences and similarities in terms of the relations established by the Jesuits with the local societies, the cultural adaptation strategies they implemented and the methods in the Christianization processes. In this context, the main purpose of the study is to understand the effects of missionary activities on local societies by analyzing the tactical adaptation strategies developed by the Jesuit missionaries in line with the social structures and balances of power they encountered. The qualitative research method was adopted in the study; historical documents such as missionary letters, travel books, official reports and secondary literature were used as sources. With the comparative historical analysis method, the road maps followed by the Jesuits were analyzed both in the feudal structure and religious intolerance environment in Japan and in the relatively flexible colonial order in New France. The findings obtained reveal that the Jesuit missions undertook not only a religious but also a socio-political function. The study aims to make a critical contribution to missionary history in the context of intercultural relations.

Keywords

Japan, Jesuits, Missionary Activities, New France, Social Structure.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Cizvit misyonerlik faaliyetlerinin Japonya (16.–17. yüzyıllar) ve Yeni Fransa (17.–18. yüzyıllar) coğrafyalarındaki uygulamalarını karşılaştırmalı bir perspektiften ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Farklı kültürel, siyasal ve dini bağlamlarda şekillenen bu iki misyon deneyimi, Cizvitlerin yerli toplumlarla kurduğu ilişkiler, uyguladığı kültürel adaptasyon stratejileri ve Hristiyanlaştırma süreçlerindeki yöntemler bakımından önemli farklılıklar ve benzerlikler göstermektedir. Bu bağlamda çalışmanın temel amacı, Cizvit misyonerlerin karşılaştıkları sosyal yapılar ve güç dengeleri doğrultusunda geliştirdikleri taktiksel uyum stratejilerini analiz ederek, misyonerlik faaliyetlerinin yerel toplumlar üzerindeki etkilerini anlamaktır. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemi benimsenmiş; misyoner mektupları, seyahatnameler, resmi raporlar ve ikincil literatür gibi tarihsel belgeler kaynak olarak kullanılmıştır. Karşılaştırmalı tarihsel analiz yöntemiyle, hem Japonya'daki feodal yapı ve dini hoşgörüsüzlük ortamında, hem de Yeni Fransa'daki görece esnek sömürge düzeninde Cizvitlerin izlediği yol haritaları çözümlenmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, Cizvit misyonlarının yalnızca dini değil, aynı zamanda sosyo-politik bir işlev üstlendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, misyonerlik tarihine kültürlerarası ilişkiler bağlamında eleştirel bir katkı sunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Japonya, Cizvitler, Misyonerlik Faaliyetleri, Yeni Fransa, Toplumsal Yapı.

1. Introduction

The 16th and 17th century Jesuit missions in Japan and New France are important examples of the global expansion of Western Christianity. The Jesuits not only spread their religious beliefs but also interacted with the local cultures they encountered and tried to adapt their religious teachings to these cultures. In both regions, the missionaries encountered the cultural, social and political structures of local societies and developed different strategies in this context. In Japan, the Jesuits, faced with a feudal social structure and a strong local administration, established relations with local *daimyō* (“feudal lords”) to ensure the success of their missionary activities and prioritised cultural integration over military conquest. This strategy aimed to adapt to the existing socio-political structure of Japan.

In New France, Jesuit missions faced a different challenge. Since the indigenous peoples were nomadic and non-hierarchical communities, interacting with their religious and cultural structures required a different method. While trying to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity, the Jesuits had to consider their cultural characteristics and religious beliefs. In this context, Jesuit missionary work, beyond being a process that coincided with Europe's colonialist goals, points to a period in which relations with indigenous societies were dynamically shaped and mutual interactions were intense.

This study aims to examine the Jesuit missions in Japan and New France from a comparative perspective, exploring the social and cultural dimensions of the missionaries' relations with local communities and their efforts to integrate their religious teachings. It will focus on the missionaries' collaboration with local leaders, how missionary activities were adapted to local communities, and how they balanced the tensions between religious goals and colonialism. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Jesuit missions in this period were intertwined with and influenced the processes of cultural transformation and colonization.

2. Japan

While Father Cabral described the Japanese as ‘low class’,¹ Father Xavier characterised them as ‘*quarrelsome and greedy*’.² However, the same Father Xavier did not hesitate to consider the Japanese as ‘the best’ among the other discovered nations.³ It is possible to find many writings similar to this laudatory approach of Xavier. In fact, Father Alessandro Valignano criticised Father Francisco Cabral, stating that he had made a serious mistake in relations by treating the Japanese brothers as servants.⁴ In the same year, Father Gaspar

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- 1 Josef Franz Schütte and J. J. Coyne, *Valignano's Mission Principles for Japan*, 1st ed, Series II--Modern Scholarly Studies about the Jesuits, in English Translations (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980), 255–60.
 - 2 Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times. Vol.IV, Japan and China, 1549-1552*, trans. Joseph Costelloe (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1982), 550.
 - 3 F. Xavier, *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, trans. M.J. Costelloe, Institute of Jesuit Sources / 1 (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 297.
 - 4 Takao Abé, *The Jesuit Mission to New France: A New Interpretation in the Light of the Earlier Jesuit Experience in Japan*, vol. 151, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 50, <https://brill.com/display/title/19569>.

Vilela went even farther and claimed that the Japanese had a more attractive complexion than the Portuguese, while Father Luis Frois added that the Japanese had fair skin and a well-proportioned body.⁵

Before the Jesuits began their activities in Japan, based on the experience of the Spanish colonies, military conquest of a nation was considered to be the sine qua non of the acculturation process. However, the Jesuits did not adopt this method in Japan and consciously avoided European-style military conquest. Moreover, they realised that for missionary activities to succeed, European settler colonies should not coexist with the local population.⁶ In this context, Japanese communities were initially composed entirely of non-European villages and were not dependent on the Iberian colonisers.

Nevertheless, it is not possible to say that they analysed everything accurately. The fact that Father Xavier, the pioneer of the Jesuit organisation in Japan, had planned a meeting with the Emperor when he landed in Japan, but this meeting did not take place,⁷ necessitated a rethinking of the organisation model. The Jesuit analyses attempted to correlate the political and social systems of Japan with those of Europe. Although there were marked differences, the feudal and theocratic order in Europe helped the Jesuits to understand Japanese society.⁸

The hierarchy analysis started by Father Torres was continued by Father Frois. Both priests categorised Japanese society into the spiritual leader, the Emperor and the nobility in Kyoto.⁹ However, Father Torres saw the Emperor more as a secular power, while Father Frois attributed to him a spiritual authority.¹⁰ Father Valignano, on the other hand, categorised society in more detail, treating the servant class, including *daimyôs*, priests, warriors, merchants and peasants, as a separate category.¹¹ Observing that the *daimyôs* had absolute power over the servants, the Jesuits shaped their organisation in Japan in accordance with this social structure.

This shows that good relations with local leaders were at the heart of the organisation. It was also understood that meeting with the emperor did not make much sense for the organisation, as the emperor was not as powerful a figure as expected. Father Xavier aimed to secure the Jesuit presence in Japan by developing close relations with the *daimyôs*. A similar approach was taken in India. In India, the Jesuits who developed good relations with the community chiefs were welcomed with tolerance in return.¹² The experience Father Xavier gained from his mission in India enabled him to adopt a similar strategy in Japan.

According to Ebisawa, the success of the Jesuits in the early period was based on the fact that they presented Japan with a new worldview through Christianity and also introduced rational reasoning. He asserted that the spiritual growth of Japan's national identity was expedited by Christianity.¹³ The transition between traditional religion and Christianity did not involve a hard break. Christianity was solely perceived by many Japanese as a

5 Abé, 151:50.

6 Abé, 151:135.

7 Xavier, *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, 310, 332.

8 Abé, *The Jesuit Mission to New France: A New Interpretation in the Light of the Earlier Jesuit Experience in Japan*, 151:59–60.

9 Abé, 151:52.

10 Abé, 151:53.

11 Abé, 151:59.

12 Xavier, *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, 116–20.

13 Xavier, 28.

rejection of the usefulness of traditional religions. This was due to the language barrier the Jesuits faced in transmitting their beliefs; the catechism books used a lot of Buddhist and Confucian terms.¹⁴ Thus, the transition between traditional understanding and Christianity as a new religion was smooth, not hard.

There are other advantages that make Christianity attractive. In the understanding of the period, solidarity was recognised as an important element and Christianity was effective in providing this. One of the most basic means of solidarity was medical assistance. Jesuits exchanged medical knowledge with Japanese physicians, learning how to make Chinese medicines and teaching surgical techniques to Japanese physicians.¹⁵ Medical care was used as a tool to convert patients to Christianity, blurring the differences between Christianity and Eastern spirituality. This suggests that the practice of seeking health and healing from the Christian church was linked to the widespread belief at the time that the suffering of the body was caused by the influence of a sick soul or an evil spirit. Within the framework of this belief, it is understood that families made it a traditional practice to seek healing by visiting temples and shrines, and that this practice was transformed over time.¹⁶ Social services included not only medical assistance, but also charity and education. In addition, the Jesuits offered a national and international network, providing an attractive opportunity for co-operation, especially for *daimyôs*.

On the other hand, the errors in the Jesuits' analyses of hierarchy are also striking. One of the main goals of the Jesuits was to replace Buddhist monks with Christian priests in Japan. They made many attempts to achieve this goal. For example, Father Gaspar Coelho persuaded the *daimyô* Ômura Sumitada to destroy Buddhist temples and shrines on his land or to allocate them to churches.¹⁷ Such attempts, however, were based on a misunderstanding of the legitimising foundations of authority in Japan. According to Japanese mythology, the country's structure of islands and islets was based on a past derived from sacred creator figures, and this mythology was recognised as the source of the legitimacy of Japanese authority. Religious structures and the priesthood were an integral part of the Japanese hierarchy, and this hierarchy was a system that would hinder rather than facilitate the activities of the Jesuits. Therefore, this understanding, which opened space for Christianity, also prevented the development of Christianity.¹⁸

The Jesuits were not only missionaries but also actors operating as merchants. Merchantship was used as a tool to open closed doors, making them a kind of diplomat. For example, many overlords who opposed missionary activities in the territories they controlled had to accept and even welcome missionaries in order to allow Portuguese merchant ships to anchor in their harbours.¹⁹ However, these relations also led to many confrontations with the political power centres with whom they wanted to develop good relations, as well as the rise of secular concerns among Jesuit priests and the collapse of the organisation as a result of internal conflicts.

14 Ikuo Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice*, ed. H. Bolitho and K. W. Radtke, vol. XVI, Brill's Japanese Studies Library (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 9.

15 Luís Fróis, *Historia de Japam / Vol. I, 1549-1564*, ed. José Wicki, vol. 1 (Lisboa: Biblioteca Nacional, 1976), chap. 19.

16 Fróis, vol. 1, chap. 4.

17 Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, XVI:92.

18 N. S. Fujita, "“Conic” Christianity and “Donut” Japan", *Missiology* 22, no. 1 (1 January 1994): 43–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182969402200104>.

19 Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, XVI:15, 137.

3. New France

As in the case of Japan, it is difficult to say that the Jesuit organisation in New France is based on a hierarchical order. At first glance, similarly to Japan, analyses in New France focus on authority due to the fact that Jesuits were minorities and foreigners. In this context, Jesuit writers analysed local tribal leaders in detail. For example, Father Biard analysed the Mi'kmaq chief Membertou, Father Le Jeune the Algonquin chief Makheabichtichiou,²⁰ and analysed the Aenons and Anenkhiondic chiefs.²¹ These analyses are based on the Jesuits' discovery of authoritative authority before the organisation was established.

Moreover, Father Le Jeune, in his analysis of the Huron tribes, drew attention to the decisive role of the elders, and also emphasised the importance of chiefs in charge of warfare and organisation. However, the influence of these chiefs was not limited to these, some chiefs had influence over the tribes through their wisdom, some through their popularity, others through their eloquence or generosity.²² These analyses are shaped by the Jesuits' need to discover the competent authorities before implementing their structures. As a result, the Jesuits realised that village governance was not based on a hierarchical order, as in Japan, but on a civil administration. The power of tribal leaders remained limited at the level of representation; they lacked hierarchical legitimacy and could not have the authority to coerce communities.

In this region, where there was no local authority, the main force on which the Jesuits relied was the colonialist French administration. The fertility of New France increased the desire for colonisation among the French, and this process also strengthened the missionary's evangelisation hopes. In this context, the idea that the Indians should be converted was increasingly expressed by official authorities. In 1629-1632, an all-out attack on the religious beliefs of the Indians was launched and this task was directly assigned to the Jesuits.²³

Missionaries in New France did not feel the need to portray the Japanese in a favorable light, despite their reliance on Japanese authorities. However, the way of life in New France is quite different both from their own and from what they had observed in Japan. For this reason, the Jesuits' analyses of the Indians were often harsh. Father Biard, for example, argued that the Indians had not yet made a real connection with Christianity and described them as ignorant, lawless and rude, wandering in the jungle, vengeful, lazy, gluttonous, irreligious and treacherous.²⁴

20 Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents : Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791 : The Original French, Latin, and Italian Texts, with English Translations and Notes*, trans. J. C. Covert et al., vol. Vol. XIV Hurons and Quebec: 1637-1638 (Cleveland: Burrows, 1898), 131–35, 145, <https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.07548>.

21 Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents : Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791 : The Original French, Latin, and Italian Texts, with English Translations and Notes*, trans. J.C. Covert, et al., vol. Vol. I Acadia : 1610-1613 (Cleveland: Burrows, 1896), 155, 165, 177, <https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.07536>.

22 Reuben Gold Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents : Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791 : The Original French, Latin, and Italian Texts, with English Translations and Notes*, vol. V. Quebec : 1632-1633 (Cleveland: Burrows, 1897), 31–35; Reuben Gold Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents : Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791 : The Original French, Latin, and Italian Texts, with English Translations and Notes*, vol. VI. Quebec : 1633-1634 (Cleveland: Burrows, 1897), 229–31, 239.

23 Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage: And the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Edmonton, Alta., Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1984), 251–278.

24 Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents : Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries*

In the light of such analyses, it was thought that the conversion process of the Indians would be easy; however, contrary to this expectation, the difficulty of the process soon became clear. Foremost among these difficulties was the nomadic lifestyle of the indigenous people. Nomadism was regarded as a violation of church laws, and for this reason, it was aimed for the indigenous people to settle down as farming communities. Accordingly, in 1615, Denis Jamet, a Récollet priest, designed villages in Quebec that transformed nomadic hunters into farmers.²⁵ The Jesuits hoped that the local population would voluntarily settle in such settlements. The first attempts were considered successful, albeit costly for the French, but war, disease and adherence to the traditional way of life soon led to the abandonment of these settlements.

Despite the difficulties, the idea of settlement continued to receive support. However, the Jesuits realised that the problems they faced in this process were linked to the fact that the areas designated for the Indians were too close to French colonialist communities. Indeed, far from encouraging Indians to become good Christians, this policy actually alienated them. It seems that such negativities were tried to be avoided in the light of lessons learnt from the experience in Japan. For example, in Japan, it was considered necessary to keep a distance between colonial communities and indigenous Christian communities, and in parallel, settlements were designed in New France to keep Indians separate from colonialists. Prairie de la Magdelaine and Sault St. Louis were built for this purpose.²⁶ However, the authorities thought that the Jesuits were not moving fast enough in this process and decided to limit their activities.

In fact, before the authorities changed their views, the Jesuits had already begun to change their ideas about sedentarisation. As a matter of fact, they made changes in rituals so that the Indians could adopt Christianity. The Jesuits recognised that the practices of the Indians, which might have been considered barbaric by the French, were in fact highly functional and part of a viable culture that was logical and viable in itself. Although this recognition led to much controversy, the Jesuits, without compromising their own principles, focussed on developing practices appropriate to the culture of the Indians. For example, instead of ringing bells, they decided that it was more functional to make announcements in accordance with the customs of the country. They also managed to create a wider space for themselves by participating in the exchange of gifts, which was important to the Indians but considered primitive by Europeans.

The Indians' rigorous dedication to their way of life was one of the challenges faced throughout the shift to settled life. Even when they settled down for a short time, they did not adopt the French way of life they had been taught. For this reason, the missionaries considered it a more reasonable approach to educate the children of the Indians. However, in Indian communities, young people had neither dignity nor a voice in councils. Another social stratum that lacked credibility was slaves, whom the Jesuits were very successful in converting.²⁷ However, this success did not have a social impact since slaves had no dignity.

In the case of Japan, we have already observed that medical activities played an important role in the spread of Christianity. However, these activities in Japan came to

in New France, 1610-1791 : The Original French, Latin, and Italian Texts, with English Translations and Notes, 1896, Vol. I Acadia : 1610-1613:173.

25 Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage*, 264.

26 Dickason, 266.

27 Dickason, 262.

an abrupt end in 1558 with the imposition of a ban on direct participation in medical treatment.²⁸ Following this ban, Jesuit missions began to focus on the salvation of souls, and this focus shaped the main purpose of the missionaries in New France.²⁹ However, medical activities were also practised in New France, but with different results. The reason for both the resumption of activities and the difference in results is that, unlike in Japan, the influence of Europeans in New France was such that epidemics in the region were effective to the point of destroying the indigenous population. The Hurons attributed the source of the disease to the Jesuits.³⁰ In addition, although the medical practices of the Indians were quite primitive compared to those of Europeans, they did not accept the medical support of Europeans because they were at least as effective as those of Europeans against epidemics. However, the disease was so effective that they eventually accepted the offer of nuns to look after the sick. With the acceptance of this offer, the Indians were freed from the obligation to kill or leave to die those who could not follow them on their wanderings, by fulfilling the wishes of the nuns. In return for this support, the Indians offered many treats to the nuns.³¹

It was the structure of their society, devoid of centralised authority, that enabled the Indians to accept Christianity to a certain extent. Like the Japanese, the Indians were open to interreligious interchange and identified the Christian god with the most powerful of their spiritual beings.³² For the Indians, however, Christianity's desire to completely change the structure of society posed a serious problem. For the Indians, who adopted a nomadic lifestyle, this required a much more radical change than for the Japanese.

From the French point of view, the Jesuit work was not a complete failure. Although the French administration considered them a failure, the French-Indian alliances forged during the colonial wars have become legendary. Most Indians showed deep loyalty to the French. This loyalty continued for a hundred years until the collapse of New France. Furthermore, the Jesuits had a great deal of success converting Indians to Christianity, as noted by James Axtell and Karen Anderson.³³

4. Conclusion

In this study, Jesuit missionary activities in Japan and New France are examined comparatively and the interactions of the missionaries in both regions with local communities, their cultural adaptation strategies and the diffusion processes of their religious teachings are analysed. As a result, although Jesuit missionaries had similar religious goals in both geographies, the socio-political structures, cultural dynamics and social organisation of the local populations they encountered created significant differences in their missionary strategies.

28 Abé, *The Jesuit Mission to New France: A New Interpretation in the Light of the Earlier Jesuit Experience in Japan*, 151:93.

29 Abé, 151:93.

30 Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage*, 269.

31 Dickason, 263.

32 M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1951), 127–69.

33 James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*, Cultural Origins of North America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 91–280; Karen L. Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (London: Routledge, 1991), 224–29.

In Japan, the feudal structure and strong local administrations required Jesuit missionaries to adopt a more strategic and diplomatic approach to achieve their religious goals. Relationships with local *daimyō* allowed the missionaries to gain acceptance in local communities and integrate into Japanese culture. However, the negative attitude of the Japanese government towards Christianity and the restrictions on the activities of missionaries greatly complicated the missionary process.

In New France, the Jesuits encountered the more diverse social structures and traditional nomadic ways of life of the indigenous peoples. Here the missionaries had to understand the cultural values and lifestyles of the indigenous peoples, which required them to present religious teachings in harmony with local customs. However, the conversion of indigenous peoples to Christianity was often superficial and the missionaries' goals were not fully realised. Nevertheless, the Jesuits' processes of education and cultural interaction with indigenous communities left long-term effects on the religious and cultural structures of local people.

In conclusion, the contributions of the Jesuit missionaries to the process of cultural transformation in both regions and the obstacles they encountered in this process show that missionary activities go beyond the mere purpose of spreading religion and constitute a complex field of cultural, social and political interaction. The experiences in Japan and New France highlight how crucial it is for missionaries to engage with local societies through a process of mutual learning and adaptation. Moreover, Jesuit missionary work, as part of Eurocentred policies of colonialism and cultural interaction, led to significant transformations in both religious and cultural terms. In this context, Jesuit missionary activities played a critical role in shaping both religious and cultural interactions on a global scale.

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