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TIME SIGNATURE IN *NAMBAN*¹ LACQUERWARE: Tangible Forms of Storing Remembrance²

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Introductory note

In homage to Maria Helena Mendes Pinto

One can begin by questioning how research on *Namban* objects goes beyond the mere collection of data and enhances the recollection of memorable events shared with other persons. In this text, written to render homage to and to acknowledge the work of Maria Helena Mendes Pinto, I will concentrate on a set of individual values and experiences that comes to my mind by recalling my teacher. Because facts are supposed to be static and memories are dynamic,³ I will develop my thoughts taking into account the inherent subjectivity of the theme.

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1 Scholars are not in agreement about the way the *kanjis* (南蛮) are converted into Roman characters. The Hepburn System is a commonly used form of Romanization of the Japanese language based on Japanese phonetics, which resulted in *Namban* being written with an “n” preceding the “b”. However, if the sound of the character is respected, according to the basic grammatical rules of some European languages, such as Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, English, etc., an “n” preceding a “b” is considered to be a basic misspelling. Instead, “m” preceding “b” is the right grammatical rule. In fact, *Namban* has been written in several ways over the ages. For instance, in the embryonic Romanized system that emerged with Catholic missionaries during the sixteenth century, the word is written as *naban* or *nabão*, as in the 1946 edition of the manuscript entitled, “Il Ceremoniale per I Missionari del Giappone” (Rome, Edizione di Storia e Letteratura). Moreover, Oliver Impey, Maria Helena Mendes Pinto and other members of Fenollosa’s circle respect both Japanese phonetics and the aforementioned grammatical rules, spelling *Namban* with an “m”. For all these reasons, I have opted to write *Namban* following the traditional current adopted by the above-mentioned scholars.

2 Paper presented at the 11th International Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies (EAJS) on the theme, *Time and Memory*, at the Department of East Asian Studies of the University of Vienna, Austria, August-September 2005, with the exception of the introductory note in homage to Maria Helena Mendes Pinto.

3 Golden stated, “(...) History is dead whereas memory is alive. History is perceived to be “factual” and thus more correct than memory, which is a malleable perception of the past.” “Where does Memory Reside” (p. 272), Charles Golden, “Where does Memory Reside, and why isn’t it History?”, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 107, n° 2, Berkeley, the American Anthropological Association, University of California Press, 2005, pp. 270-274.

The study of *Namban* art started with *Fenollosa, and His Circle*.⁴ Fenollosa, went to Japan on the invitation of Edward Morse with the mission of doing an inventory and taxonomy of Japanese masterpieces.⁵ In the aforementioned book, Brenda, Fenollosa's daughter stated:

“Father had been knighted by the Emperor of Japan for his mission to Europe”.⁶

I wonder what kind of mission Fenollosa realised in Europe? After proceeding to classify Japanese masterpieces, one could wonder, what were the next steps for the followers of the group?⁷ Maria Helena inherited her part of *Fenollosa's Circle*, and followed the steps and currents that flourished at the time of Oliver Impey.⁸

This homage attempts to set out: first, the ways in which Maria Helena Mendes Pinto broke new ground and contributed to the study of *Namban* collections in Portugal; and second, to portray my personal experience as a young scholar under Maria Helena.

I. Contribution for the study of *Namban* art in Portugal

With a sense of purpose, Maria Helena initiated an inventory of masterpieces from religious institutions and became the leading specialist on *Namban* art in Portugal. This section intends to highlight the trajectory traced by Maria Helena in accomplishing her task. She developed her research as Curator at the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga* [National Museum of Ancient

4 Van Wyck Brooks, *Fenollosa and His Circle*, New York, E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1962.

5 Brooks stated, “It was Norton who, presently, recommended Fenollosa to Edward S. Morse, and Morse arranged to send him to Japan at a time when the University of Tokyo opened its doors to foreign instruction, obliging students to learn English in advance.” *Fenollosa and His Circle*, p. 3. Brooks pointed out that, “Morse was the magnet that attracted to Japan not only Fenollosa but Percival Lowell (...).” *Fenollosa and His Circle*, p. 10. Later, Brooks revealed Fenollosa's goal in Japan, “Fenollosa was entrusted with the task of registering the art treasures of the country.” *Fenollosa and His Circle*, p. 27.

6 *Fenollosa and His Circle*, p. 58.

7 Fenollosa's circle maintained privileged links with Okakura Tenshin's Circle. For further information on the subject see, Victoria Weston, *Japanese Painting and National Identity: Okakura Tenshin and His Circle*, Ann Arbor, Center for Japanese Studies of the University of Michigan, 2004.

8 I would especially like to extend this homage to Dr. Oliver Impey, who I greatly admired and with whom I exchanged views and information while I was (as presently) pursuing my research at the Oxford Brookes University (UK). It was with deep regret that I received a letter from Ms. Joyce Seaman of the Department of Eastern Art at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, informing me that Oliver Impey had passed away in September 2005.

Art, in Lisbon]. It is necessary to keep in mind that part of the collection of the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga* came from the legacy that entered the State's coffers from royal collections and religious institutions. After the decree promulgated in 1834 ordering the closure of religious institutions, apart from the belongings remitted to the Bishops, the majority of items were incorporated into the public treasury.⁹ This secularised legacy was included in the collections of the *Museu Real de Belas Artes* and, then became part of the collection of the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga*. Until 1928, objects proceeding from religious houses continued to be incorporated into the collections of the museum and some of the religious houses were converted into hospitals.¹⁰

Another inventory campaign took place in the *Misericórdias*,

“In 1962, in the newly-created Ministry of Health and Welfare, by means of the creation of an artistic brigade consisting of volunteers, the Minister, Dr. Henrique Martins de Carvalho, sought to preserve and assist in the maintenance of a diverse set of paintings, buildings, silverware, sculptures, etc., some of which were of a dubious quality while others were absolute gems, which comprised the patrimony of numerous establishments or were simply under the tutelage of the Ministry.”¹¹

The results of the inventory were published in the book *As Misericórdias do Algarve* written together with her husband, Victor Mendes Pinto. During the 1970s Maria Helena became responsible for the “Furniture Section” of the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga*, in which Oriental collections were included. Subsequently, she was the main authority in charge of regrouping, redirecting, and establishing new taxonomies for several collections, namely the *Namban*

9 For further information see the catalogue published by the Secretaria de Estado da Cultura, *Artes Decorativa Portuguesas no Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga Séculos XV/XVIII*, Lisbon, Secretaria de Estado da Cultura, 1979, where Mendes Pinto stated, “As is well-known, while ordering the closure of religious institutions the decree of 1834 sent their properties to the public treasury, except for the liturgical artefacts that were to be handed over to the Bishops of the dioceses where the convents were located.” And Mendes Pinto continued, “This law of extinction was applied only to male brotherhoods, as nuns were allowed to group together in certain monasteries that would be closed only much later and after the last nun had died.” *Artes Decorativa Portuguesas*, s.n.

10 The author stated, “despite the setbacks, the pieces continued to enter the collections of the Museum, the last incorporations dating from 1924, 1927 and 1928, respectively, from the convent of the hospital of the same name and the former House of the Society of Jesus, where St. Joseph's Hospital is located today. These incorporations were particularly important in the years immediately after the proclamation of the Republic, and they were joined by some pieces from the Royal Palaces.” *Artes Decorativa Portuguesas no Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga*, s.n.

11 Maria Helena Mendes Pinto and Victor Mendes Pinto, *As Misericórdias do Algarve*, Lisboa, Ministério da Saúde e Assistência, 1968, p. 7.

ones.¹² She projected her views by defining classifications, representations, constitutions, and displacements in the construction of *visual narratives*¹³ on display.

Maria Helena is an eclectic person, who has a great ability to master extensive subject-matter. Instead of restricting herself exclusively to a single field, she dominates numerous areas. In fact, her research embraces a variety of items including furniture, tapestries, sculptures, gold and silver artefacts, and a paraphernalia of multi-material objects deriving from diverse geographical settings.

II. Personal experience as a young scholar

My first encounter with Maria Helena Mendes Pinto took place in 1992, when she visited the Furniture Conservation Studio at the *José de Figueiredo Institute*,¹⁴ where I was restoring a piece of lacquerware. At that moment, I had just returned from Italy where I had completed my studies on Conservation and Restoration of Wood¹⁵ and I was lecturing at the *Escola Superior de Conservação e Restauro*, in Lisbon. Such an apparently casual meeting had a special significance for me – her publications on Portuguese Furniture were a reference for my lectures.

A year later (between 1993-96) we started meeting regularly due to the research that I was carrying out as a holder of a scholarship given by the *Fundação Oriente*, on the subject of *Namban Lacquerware: Techniques, Materials and Conservation*. Maria Helena Mendes Pinto supervised my research together with Professor João M. Peixoto Cabral.¹⁶ Three articles resulted from this research, one of them written together with the supervisors.¹⁷ An event that portrays her open mindedness took place at the beginning of the research.

12 Some comments and reflections were based on the interview conducted in September 2003 at the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga* with Maria Helena Mendes Pinto.

13 Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 102.

14 The Institute is nowadays called the Instituto Português de Conservação e Restauro (IPCR).

15 *Course of Conservation and Restoration of Wood* at the Istituto per l'Arte e il Restauro, Florence, Italy, 1989-91.

16 Professor Peixoto Cabral was Director of the Instituto José de Figueiredo in 1992/93 and affiliated with the Instituto Superior Técnico (Technical University of Lisbon) and the Instituto Tecnológico e Nuclear. He supervised the analytical part of the research.

17 Leonor Leiria, Maria Helena Mendes Pinto and João M. Peixoto Cabral, "Contribuição para o Estudo de Polvorinho Namban do Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga" (*A contribution for the study of the gunpowder flask from the Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon*), *Cadernos de Conservação e Restauro* of the Portuguese National Conservation and Restoration Institute, n° 3, Lisbon, Portugal, 2004, pp. 50-55.

Maria Helena found the comments that I had written about her book in my desk and started reading them out aloud. I was rather embarrassed about this incident, as I had made some amendments to the book but, to my astonishment, Maria Helena seemed very amused with the situation and she started laughing and questioning me about the sources of my observations.

Maria Helena always found time in her busy schedule to receive me in her office and to critically review my trimester reports on the ongoing research. Then, she carefully compiled them in a document folder labelled with my name.

During the learning process, instead of having to listen to long statements prepared by lecturers, Maria Helena encouraged me to find things out for myself and to exhaustively record data and reflections, in order to then compare them with further written sources and visual material. She always listened to me attentively and showed great respect for a younger scholar. She often dropped some clues that guided me on how to develop a thought or where to find some complementary information. Sometimes, I accepted her opinion with resignation, other times with rebellion. In one situation or another, with the excuse of researching *Namban* objects, a link charged with affection was created between teacher and student. In short, we were using inductive and deductive methods to achieve knowledge without being consciously aware of them.

Moreover, Maria Helena introduced a form of fieldwork in her research. She travelled abroad acquiring data *in loco* through direct observation of objects. In the same way, she also encouraged me to study objects *in loco*, which resulted in two journeys; one in Portugal visiting convents, monasteries, churches, national, municipal and private museums or objects in possession of private owners. The other journey made me cross frontiers and travel to Japan. This trip took place between 1995-96, when I did an apprenticeship¹⁸ on the conservation of *Namban* lacquerware at the Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Properties.¹⁹ Such journeys were a way of complementing the inventory that Maria Helena began, and of meeting other custodians of objects and individuals who were involved in research on the similarities and peculiarities of *Namban* items. It also made me understand that objects

18 The apprenticeship in Japan benefited from the financial support of the Fundação Oriente and the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

19 The apprenticeship was supervised by Mr. Nakasato, Toshikatsu and Mr. Kato, Hiroshi. Mr. Nakasato, Toshikatsu was the Head of the Wood and *Urushi* Department at the above-mentioned Institute and is presently retired. Mr. Kato, Hiroshi was in the Tokyo National Museum and is presently the Head of the Restoration Technique Research Department in the Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Properties (*Tōkyō Kokuritsu Bunkasai kenkyū-sho*). Ms. Haruna, Arai despite not being my *official* supervisor also guided me during the apprenticeship.

are not isolated items as they may appear in displays but are instead mediators of different modes of interaction between persons in a specific temporal context.

To conclude this brief overview, I wonder what was achieved in this learning process. If objects inevitably fade over time, perpetuation may perhaps be achieved by taking actions in continuity. In other words, the transmission of values and valuables across generations is achieved through networks of affection that link persons of different ages and distinct experiences. The emphasis is not only placed on the objects themselves, but instead, on the diversity of relationships and imparting experiences that can be constructed through objects as vehicles of enhancing memories.

Lastly, I feel a deep sense of gratitude to Maria Helena Mendes Pinto and I am honoured to have been her student.

Introduction

“Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”²⁰

I shall begin by addressing the question, how far and to what extent do objects impress the mind by leaving traces across generations? In this paper, aspects concerning time and memory are examined in terms of conservation and transmission of memories. This paper will be developed in three main ways: firstly, the topic *Temporal Ir/reversibility of Events and Objects* expounds upon the theme of how different perceptions of time in Europe and in Japan may influence methods of conservation of what is inevitably ephemeral by nature. Secondly, *In Search of Memory Traces: Transport of Relics* seeks to give an overview of *Namban* chests as memorial marks. Thirdly, this article provides an overview of the role of *Namban* objects in enacting memories and examines the ways in which *Namban* objects are exhibited both in religious and secular settings.

Fragmented accounts from fieldwork diaries cover the construction of ethnography on *Namban* lacquerware compiled during three different moments: the first, in Japan between 1995-96 at the *Lacquer Conservation Studio of the Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Properties*, which was an opportunity to collect data about the inherent cultural relativism in conser-

²⁰ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London, Modern Classics, Penguin Books, 2000 (1st ed. 1949), p. 37.

vation practices; the second, during fieldwork undertaken between January-December 2004 in the Vatican, Italy and Spain. Lastly, “in between” these two periods, where I visited museums, conservation studios and monasteries in Portugal and in Spain with the intention of collecting more information.

This subject is illustrated with examples of *Namban* art that represent the encounter between people, the production of objects and thoughts, the sharing of common experiences between Europeans and Japanese during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.

1. Temporal ir/reversibility of events and ageing objects

I shall begin by questioning how objects from the past endure over time as long notes reverberating in collective memory? Like in music, preservation is located in the sequence of the composition, and changes are predicted in the re-interpretation of each performance. When I chose the term *Time Signature* for the title of this paper, a parallelism was established between objects that by their physical nature are ephemeral and music, which, notwithstanding the absence of a physical form, is re-interpreted in each performance.

Time is the axis of change and of the transformation of persons, events, and objects. One can now examine how different temporal experiences influence the options of different methodologies of transmission.²¹ Physicists observe the concept of time from a different analytical view as compared to anthropologists. The former regard time as a physical principle belonging to the external world and the latter feel that there is also an internal perception of time in the mind and in human lifestyles. Eddington’s metaphor of *The Arrow of Time* followed by Sir Karl Popper’s studies provide some useful clues to develop the influence that different conceptions of time have in the diversity of methodologies of conservation and transmission of tangible valuables.²² Therefore, based on the concept of irreversibility and reversibility of

21 Pilgrim’s study on the subjective interpretation of the kanji “Ma” considers the Japanese notion of time to be connected with the notion of space, which differs considerably from the European concept of time that distinguishes both concepts. Although there is no common notion of time in Europe, for instance in Portuguese, the word for time is the same as the one used for weather, which differs considerably from the English conception of time that does not connect the concept of time with concept of weather. Richard B. Pilgrim, *Intervals (Ma) in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan*, pp. 55-80 in Wei-Hsun Fun and Steve Heine, eds. *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, New York, State University of New York Press. Other sources on the subject of time are: Joy Hendry and Jonathan Webber, eds., *Interpreting Japanese Society*, London, Routledge, 1998 as well as Alfred Gell, *The Anthropology of Time*, Oxford, Berg, 1992.

22 Karl Popper developed his view in the following texts, “Time’s Arrow and Entropy” *Nature* 207, London, MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1965, pp. 233-234; as well as in “The Arrow of Time” *Nature* 178, London, MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1965, p. 538.

processes in time, intergenerational transmission of valuables can be regarded in a twofold manner:

First, a group that recognizes the irreversibility of events and the ageing of objects in time and, therefore consider them to be unique and irreplaceable, accepting their limited life-span. If the concept of time is perceived in such a way, the decay of the physical nature of objects is an inevitable stage of the ageing process. In this case, memories are extended in time through strategies of transmission comprising two figures: first, a deposit that encloses tangible valuables. Second, guardians of the deposit, who have the task of preserving and transmitting belongings from the deposit through generations and who also have the ability to reform the deposit when an object or a thought is on the verge of becoming obsolete and needs to be upgraded.²³ Paradoxically, on the one hand a reform is an indication of progression in what is supposed to be stable, while, on the other hand, mechanisms of change are a way to prevent a tangible valuable that comes from the past from becoming obsolete. I wonder how the deposit can be reformed, transformed and at the same time maintain its authenticity?

Secondly, when a group considers the reversibility of events and of ageing on objects in a cyclic notion of time. Metaphorically, *the arrow of time* is curved with the head and tail united. In such cases, it is generally believed that everything can be repeated in regular practices, such as rituals or in production of *simulacra* in an attempt to fix objects in an unchanged form. In that case, the object in its materiality is considered irrelevant, and a replacement with a similar one is commonly practiced. We may conjecture, if the original model has the capacity to stimulate remembrance in the minds of human beings, in the case of *simulacra*,²⁴ that it was remembrance that motivated their manufacture. Consequently, the *simulacra* are not historical objects because they are not able to represent the events of the past attributed to them. Instead, *simulacra* can generate revivalisms with the attempt to create permanent objects of memory. Despite the aforementioned reasons, *simulacra* have been widely adopted in museums as a methodology of transmission and education. In short, the predicament of the perpetuation

23 Lévi-Strauss provides an example to extend the memory of tangible valuables giving the example of archives by stating, "Our past would not disappear if we lost our archives: it would be deprived of what one is inclined to call its diachronic flavour. It would exist as a past but preserved in nothing but contemporary or recent books, institutions, or even a situation. So it too would be exhibited in synchrony." Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London, Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1966 (1st ed. 1962), p. 242.

24 The term *simulacrum* is used in this article to refer to an object that is produced in order to substitute an original one. However, it can also allude to objects that are reproduced without having an original.

of physical things in time resides in the incapacity to *join the beginning to the end*²⁵ of the arrow of time and so, the system is idealized.

Furthermore, in an academic overstatement, Lévi-Strauss distinguished between cold and hot societies, by defining cold societies as living in accordance with the cyclical notion of time, where there is no historical perception, and where myths play the role of explaining a past.²⁶ In contrast, hot societies are oriented in a linear notion of time towards a dynamic way of living. It is important to highlight that such distinctions are not geographically demarcated between Europe and Japan, because I believe that fast and slow moving changes co-exist within a society. To cite an example, religious groups irrespective of whether they are Christian, Buddhist or Shintō tend to live in slow moving changes in contrast with some secular groups. Consequently, we may infer that both static and dynamic processes interplay within a society alongside a simultaneous strategy adopted by each group and defined by the role played by each of them within the community.

In fact, collective memory is a powerful driving force for the perpetuation of rituals and plays an active role in the individual construction of memory acquired in the form of habits, customs and traditions. Consequently, whoever controls patterns of memory, also controls contemporary representations of the past, and herein lies the power of images.

After this quick glance at mechanisms of time and memory in order to lay the groundwork for our main topic, two questions may still be formulated: first, how do objects, such as *Namban* lacquerware, play a role as mediators of memories? Secondly, can objects also be mediators of forgotten or, forgotten is drawn just by absence? This subject is focused in the next topic.

2. In search of memory traces: transport of relics

According to Popper,

“(...)electrons have no memory. Nor, for all we know, have atoms.(...)”.
So, “Biological organisms may be said to have memory.”²⁷

Fresh visual memories gradually fade away with time, lose clarity and become discoloured. Von Leyden established a comparison between retrieval and portraits, where in both cases, confabulation gains its space,

25 Rudolf Arnheim, *To the Rescue of Art: Twenty Six Essays*, Berkeley, Oxford, University of California Press, 1992.

26 *The Savage Mind*, London, p. 234. For further information on myths also see, Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, London and New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987.

27 Karl Popper, *Knowledge and the Body-Mind Problem: In Defence of Interaction*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000 (1st ed. 1994), p. 131.

“A recollection is far from being a reflection or replica of something (...) a recollection is at best more like a picture or portrait (...) Even a portrait might be either very sketchy, or largely imaginary (...).”²⁸

If on the one hand, human interaction with objects activates the process of thinking, learning, reflecting and reasoning, on the other hand, human beings leave traces on the physical nature of objects when they interact with them. One can focus upon a clear point here, in understanding temporal traces present in objects and traces that objects left on the human mind. Frequently, such temporal marks present in objects intensify human emotional response and confabulation fills the gaps of those tangible and intangible features that cannot be recalled anymore.

Let us begin by going back in time when Christian missionaries introduced images as agents, assigned with iconographic meanings, for the propagation of the faith in Japan during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such images were conceived in a pre-elaborated scheme intended to create patterns of memory traces through the construction of archetypes,²⁹ similar to the techniques described by Yates in “*The Art of Memory*”.³⁰ The way archetypal imagery was received by the Japanese depended on the capacity of persuasion of the European missionaries. However, the early encounter between Europeans and Japanese lasted about one century, beginning in 1543 with the arrival of the Portuguese and, ending in 1639, the year the country was closed to foreigners (*Sakoku-Jidai*). A production of hybrid objects, with features from different ethnic groups, was the outcome of this early encounter between Europeans and Japanese. Only a few of these objects have survived to present days. After the banishment and persecution of the brotherhood with anti-Christian edicts issued in July 1587 promulgated by the Shōgun *Hideyoshi*, the majority of objects were destroyed in iconoclastic practices.

What is the meaning of *Namban*? This apparently simple question gave rise to a diverse range of answers given by scholars and specialists in this area during my fieldwork.³¹ A threefold trend can be briefly summarized

28 Wolfgang Von Leyden, *Remembering: A Philosophic Problem*, New York, Philosophical Library, Inc., 1961, p. 75.

29 Jung’s notion of archetypes is regarded as *primordial images* that formed a collective unconscious. In his view, archetypes enhance emotional responses in human beings that can be predicted beforehand. However, he affirmed that collective representations, “(...) are no longer contents of the unconscious, but have already been changed into conscious formulae taught according to tradition.” Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, London, Routledge, 1990 (1st ed. 1959), p. 5.

30 Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.

31 I shall leave the statements anonymous for ethical reasons. However, I would like to thank everyone who, in one way or another, received me and supported me during my fieldwork.

as follows: firstly, *Namban* is viewed as the product of interaction between Portuguese, Spanish and Italians with Japanese during the early period. Secondly, it goes further in time by including the cross-cultural encounter with *Komon-jin*, the name given by the Japanese to the English and Dutch. Thirdly, there is the broadest view of the term *Namban* embracing inter-continental encounters with Japan over time. One of the aims of this fieldwork was to examine *Namban* lacquerware in contemporary contexts, particularly objects that were not transferred to museums and are kept in convents and monasteries, and to attempt to understand what kind of narratives are constructed in religious contexts and what kind of changes can be perceived once transferred from religious settings to temporal ones. First of all, let us remember the words of Derrida,

“Never compare secularisation to sacredness” and the reason given by him is that “(...) secularisation means the inheritance of a theological memory.”³²

During archival research, I came across a letter written by Father Gabriel Matos from the Nagasaki harbour in Japan dated 19 October 1613, which describes the circumstances in which three Christians were burned inside a house and their human remains were encased in coffins already prepared for that purpose,³³

“In less than an hour, the three Christian noblemen were arrested and there were already people in front and behind the house. There was no space for such agglomeration, because throughout the night [people] mingled together from diverse parts, quitting places and entire villages (...) On the arrival of the first Christian, (...), who was Mondo Adrião, whose hands were untied and were immediately tied to a stake of the house as described, when the Christians saw that one of them was already adored as a saint while alive, they sought to take possession of some relic from him (...) they came close to canhemon, and to suqeyemon, and almost nothing was left of the dress they wore, to such a degree that a Christian felt obliged to take his mantle from his shoulders and throw it to cover one of

32 Paul Patton and Terry Smith, eds., *Jacques Derrida Deconstruction Engaged*, The Sidney Seminars, Sidney, Power Publications, 2001 (1st ed. 1968), p. 117.

33 Each individual or group may fill chests or other containers with a plethora of things. This subject was developed in my previous article entitled, “*Namban* Art: Packing and Transportation”, *Bulletin of Portuguese/Japanese Studies*, Centro de História de Além-Mar, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, vol. 5, 2002, pp. 49-65.



Fig. 1 – Namban Chest with relics of St. Valerio
Madrid, Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales
Patrimonio Nacional
Madrid
Photo: by the author



Fig. 2 – Relics of St. Valerio
Madrid, Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales
Patrimonio Nacional
Madrid
Photo: by the author

them but, [the mantle] had not yet fallen and come into contact with his body, when they grasped it immediately and tore it to pieces, taking them away for relics (...) And when the Christians saw that they were dead, some for the deep desire to bring relics [home], others to encase them quickly in the coffins that they had already prepared and smoothed to encase such rich treasures, and as the fire was still burning intensely, spreading [ashes] in all directions, they assailed the saints' bodies, and took them away, and adored them with great reverence. Some [of them] who could take relics from the stake where they had been tied, quickly put them inside the coffins. There was nothing left, not a stick nor a burning coal, neither were ashes left. (...) many found it hard to return [home] with their hands and feet burned; their bodies were deposited in Arima until the twelfth but, soon after they will be carried to Nangasaqui for the place of reverence that such Christian soldiers deserve."³⁴

The scene shows that missionaries enhanced collective hysteria³⁵ to proselytise. In order to connect reports of events from the seventeenth century with objects from the same period that survived to our days, I went to the *Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales*, in Spain. Among other typologies of Namban lacquerware on display on the altar of the reliquary room, there

34 "(...) Não auia hora q os tres nobres Chrãos erão presos, quando já diante E de tras da casa onde estauão, estaua agente apinhada de tal modo que não cabia, E como toda a noite se ajuntarão de diversas partes desemparando lugares E villas inteiras (...)." "Em chegando o prim.º q (...) foi Mondo Adrião, ao qual desatarão as mãos logo, Eatarão a hũ esteio da casa q descrevemos, vendo os Chrãos que já hum daquelles q Em vida adoraũo como sancto lhes escapara das mãos, sem delle tomaré alguã reliquia, (...). E assi chegarão se a canhemon, E a Suqeyemon, E dos vestidos q leuauão, quasi nada lhe deixarão, tanto que se deu p obrigado hũ Chrão atirar sua capa dos hombros pra. Cubrir hũ delles, mas nem esta parou, porq Em lhe tocando no corpo, logo a tomarão, E fizerão Empedaços, leuando os por reliquias" (...) vendo os Chrãos q todos já erão mortos, hũs polo desejo q tinham de alguã reliquia, outros pera meter depressa Em os caixões que tinham aparelhados aquelles ricos tesouros, estando ainda o fogo ardendo de romaria por todas as partes arremeterão aos santos corpos, E os tirarão fora, E adorarão com grande reverencia; levando os q puderão alguãs reliquias, dos esteos onde forão atados não há q falar, nẽ pao, nẽ tissão nẽ cinza ainda deixarão, tanto era o desejo q tinha cada hũ de levar alguã reliquia pera sua casa, E a m.tos custou irê cõ as mãos ou pes queimados; seus corpos ate odia dose estão depositados Em Arima, mas logo se trarão a este Nangasaqui onde serão collocados cõ areverencia q taes soldados de Xpo. se deve." Father gabriel matos. Por comissão do P.e Prouincial d. V. Pe gabriel de matos, De Nangasaqui porto de Japão 19. de Outubro de 1613, pera se ler em Manila, Real Academia de la Historia (RAH), Cortes 565-9/2665, fl. 99f.-100f.

35 Eidelberg called these phenomena mass hysteria and stated, "The behaviour of a large group of people (...) frequently characterized by irrational actions and fears that interfere with the functions of the whole group." Ludwig Eidelberg, ed. *Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis*, New York and London, The Free Press and Collier-MacMillan Limited, 1968, p. 237.

is a *Namban* chest containing the relics of Saint Valerio.³⁶ Flowers are spread inside the chest and the relics are wrapped in white cloth. A question may be raised, what power resides in this consecrated item? In fact, it was not only the relics that were considered sacred, but also related belongings were contaminated by sacredness by merely being kept in contact with them. For instance, the cloth that wrapped a saint or that was worn by him or her was also considered sacred. In the chapter entitled *Death and Memorial Celebrations* Hendry observed that in Japanese memorial rites relatives hand out an envelope of acknowledgement,

“(...) imprinted with a representation of a small piece of abalone.”³⁷

Similarly, tiny pieces of abalone are inlaid and spread on the surface of *Namban* chests. Despite their aesthetic value, namely given by the iridescence of mother-of-pearl, the abalone also has the meaning of avoiding pollution from death. Black lacquer covering the background of the surface and half wheels represented in the bands that separate decorative fields of the chest are characteristic for *memorial gifts*.³⁸ Such surfaces contrast with the interior of the *Namban* chests commonly covered with red lacquer, namely with a mixture of sulphur, mercury and lacquer – the same red dust frequently used to cover dead bodies, or with the inside of the lid decorated, in order to be displayed open.

Furthermore, exhibiting such devotional objects in monasteries and convents was in conformity to the liturgical calendar,³⁹ where each day corresponds to the cult of at least one saint. Sanz and Gschwend quoted Father Carrillo’s accounts from 1616 providing us with information on the memorial day of this specific saint, now encased on a *Namban* chest,

“(...) the relics were exhibited to the public each 29th of January for the people to see and worship his remains (...)”⁴⁰ and further

36 According to Sanz, responsible for the collections of the Descalzas Reales, the relics were not from the same period as the chest. They were encased in the chest later. According to Mendes Pinto these chests were also brought for the purpose of encasing relics. In this case, what matters is how nuns and believers interacted and created devotional links through these objects.

37 Joy Hendry, *Understanding Japanese Society*, London, New York and Sidney, Croom Helm, 1987, p. 132.

38 *Ibidem*, p. 132.

39 The same chest was on display with the lid closed, without relics or any explanation of the content and related ceremony, in a temporary exhibition called *Exotica*, the Discoveries and Renaissance Kunstkammer Collections, at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, in Lisbon from 17 October 2001 to 6 January 2002.

40 “Según cuenta el Padre Carrillo, esta reliquia se exponía al público cada 29 de enero, día de la festividad de este santo, para que el pueblo pudiera ver y adorar sus restos (...)”, Ana Sanz and

explained, "(...) in these four days the window is opened from where the nuns partake a holy communion (...), for the public to see and enjoy this treasure."⁴¹

However, such chests did not encase the relics *in perpetuum rei memoriam* but just during the moment where the corpses of Christian soldiers travelled beyond the transoceanic routes from Japan to Europe.⁴² Once relics pulverized they ran the danger of being considered impure.⁴³ Douglas clearly portrays this thought by stating,

"But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt. In the end all identity is gone (...) the thought that the air is full of the dust of corpses of bygone races has no power to move. Where there is no differentiation there is no defilement."⁴⁴

Without physical evidence, memory and faith also faded away and the secular world does not value relics in the way they were valued by Catholics during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁵ In fact, Brooks stated when he portrayed Charles Godfrey Leland,

"He found that relics of saints sometimes lost value. He once saw a large silver casket for sale, stuffed full of the remains of the holiest saints, together with certificates of their authenticity, a mass of old bones, nails, rags with blood and dried-up eyes, offered for the value of the silver in the casket, the relics being thrown in."⁴⁶

Jordan Gschwend, "Via Orientalis: Objetos de Lejano Oriente en el Monasterio de las descalzas Reales" *Reales Sitios*, Madrid, Revista del Patrimonio Nacional, n° 138, Year 35, 1998, pp. 25-39, p. 29.

41 "Como se ve en los dias que se muestran las reliquias, que son (...) el dia de San Valerio (...). En estos quatro dias se abre la ventanilla por donde las monjas comulgan, (...) para que el pueblo vea y goze de aquel tesoro." *Ibidem*, pp. 29 and 37.

42 Yet, concerning the concept of time Van Gennep distinguished between religious and secular time and argued that sacred time is oriented in role-reversal. I wonder if transoceanic journeys and the respective mourning belong to a reversal notion of time and in such a case, the direction of the arrow is inverted. For further information see Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London, Routledge, 1960.

43 Moreover, Douglas suggested that fading relics encompass a gradual dissipation of individual identity. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Boston and Henley, Art Paperbacks, 1966.

44 *Ibidem*, p. 160.

45 A conservationist once told me about a case in which dust belonging to the bygone relic was thrown away in a conservation studio, "(...) only the teeth were kept because they were of a durable material".

46 *Fenollosa and His Circle*, p. 245.

Generally, human relics have a limited life-span; while lacquer chests, even though sensitive to agents of deterioration, were produced in durable materials. Paradoxically, what once was the treasure in the form of relics encased into *Namban* chests faded into dust; and what became the inalienable item, transferred to and displayed in museums is the container – the respective empty travel chest. In this light, *Namban* chests, once *mementos* used to keep the remembrance of persons and events, became not only objects displaying emptiness but clearly considered works of art *per se*. These chests could be turned into memorials in comparison to other similar Buddhist practices in Japan⁴⁷ and, in this way, maintain the meaning that they once had. For instance, Ivy described similar substitutions,

“Memorialising the dead is a way of replacing the memory of the dead person by substituting a marker or memorial (...) to unravel the connection between death, memory, and signification.”⁴⁸

If in the past relics had the value of treasures, in contemporary times they may be a source of data collection. When I spoke about this subject with Hendry, she stated that, nowadays their value is located in DNA and the potential knowledge that can be obtained by doing analyses of them.

To sum up, some objects that were once exhibited in religious contexts were transferred to secular settings.⁴⁹ The transference of objects from religious to temporal contexts encompasses a transformation or erasure of meanings that once were attached to them. Therefore, museums are exhibiting emptiness by disguising death.

Finally, in such processes, forgotten⁵⁰ instead of remembrance is highlighted. In the book published in 2004 entitled “Oblivion” Augé suggested, *The three figures of oblivion* in ritual context and named the first return, the second suspense and the third re-beginning.⁵¹ Paradoxically, how can re-

47 The term *Hotoke o kau*, which signifies the process of substitution of a *Tōba* [wooden memorial stupa] for the dead person’s body, is a common practice in several religious rituals. *Discourses of the Vanishing*, p. 152.

48 Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity Phantasm Japan*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 152.

49 Duncan has suggested that museums become sites for secular rites in an attempt to substitute what once belonged to the religious sphere, Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London, Routledge, 1995, pp. 7-8.

50 For further information on the subject see Adrian Forty and Susanne Kuchler, *The Art of Forgetting*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2003.

51 Marc Augé, *Oblivion* [Formes de l’Oubli]. (Translated from the French by Marjolijn de Jager), Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, pp. 56-57.

beginning be the last figure of oblivion? On the contrary, I argue that rituals and traditions have been maintained through substitutions, transformations, or repetitions across generations as a path towards remembrance rather than forgotten. In my view, forgotten is a necessary stage to activate mechanism of perpetuation.

Conclusions

It has been established how distinct perceptions of time influence and condition the way in which traditions are kept and objects are conserved. To sum up, the role of time in the process of perpetuation is twofold: in groups or communities who perceive events and objects to be irreplaceable in time, transmission is secured through strategies of reform and transformation of things into another form of expression. Conversely, in groups or communities that regard events and objects as replaceable in time, simulacra is one of the practices adopted.

Concerning the memory of events, an example of accounts of collective hysteria in Japan and the consequent transformation of human remains into sacred relics is given. The examples show how tangible valuables and intangible values have been reformulated over time in order to overcome their inherent ephemeral condition and how nowadays they constitute a body of memorabilia on display whether in religious or secular settings.

In conclusion, it is in the interest of all to continue to establish dialogues between Europe and Japan particularly in matters like time, memory, transmission of tangible valuables and intangible values in order to create a dialogue towards a "*tradition of tolerance*".⁵²

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Abstract

This paper attempts to establish ground for an Anthropological understanding of forms of transmission of tangible valuables between generations according to universalism versus cultural relativism dichotomy. The subject is exemplified with a specific universe of objects – *Namban* lacquerware, that are the outcome of an intercultural exchange between Europeans and Japanese during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Drawing on fieldwork experience, the aim is to understand the *modus operandi* of conservation and transmission of *Namban* objects. For that purpose, the notion of irreversibility and reversibility of events and material forms in time is developed according to Sir Karl Popper's metaphor of *the Arrow of Time*. Furthermore, a case of transformation of human bodies into objects of catholic worship is given.

Finally, the paper examine how *Namban* chests containing relics were in display in religious context and, how nowadays the same items are in display in secular settings, namely in museums.

Resumo

Este artigo pretende examinar formas de transmissão de valores entre gerações, de acordo com a dicotomia universalismo *versus* relativismo cultural numa abordagem Antropológica. Para esse efeito, o tema é exemplificado com um específico universo de objectos – manufactos *Namban* que resultam de um encontro intercultural entre Europeus e Japoneses durante os séculos XVI e XVII.

Com base no trabalho de campo pretende-se compreender o *modus operandi* da conservação e transmissão de objectos *Namban* entre gerações. Com esse objectivo, enquadra-se o tema na noção de reversibilidade e irreversibilidade de objectos e acontecimentos no tempo, de acordo com a metáfora *the Arrow of Time* desenvolvida por Sir Karl Popper. O artigo tem também a intenção de apresentar um caso de transformação de corpos humanos em objectos de culto católico, em forma de relíquias.

Finalmente, o artigo examina como é que arcas *Namban* eram expostas em contextos religiosos e como é que são exibidas hoje em dia em contextos seculares, nomeadamente em museus.

要約

この論文は貴重品が世代間でどう引き継がれるかの文化的普遍主義と相対主義による人類学的アプローチである。十六と十七世紀のヨーロッパ人と日本人との文化的交流の結果である南蛮漆器を例として紹介する。

現地調査に基づいて南蛮の品々の保存と世代間伝道を理解することがこの論文の目的である。そのために時間における出来事の可逆性と不可逆性という概念をK・ポパーの論理に従って紹介する。