

PAGANS IN EAST ASIA IN EARLY MODERN DUTCH SOURCES

The contacts between paganism and Christianity have, since antiquity constituted by far one of the main pivots in intercultural relations. The discussion on pagans and foreign peoples introduced into European culture by Aristotle has served as a basis for the discourse developed in the following centuries. According to the Greek philosopher, the human soul is a form struggling with the limits of matter to realise its potential. Thus he proved that the souls of white people have fully achieved their goal, while in the case of black people and Indians their souls had to face greater obstacles. His thoughts have been fundamental for the Medieval scholastic such as represented by Thomas Aquinas and later on developed by the Renaissance humanists. These issues became even more important in the era of great geographical discoveries and the discussion on the problem whether the Indians actually have a soul or not, being a basis for the way of treating the natives encountered in the New World.¹⁾

Therefore the development of colonialism and foreign trade in the early modern period was always associated with the contemporary religious debate, providing arguments and bringing intercultural relations to a new level. The aim of this paper is to present the attitude of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) towards the various groups and nations in East Asia commonly referred to as “pagans”, expressed in the 16th and 17th c. A special reference will be made to the written sources and artistic depictions created at that time which convey the most significant notions concerning foreign peoples.

¹⁾ Popowicz (2009:15).

The beginning of the European experience of the broadly understood Orient began in the early Middle Ages with the highly negative impression associated with the Middle East. This too has been in a certain part constructed on a religious basis, as the crusades have shaped the long-term image of this region in European eyes, however the Muslims could not be mistaken with pagans. Though the first meeting with a foreign culture was marked by a religious conflict, the exotic Orient was still tempting and extremely fascinating for the Europeans. An example of this are the thriving trade contacts and routes passing through Jerusalem linking the East and West, as well as popular travel relations such as telling the story of Prester John and his kingdom, who was the only Christian in the East settled somewhere in the middle of the pagan land. Thus they provided an explanation for European expansion on the level of piety in the search for this mythical state and spreading Christianity outside the Old Continent. However they were not limited solely to the Middle East, although most of the relations focus on it. The first source referring strictly to East Asia was Marco Polo's *Il Millione* (*The Travels of Marco Polo*). Concerning the customs and religious beliefs of the locals, the Venetian traveller wrote that the inhabitants of Asia worship numerous and various deities. Although his experiences were limited to the court of Kublai Khan, he was not afraid to write about Japan, India and the islands of South-East Asia. In his vivid description he enumerated nearly every forms and aspects of paganism: hybrid human-animal gods and their idols, bloody sacrifices and bizarre rituals, examples of cannibalism, sorcery and occultism, false temples etc., not to mention burying rituals involving burning the dead. All this must have made a diabolic (a term often used by Marco Polo) impression on Medieval readers.

As we shall see the simple notion that the people of Asia were pagans persisted in the following centuries, especially in case of the lesser known and more dangerous areas of the Asian continent. In the case of more civilised nations – such as the Chinese and Japanese – it was however hard to maintain such an opinion. Since the beginning of the European presence in East Asia, trade contacts and military conquest have been combined with missionary activity. This explicitly refers to the doings of two major powers – the Spaniards and Portuguese, sending their missionaries to convert as many locals as possible. The Jesuits headed by Alessandro Valignano were specially eager to convince the authorities in Rome that the Asians, although pagan, could be easily converted. The fathers often emphasised the high level of Chinese and Japanese culture including their understanding of Christian religious con-

cepts.²⁾ Such opinions, even if exaggerated and highly optimistic, give a good impression of the ambitions driving some of the European colonialists.

On the other hand the Dutch had a completely different attitude towards the locals in Asia. The VOC had among its general governors mainly orthodox Calvinists and pragmatic merchants, who have never put missionary activity before trade. On the contrary: they were focused on making money and any form of missionary activity was considered by them as an unnecessary expense. The Company authorities in Batavia would often interfere in the work of the ministers (*predikanten*) treating them as their loyal employees, drastically limiting their number and transferring them from one part of the East Indies to the other.³⁾ Moreover the Dutch themselves had a horrible reputation among the inhabitants of the East Indies, which was due to their scandalous behaviour such as piracy, involvement in slavery and drunkenness. For this reason, the relations between them and the local rulers were rather tense, though they were tolerated as skilled merchants and sailors capable of transporting large quantities of various goods in the area of the Indian Ocean. Still, the Dutch had a sense of superiority over the natives no matter whether they were Muslims, Indians or of any other origin, though usually this was expressed in private correspondence rather than openly. Therefore, in general they had no reason to support a positive image of Asian piety and religious beliefs, and the contrast between the generally Protestant employees of the Company and the local creeds fuelled mutual hatred.

The Dutch in East Asia primarily focused on spice as a source of great profit. To strengthen their position they gradually repelled the Portuguese and Spaniards from the Malay Archipelago and interfered in the politics of the local kingdoms, especially in modern-day Indonesia. A milestone in their activity was marked by conquering Djakarta in 1619 and establishing a permanent capital in Batavia founded on its ruins. Once settled, they closed themselves in the factories, focused on developing trade and thwarting any examples of discontent.⁴⁾ The Dutch East Indies was a vast region with a great variety of nations and religions, ranging from Buddhists in China and Japan, through Muslims in Indonesia, ending with “real” pagans and even cannibals in the islands of East-West Asia. Thus the Dutch have made contact with a multitude of new religions with Batavia itself serving as a cultural melting pot with immigrants

²⁾ Cooper (1965:229).

³⁾ Boxer (1980:142–143).

⁴⁾ van Goor&van Goor (2004:52).

and travelling merchants from all over the Indies, and Europeans as the ruling minority.

The developing global trade and encounters with new people has also created a demand for scientific compilations gathering as many information as possible on the newly discovered parts of the world. They were however very often written by people who had never set foot in Asia and were based on the second-hand reports of travellers, missionaries and merchants. Therefore they had no interest in presenting a positive image of the Dutch colonies, given that the criticism aimed against pagans was much fiercer in Europe, especially among the *predikanten*, than in Asia itself. Moreover they did not hesitate to revive old myths and colour their stories to make them more interesting for the average European reader. The information presented by the authors on the religions of the East Indies lack order and are characterised by a strong confusion caused by the multitude of sects and cults, though they managed to present some of the principles of their teaching.⁵⁾ On the other hand a lot of space is devoted to the history of Christianity in Asia, the missionary activity of the Jesuits. The Dutch however showed great intolerance against all other religions except for Calvinists, often transferring the religious conflicts on the Old Continent (such as concerning the issue of idolatry) and rhetoric on East Asia without understanding the specific of its situation.

The first Dutch source on the issue of world religions was the *Itinerario (John Huighen van Linschoten, His discours of voyages into ye Easte and West Indies: deuided into foure bookes*, first edition: Amsterdam 1596) written by Jan Huygen van Linschoten of Haarlem, a secretary of the Portuguese archbishop of Goa. Though he was mainly interested in providing practical information for the sailors and merchants sailing to East Asia, describing the sea routes and goods available. Still, he managed to present a detailed view on the cultural life in the Indies, where the followers of various religions lived peacefully together. Nevertheless he remained highly critical such as when calling the Brahmins and Muslim muftis *papen* ("Popes"), being a common insult used by the Dutch, although they were very respected among their own kin (Fig. 1).⁶⁾ We can also find depictions of mosques and pagodas – in both cases rather inaccurate, especially the pagoda presented as a place where people worship some kind of diabolical, hybrid deity (Fig. 2). Van Linschoten has also referred to the problem

⁵⁾ Cooper (1965:297–305, 311–319).

⁶⁾ Boxer (1980:190).

of foreign customs, mentioning a Brahmin's wife throwing herself into the fire (Fig. 3) after the death of her husband. Every time the natives and their culture is presented according to the European artistic canons with no reference to the tradition and specifics of local art except for the costumes. In all the Indies described by van Linschoten made a barbarian and bizarre impression.

Later on, the Dutch notions on the religions of the world, being also representative of other European nations, were explicitly presented in the book *Descriptio Regni Japoniae et Siam* (*Description of the Kingdoms of Japan and Siam*) by Bernhardus Varenius (Bernhard Varen, 1622–1650) published by Lodewijk Elzevier in Amsterdam 1649. Although Varenius focused mainly on Japan and China, he managed to provide short notes on the religions in various countries in the whole world. This can be at least partially explained by his family traditions with theologians and professors of theology among his relatives, and as his argument is conducted clearly from a European-Christian perspective.⁷⁾ According to Varenius when their religion is concerned, the people of the world could be divided into four basic groups: Christians, Jews and Muslims (as those who have based their religion upon a holy book, with respect to the inner subdivisions between the various fractions) and the pagans. Thus the vast majority of Asia's population was placed in the last and at the same time the largest group. It included both ancient tribes and those who worship the sun and moon, the godless and savages, as well as polytheists and the followers of various cults and religions incomprehensible to the Europeans, such as Buddhism, Shinto or Hinduism. However crude, this division shaped the relations between the European and Asians, bolstering the missionary activity on one hand and the ruthless conquest and exploitation on the other. According to Varenius, even Islam (*Mahometan Religion*) was treated as a blasphemy and negation of all Christian dogmas. His opinion about the other nations are not much better when he writes that the Chinese worship various spirits of mountains and rivers. Varenius, however, saw some regularities when describing the popularity of certain "sects" both in China and Japan spreading the cult of Shaka and Amidaba, though the term "Buddhism", "Hinduism" or "Shinto" are never used by Varenius or any other scholar of this time.

Repeating van Linschoten's opinion, he mentioned numerous Brahmins (*Brachmanes, Bramenes*) who roamed the region and were very respected by the locals, as they taught the virtues and principles of their religion, advocat-

⁷⁾ Schuchard (2007:20).

ing the avoidance of eating meat and celibacy. The other face of Asian piety were demons and deities, worshiped in the form of statues and idols, as well as numerous temples and feast days. In all, Varenius created a colourful and diverse vision of Asia filled with examples of superstition and “pagan” rituals making a tremendous impression on the European readers.

The previously mentioned description was caught up and developed by Arnoldus Montanus (Arent van der Berg or van Bergen, ca. 1625–1683) in his *Gedenkwaardige Gesantschappen der Oost-Indische Maetschappy in't Vereenigde Nederland, aen de Kaisaren van Japan. Getrokken uit de Geschriften en Reiseaentekeninge der zelve Gesanten (Atlas Japannensis being remarkable addresses by way of Embassy from the East India Company of the United Provinces, to the Emperor of Japan, first edition: Amsterdam 1669)*. Montanus, a Calvinist preacher educated in Leiden, had proved to be a devoted opponent of any form of idolatry – firstly in his homeland and secondly in the Dutch colonies, publishing treatises and pamphlets. However he had never left Holland, so all this was based mostly on the VOC relations in addition to the ever popular myths about the situation in East Asia going back to Marco Polo. Although the *Atlas Japannensis* focused solely on the religions of Japan, his conclusions could be applied to the rest of the region. Generally he did not attempt to represent the oriental deities, cults and temples faithfully, which were probably unavailable to him, but instead he referred to the more general impression made by the gods of the East Indies.⁸⁾ We may argue that he would purposely select the most shocking and controversial aspects of Asian religiousness for the European audience. In the *Atlas Japannensis*, Montanus presented the Japanese and their peculiar rituals, worshiping monkeys (perhaps the temple of Hanuman) or great idols, often richly painted or covered with gold (Fig. 4–7). The statue of Buddha (*Daibutsu*) in Nara evoked particularly great attention among the VOC representatives who had seen it on their way to the shogun's court in Edo as a part of their yearly visits (*hofreis*). The graphics representing such topics constituted a major part of the illustrations in the *Atlas*, reflecting Montanus' interests and his search for sensation. The book was extremely popular and to a large extent shaped the stereotype of Asian paganism. It was translated into English (1670), German (1669 and 1670) and French (1680). Moreover

⁸⁾ Lach&Van Kley (1998:1873–1877), Hesselink (2002:102, 104–105), Curvelo (2003: 148–149).

it entered an exclusive series of scientific compilations about the New World issued by Jacob van Meurs.⁹⁾

However even the diabolic deities of the East could be transformed into a form of exotic ornament. In 1665 Johan Nieuhof, a traveler from Amsterdam, published *Die Gesantschaft der Ost-Indischen Gesellschaft in der Vereinigten Niederländern an der tartarischen Cham und nunmehr auch sinischen Keiser* (*An embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces, to the Grand Tartar Cham, emperor of China*, Amsterdam 1666), which was his description of the VOC embassy to China made between 1655–1657. The book was also published by van Meurs and translated into French (1665), German (1666), Latin 1668) and English (John Ogilby, 1669). Its great value lies in the 150 detailed and realistic illustrations of the Chinese people and their country such as ports, cities, temples, pagodas and other important monuments (including the Porcelain Tower of Nanking). Nieuhof also addressed the issue of the Chinese religion and, though it was not his main interest, he provided a few illustrations presenting the lamas, monks and other priests (*Paapen*) of the local cults, as well as the deities and idols worshiped by them (Fig. 8–9). Again they were treated as representatives of one, pagan group, although the author was aware that they represented different “sects”.

Thanks to such illustrations it was possible to accurately present Asian costumes and physiognomy in a way never available before. Combined with the great popularity of the book this led to the formation of the *chinoiserie* fashion in the following decades and the 18th c., influencing many areas of design, crafts and artistic production. In the visual arts, Asians were brought to the role of an ornament, a staffage giving the scene an exotic, oriental character. So there was no question of even the slightest attempt to cast the characteristics of dress, physiognomy, or other characteristics of the nation. This problem also applied to images of other nations, though they were not so popular in Europe, as the Chinese.¹⁰⁾ Nieuhof’s prints were reused by, among others, Jan van Kessel in his allegory of Asia which was part of the four continents series, painted in 1666, currently exhibited in Munich (Fig. 10). Van Kessel was inspired by the golden deity described by van Nieuhof as *Niniso*, the idol of lust. Moreover smaller figures can be seen in the foreground, together with other objects creating the image of cosmopolite Jerusalem set between the East and West.

⁹⁾ Curvelo (2003:149).

¹⁰⁾ Falkenburg (1987); Łakomska (2008:19); Zasławska (2009:84).

Although the main reason for the Dutch presence in East Asia was trade, it also had an enormous meaning on the level of culture with the relations between the Christians and the so-called “pagans” (and the representations of them) being an important element. The 17th c. texts and artworks reflect the confusion of European explorers and scholars when it came to describing and understanding the various “sects”. Nevertheless, the Asians had similar problems with discerning the Catholics and the Protestants. It is no secret that the early intercultural relations in the Dutch East Indies are dominated by negative opinions, especially among orthodox Calvinists. In the course of time they, however, ceased covered up by the *chinoiserie* fashion and stylised representation of exotic Asians.

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Fig. 1. *Pagoda and a mosque*, illustration from: Jan Huygen van Linschoten, *Itinerario*, Amsterdam 1596



Fig. 2. *Brahmin's wife throwing herself into the fire*, illustration from: Jan Huygen van Linschoten, *Itinerario*, Amsterdam 1596



Fig. 3. *Pagan ritual*, illustration from: Arnoldus Montanus, *Gedenkwaerdige Gesantschappen...*, Amsterdam 1669

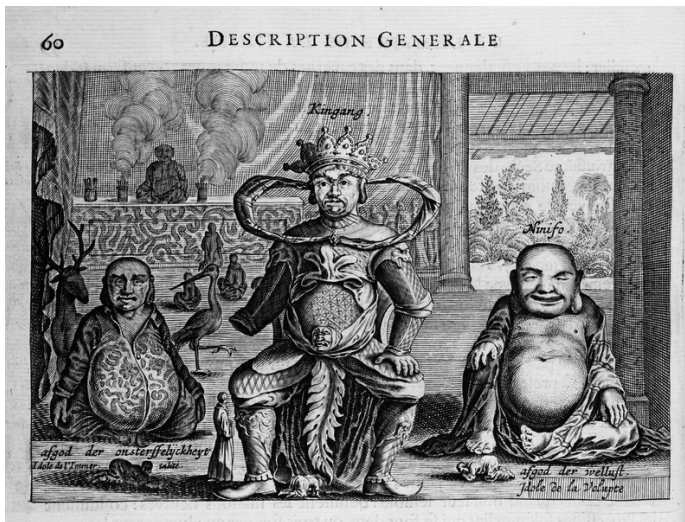


Fig. 4. *Chinese idols*, illustration from the French edition of Johan Nieuwhof's *An embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces, to the Grand Tartar Cham, emperor of China*, Paris 1665



Fig. 5. Jan van Kessel I, *Allegory of Asia*, Alte Pinakothek Munich, 1666