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Japanese elites as seen by Jesuit Missionaries. Perceptions of social and political inequality among the elites
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1. One of the basic features of the Jesuit evangelization was the concern to understand, respect and adapt their actions to the socio-political reality of the territories where they established their missions, developing what could be called a contextual evangelization. With this method they tried, no doubt, to assure the success of their activity. In the case of Japan, for instance, one may detect the development of a strategy of evangelization according to the social inequality of Japanese society. In fact, the letters sent by Jesuits settled in Japan to Europe\(^1\), the reports prepared to provide a strengthening of missionary strategies\(^2\), and other sources for the history of the presence of the Society in Japanese soil\(^3\), show us the persistence and the adaptation of the missionary work to the reality of the extremes of society: on one hand the most ill-favoured, and on the other hand the socio-political elites in their different degrees of performance.

In fact through charity and mercy actions, the establishment of hospitals or taking care of lepers, which were characteristic of missionary work, the Jesuits attracted not only the poorest, but also gained credibility with the population. This performance assumed still more significance due to the fact that those tasks which involved blood and the dead were considered in Japanese society to be sources of impurity. This culture had evolved since the

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\(^1\) For example Cartas que os padres e irmãos da Companhia de Ieasus escreverão dos Reynos de Iapão e China aos da mesmo Companhia da India, e Europa des do anno de 1549 ate ao de 1580. Primeiro Tomo. Nellas se conta o principio, socesso, & bondade da Christandade daquellas partes, & varios costumes, & falsos rito da gentilidade. Impressas por mandado do Reverendissimo em Christo Padre dom Thetemo de Bragança. Arcebispo d’Evora, 2 tomos, Evora, Manuel de Lyra, 1598. It will be quoted as Cartas..., followed by the indication of the tomo and folio.


14th century proceeding from shintoist myths and had promoted the emergence of out-caste groups, the hinin, whose social exclusion was due to devoting themselves to activities considered impure such as criminal executions or the removal of dead animals. It was this connection to the humble and ill-favoured groups in Japanese society, the first main target of the Jesuit conversion work, that resulted in the perception of the Christian faith as the religion of the poor and of the sick. However, this image would change as the Jesuits moved on to other social groups.

The approach to the social and political elites was a fundamental strategy of the Jesuits that soon became an urgent, *sine qua non* condition to the success of the Mission in Japanese territory. In the context of the civil war, that Japan was living at the moment of the arrival of the missionaries (1549), only the protection by local authorities, allowed by the establishment of cordial diplomatic relations with the government elites, could provide the safety for free circulation and protection from the risks that the Jesuits faced daily. This precariousness occurred, on one hand, due to the absence of institutional protection, either by the Crown or by a local Portuguese community, as happened in Macao, and on the other hand, by the fact of preaching a religion that constituted an insult to local religious beliefs. It is in this context that one can explain the constant concern of the missionaries’ who were residing in the mission to describe the centers of authority and the Japanese socio-political reality in great detail. This information, which was sent to Europe and to India, enabled the preparation of new missionary strategies which were adapted to local realities, and at the same time justified the previous policies that were used in the evangelization of the area.

2. The Jesuit’s approach to the Japanese elites allowed them a full understanding of their diversity. Nevertheless, this perception occurred only after 1559, when the missionaries arrived into Miyako, capital of the empire, where the two traditional structures of authority were established: the imperial institution and the *bakufu*. It was only then that the Jesuits understood the existence of two main elites, whose social prominence derived from the duality of Japanese

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5 After the brief visit of Francis Xavier to Miyako in 1551, Gaspar Vilela SJ, accompanied by the Japanese Lourenço and Damião, were the first elements of the Society of Jesus to establish themselves in the capital. This Mission arose as a consequence of the expulsion of the missionaries from the cities of Hakata and Hirado. On this subject see Léon Bourdon, *La Compagnie de Jésus et le Japon. 1547-1570*, Paris, Centro Cultural Português, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian-Comissão Nacional para a Comemoração dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 1993, pp. 379-381.
political system, settled in both the imperial institution and the military order. It was also at this stage that the missionaries learned about the respective political role of the elites.

First of all, the missionaries understood the social prominence of courtiers, who by living in the surrounding of the imperial entity enjoyed the maximum status in the heart of the social Japanese society. This is obvious in the missionaries’ statements, such as, for example, that in order of merit the courtiers were the principal persons in Japanese kingdom\(^6\). However, the Jesuits also recognised how their public influence was minimal\(^7\). According to them, the kuge were reportedly counsellors and servants of the emperor, and sometimes, ambassadors in the shogun’s service\(^8\). However, by a systematic perusal of the Jesuit letters one can see that, in practice, these posts did not imply effective political power. The first evidence of this lack of effective political power is the scarcity of references to the kuge, especially when compared to the frequent references to the buke. In fact not even the increasing importance of the Emperor, and thus consequently also of the courtiers, in the latter half of the 16th century, as a result of the policies implemented by first Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), and later by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), would alter this scenario. There are also some specific situations that show the secondary role of the courtier elite. For example, in 1565, in the context of the Emperor’s edict of the expulsion of the Jesuits\(^9\), some warriors who favoured the Christians brought pressure on the kuge to intervene on their behalf\(^10\). If initially these kuge were reluctant to do so, they acquiesced immediately when faced with the possibility of the Jesuits returning to the capital despite the imperial verdict, by means of military action by the warriors. This volte-face in the attitude of the kuge, even though it did not have any practical consequences because the authorization for the return of the Jesuits to Miyako did not come about by these means, shows to what extent the imperial institution found itself to be at the mercy of the warriors will.

With regard to the warriors, the Jesuits immediately recognised their status of effective authority. The decline of the traditional structures of power - the shogunate/bakufu and the imperial institution - promoted the socio-political

\(^6\) See letter from brother Lourenço to the Jesuits of Bungo, Miyako, 1 June 1560 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.70
\(^8\) It’s precisely this statute of ambassador that explains the shogun’s interest in turning to a kuge for help to act as ambassador between Ōtomo Yoshishige and Mōri Motonari for the purpose of making peace between the two warriors. Vide letter from Luís Fróis, Miyako, 20 February 1565 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.173.
\(^9\) See letter from Luís Fróis, Kaga, 3 August 1565 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.191v.
\(^10\) Vide carta de Luís Fróis, Sakai, 8 July 1567 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.241v.
emergence of minor warriors - the sengoku daimyō - whose capacity to emerge as an unchallenged authority in their territories legitimized their preemience. The missionaries defined them as noble people with a clear objective of clarifying the social standing of these warriors. However, the need to specify their political and military projection forced the Jesuits to use, not only general concepts, but also to evoke the commonly understood categories of European nobility. If the main descriptions of the classification of each individual was done by using the title of “king”, the titles of “marquis” or “dukes” also occurred. For instance, Ōtomo Yoshishige, daimyō of Bungo was in fact referred as “duke”, in a way to reinforce his unique status, according to a Jesuit author. But it is important to notice that the appropriation of European categories by the missionaries did not follow a pattern and therefore did not emerge from a rigorous effort to transcribe the warrior hierarchy properly. In fact, this terminology should be considered as an useful instrument by which the missionaries wanted to simplify the understanding of the events and success of the mission.

However, in the decade from 1580-1590, this situation changed and the Jesuit reports frequently resorted to the use of Japanese words which showed the respective rank in the hierarchy. This change in usage (by the very same individuals who had until then dominated the writing of missives to Europe) very probably was an outcome of the reforms introduced by Alexandre Valignano, Visitador of the Society in Japan, in the writing of missives, on his first visit to Japan. This can be based on two assumptions. On the one hand, the fact that the usage of terms of the Japanese military hierarchy appeared for the first time in the description of Japanese society written by Alexandre Valignano in Sumario de las cosas de Japon14. Secondly, because in 1601, in the Libro primero del principio y progresso de la religión christianá en Japon, Valignano reiterated the ambiguities that the juxtaposition of European titles

11 Vide for example the following description of a warrior written by Luís Fróis: “Por certo carissimo padre, que ver hum moço destes fodalghos de quinze, ou desazeis annos muito mais aluo que os -espanhões com hum terçado douro, que he maior que elle, que val quinhentos cruzados, a pé, ou a caualo acompanhado de toda a gente [...] & seu ensino, & cortesia, he muito pera dar gloria ao Senhor, & pera se auer por bem empregado todo o trabalho do Miáco, por os trazer ao conhecimento de seu Deus e salvador.” Letter from Luís Fróis to Francisco Peres SJ, Miyako, 6 March 1565 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.180.
12 See, for instance, the following definition of a dáimio presented by Fróis: “Em as partes do Miáco ha ahi tres maneiras de fidalghos, os primeiros se chamam Daiméos, que são como Conde ou Marquezes [...]”. Letter of Luís Fróis to the General, Nagasaki, 27 August 1585 in Cartas..., tomo II, fl.153.
13 See the explanation presented by Baltazar Gago SJ to justified valuation of Ōtomo Yoshishige as a duke: “E posto que em algumas cartas que de cá forão lhe chamásem Duque, a causa he, porque tem estes senhores por costume nomearem se de nomes meãos, que querem que os de fora lhe derem a honra que lhes cabe.” Letter from Baltazar Gago SJ to the Jesuits in Portugal, Goa, 10 December 1562 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.98v.
caused when applied to the Japanese situation\textsuperscript{15}. What is certain, is that from the aforementioned decade onwards, the European terminology, which was earlier applied indiscriminately, tends to disappear from the missives, or to appear as an explanatory note\textsuperscript{16}.

The different abilities of the two elites to interfere in Japanese society had a clear influence on the ways of approach and evangelization of these main elites. Indeed, perceiving the genuine difference between the representative power enjoyed by the \textit{kuge}, and the effective power carried out by the \textit{buke}, led the missionaries to concentrate their efforts on the latter. This does not mean that the Jesuits neglected the approach to the courtiers, which could provide them a closer position to the imperial institution. The sparse contacts with the \textit{kuge} were not therefore the result of a premeditated choice, but were a consequence of effective political conditions: on one hand, the physical separation that divided the \textit{kuge} from the Jesuits, since the courtiers were confined to the imperial court; on the other hand the indifference shown by the courtiers about Christendom even when huge profits were involved. For example, we know of the refusal of some \textit{kuge} to intervene on behalf on the Jesuits, for them to be received by the Emperor, even when the warriors offered the restoration of some taxes that they had lost\textsuperscript{17}. This reluctance may be justified by their religious convictions, but also by the fact, as occurred with many other Japanese, that the \textit{kuge} believed the general idea that the missionaries were the cause of calamities in every place to which they moved\textsuperscript{18}.

However, one can see that not even the approach to the warriors followed a linear progression. On the contrary, it was necessary to adapt to the different political contexts where they operated. In Kyūshū, the landing place for every missionary, the evangelization benefited from a situation of political impasse caused by the civil war. Here, where the power was disputed by equally distinguished warlords, the hostility of a warrior could be overwhelmed by the authorisation of freedom of circulation on preaching given by other warrior. Besides, as the island was the \textit{terminus} of the \textit{nau do trato}, the missionaries used their influence among the merchants to obtain benefits from the Japanese authorities\textsuperscript{19}. Not even the definitive choice of the merchants of the

\textsuperscript{16} For example, Luís Fróis applies for the first time the term daimyo in 1585, presenting him as the former of the fidalgos. \textit{Vide} letter from Luís Fróis to the General, Nagasaki, 27 August 1585 in \textit{Cartas...}, tomo II, fl.153
\textsuperscript{17} For an example see letter from Luís Fróis to António Quadros SJ, Miyako, 21 September 1571 in \textit{Cartas...}, tomo I, fl.313v.\textsuperscript{18} See letter of Luís Fróis, Sakai, 8 July 1567 in \textit{Cartas...}, I, fl.241v.
harbour of Nagasaki in 1571, the decree of Ômura and Arima territories as Cristian realms (in 1574 and 1580), and the institutionalization of the bishopric in Funai, province of Bungo (1588), had modified this strategy\textsuperscript{20}. In 1583 Alexandre Valignano, after his stay in the Japanese archipelago, complained of the persistant pressure of the governing elite on the missionaries to obtain commercial benefits\textsuperscript{21}, such as the possibility of influencing the choice of the port of the *nau do trato* or to obtain loans. However, while referring to the fact that conformance to Christian rites by converted warriors varied according to the economic benefits conceded by the missionaries, Valignano admits the Jesuit acceptance of the very same incentives in which the initial strategy was based\textsuperscript{22}:

\[\text{[...]} \text{los señores que están en estas partes de Shimo, y aun de Bungo, siempre tienen puestos los ojos en sus intereses que de la Compañía pretendem por respeto de los navíos de los portugueses que van a sus puertos, y con esto, aunque sean cristianos, siempre cojean [faltar á rectidão nalgumas ocasiões] persuadidos de que los Padres pueden hacer entrar los navíos donde ellos quieren y que tienen por suya buena parte de aquella hacienda, [...] y como sean pobres pretenden dones y empréstitos de dineros que nunca los pagan; y no haciéndolo o no pudiendo hacer los Padres lo que ellos quieren, luego se enfrian y perturban y mostrándose enfadados no hacen caso de ellos como conviene ni acuden como deben y es razón a sus obligaciones y a las iglesias [...].}\textsuperscript{23}

In Miyako, capital of the empire, where the courts of both the shogun and the Emperor were established, the situation was quite different. Here, the political posture of the Society of Jesus, that evangelization had to be extended to the political center as a way to get the support of the ruling classes, confined the missionarie’s establishment to one specific region - Miyako. Miyako was also the center of a civil war, for the final goal of *sengoku daimyô* was the control of the traditional structures of power established there - the *bakufu* and the imperial institution -, with to view to conquer the government of the capital and the Kinai region. So, in this case, the missionaries were forced to concentrate their efforts on a single warrior: the one whose military power overwhelmed the capital and consequently obtained effective ruling power.

\textsuperscript{20} See, for example, [...] Alexandre Valignano’s recommendations to avoid that police in *Sumario de las cosas de Japón* (1583), cap. XI, p.163.
\textsuperscript{21} ibidem
\textsuperscript{22} See Jurgis Elisonas, *op. cit.*
\textsuperscript{23} Alexandre Valignano, *op. cit.*, cap.XI, p.163.
3. In this way, the description of the Japanese elites reflects the dicotomy between the two social groups that differed in their capacity to intervene publically: a courtier elite that was at the apex of the social chain but that was living in an unstable political and economic situation, while the wealth and real power lay with the warrior elite. However, the Jesuit view of the political reality, which was inherent to the missionary strategy of the Society of Jesus, also elaborated on other inequalities related to the wielding of power. From the missionary descriptions in this regard, two essential aspects are revealed - in the first place, the contrast between the role of the imperial institution and of the bakufu in the Japanese political system, and secondly, the distinct social concepts which are evident in the appropriation of power used by Oda Nobunaga, and by Toyotomi Hideyoshi - both of whom were warriors whose socio-political rise exemplified the gekokujō24, and whose politico-military activities25, emanating from Kinai (a critical region of Japan), promoted the unification of the Empire, and who, in this way, came to dominate the Japanese political reality in the 16th century. This latter fact made them the central protagonists in the reports sent by the missionaries who were based in the capital (the political center of the archipelago).

The Jesuit perception of the importance of the heads of the military and imperial hierarchy in the Japanese system of governance (derived from the Jesuit viewpoint of the missionary establishment at Miyako, where, as already stated both these authorities were established) did not happen immediately on establishing the mission in the capital. In fact, the Jesuit understanding evolved with the progression of events, which would explain why the image that results from the Jesuit's initial descriptions is confused and does not clarify the importance of the capital in the wider context of Japanese politics26.

In the case of the bakufu, the role of the shogun in the political scenario only became clear to the Jesuits in 1565, when the shogun Ashikaga Yoshiteru (1536-1565) was assassinated. It is only then that the shogun appears as the head of the military hierarchy, as not only the disorder in Miyako is attributed

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24 The term Gekokujō encapsulates the reality that historians have called “an upward movement” i.e. the upwardly mobile social movement of individuals of more or less humble origen, promoted by means of military exploits.


26 As an example see the brief description of Gaspar Vilela, who limits himself to describing Ashikaga Yoshiteru as a “main lord” and “landlord”, thus utilizing the same terms that were used in the report about the political situation in other parts of the archipelago. See letter from Gaspar Vilela to the Jesuits of India, Sakai, 17 August 1561 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.91-91v.
to be a consequence of his assassination, but also the restoration of peace is associated with the re-establishment of the military government. In this regard, it is also on this occasion that the policy of control to which the military institution was subjected is clarified. In fact, after the assassination of Ashikaga Yoshiteru, the traitors Miyoshi Chôkei (1522-1565) and Matsunaga Hisahide (1510-1577), tried to restore the bakufu by means of promoting another member of the Ashikaga family, who would however remain under their tutelage. It is also in the course of the episode of the assassination of the shogun Ashikaga Yoshiteru, but only in 1568, that the Emperor emerges in Jesuit writings as a primordial figure in Japanese society. The Jesuits record the attention of Oda Nobunaga in looking after imperial necessities, restoring lost dignity by the reconstruction of the imperial palace when he came to Miyako that year with a view to restoring the shogunate in the person of Ashikaga Yoshiaki (1537-1597).

In this way, the missionaries’ stay in the region of Kinai enabled the understanding of the policy of the sengoku daimyô to move to the traditional centers of power as a means of legitimizing their authority, acquired by force of arms. It is in the context of this power strategy of the warriors, incorporated in the so called “Kyoto orientation” movement, that the figure of the emperor and of the shogun appear in Jesuit writings as characters in a political scenario where they are no longer dominant, but in which they still play a significant, if unequal, role. In fact, in the Jesuit reports one clearly sees the disdain of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi towards the bakufu, as distinct from the attention that both warriors demonstrate towards the imperial institution. In the first case, both warriors, with a view to establish

27 [...] fica o Miáco tão perturbado, desenquieto com estas guerras, que de nenhuma maneira se pode agora estar nesse sem notavel perigo, por não ter cabeça, & senhor que o gouverne. Depois que ouuer Cubçama, as guerras cessarem farei mais instancia [...]. Letter from Luís Fróis to the Jesuits, Sakai, 30 June 1566 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.208v.

28 About the political careers of these two warriors, see Jurgis Elisonas, op.cit., p.319.

29 “Agora dizem que quer Mioxindono [Miyoshi Chôkei] aleuantar por Cubucama [shogum] outro primo com irmão do que morreo, que esta no reyno de Aua, donde elle he natural, e tele aqui posto de sua mão, sem nenhum poder.” Letter from Luís Fróis to the Jesuits in Bungo, Miyako, 19 June 1565 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.188.

30 “Depois que o Nubonanga [Oda Nobunaga] veo ao Miáco pera restituir ao Cubçama & vendo o Davr que tambem se lhe offerêca aboa occasião pera se aleuantar de sua miseria & pobreza, meteo por terceiro de suas cousas Nequijoxinim [Nichiijô Shônin] ....” Letter from Luís Fróis to Belchior Figueiredo SJ, Miyako, 1 June 1569 in Cartas....., tomo I,fl.263.


themselves as the “Lord of Japan”, develop a policy that in one way or another rejects the shogunate. During the government of Oda Nobunaga, the missionaries relate the process of how, beginning with the curtailment of the powers of the shogun\textsuperscript{33}, the political action of Ashikaga Yoshiaki\textsuperscript{34} is undermined and finally overthrown\textsuperscript{35}. Likewise, the descriptions referring to the government of Toyotomi Hideyoshi show how Ashikaga Yoshiaki, living in exile since 1575, when he was evicted from the capital by Nobunaga, continued to be without any political role. In this way, there are references to the contacts established by Yoshiaki with a view to have his former authority restored, and the lack of interest of Hideyoshi to these appeals\textsuperscript{36}. Equally indicative of the situation in which the shogunate had fallen is the fact that the abolition of the institution in jure by Hideyoshi in 1588 did not merit any reference on the part of the Jesuits. The imperial institution, on the contrary, always appears in the letters as an entity given great prestige by the unifiers. Unaware of the conflicts that existed between the latter and the Emperor\textsuperscript{37} - given the lack of effective power of the imperial entity, these animosities did not affect the mission’s fortunes - the Jesuits highlight the attention shown by Nobunaga and Hideyoshi towards that institution with a view to obtain legitimacy to the respective governments. Both take great care to safeguard the physical integrity of the Emperor\textsuperscript{38} and both, likewise, exert themselves to win his favour and maintain him in accordance with his status\textsuperscript{39}.

It is also in the context of reporting the strategies of the two warriors that the Jesuits learn of the emergence of a new concept of power, the \textit{tenka}, used by these warlords as a result of the process of unification. While delineating

\textsuperscript{33} The most important example is Luís Fróis’ report about the missionaries’ request to obtain a licence that would authorize them to circulate freely. In the first place, it is only after having obtained the consent of Nobunaga, that the missionaries concern themselves with obtaining the authorization of Ashikaga Yoshiaki. Secondly, the shogun was compelled to follow the suggestions of the warlord, despite the pressure brought to bear by the emperor Ogmachi to accept the imperial resolution which was contrary to that of Nobunaga. See letter from Luís Fróis to Belchior de Figueiredo, Miyako, 1 June 1569 in \textit{Cartas...}, tomo I, fl.259v; 261-262 e fl.265v; letter from Luís Fróis to Belchior de Figueiredo, Miyako, 12 July 1569 in \textit{Cartas...}, tomo I, fl.270, fl.273v.

\textsuperscript{34} See the description of the missionaries with reference to the public ire of Oda Nobunaga caused by the non conformance on the part of the shogun to orders which had been stipulated. \textit{Vide} letter from Luís Fróis to Francisco Cabral SJ, Miyako, 290 April 1573 in \textit{Cartas...}, tomo I, fl.340.

\textsuperscript{35} See \textit{ibidem}, fl.347v.

\textsuperscript{36} See letter from Luís Fróis to the General, 20 January 1584 in \textit{Cartas...}, tomo II, fl.100v.

\textsuperscript{37} With reference to Oda Nobunaga see Fujiki Hisashi and George Elison, \textit{op. cit.}, pp.173-184; with reference to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, see John W. Hall, “Hideyoshi’s domestic policies” in \textit{Japan before Tokugawa...}, p.197.

\textsuperscript{38} When Nobunaga falls out with the Shogun in 1572, and begins the destruction of Miyako, he immediately ensures his protection with the imperial entity. See Letter from Luís Fróis to Francisco Cabral, Miyako, 27 Mai 1573 in \textit{Cartas...}, tomo I, fl.346.
in no uncertain manner the figure of the Emperor from that of the Lord of the 
tenka, presenting the former as a symbolic structure and the latter as the wield-
er of effective political and military power, the missionaries showed the main-
tenance of the duality of the Japanese political system by Oda Nobunaga and 
Toyotomi Hideyoshi and show an exact understanding of this reality.

The Emperor thus appears, symbolically classified in the missives as an “absolute”, “supreme” and “universal” lord of the archipelago, and at the same time as a figure without power. The type of adjectives used by the mis-
sionaries when describing the emperor and the thoroughness with which they refer to his day to day habits allow us to conclude that they managed to per-
ceive his unique status in comparison to other Japanese political entities. The fact of the emperor living restricted to the area of his residence, not being able 
to touch the ground, and being exclusively served by the aristocracy of the 
court, helped the missionaries to comprehend the symbolic power of this 
entity. However, it is the description of the social role of the emperor, in com-
parison to a European monarch, that shows the recognition of his unequivo-
cal supremacy in Japanese society. The European monarch, according to the 
political concept of 16th century (modelo corporativo), had the responsibility 
of maintaining the social order “giving to each what was his […], guarantee-
ing to each his status”; to the emperor fell the task of dictating the rules in 
society and distributing honours among his subjects:

“O officio & presidencia deste, he nas cousas ha hőra, porque a elle só per-
tence dala a cada hum segundo lhe parece, e segundo a qualidade das pessoas, & as cousas que fez, & assi seu officio he dar nomes, ou titulos aos senhores, côôrforme ao que merecem, por onde se sabe de que horna, equalidade he cada hum, & respeito & reuerencia se lhe deue ter. A este tambem pertence conserualos em seus titulos, acre-
SENTANDO a cada hum, os graos de honra que lhe parece terem merecido. […].”

39 Both Nobunaga as well as Hideyoshi reconstruct or build palaces for the Emperor. As an example see, with reference to the former, see letter from Luís Fróis to Belchior Barreto, Miyako, 1 June 1569 in 
Cartas..., tomo I, fl.263 e 264; for the latter see letter from Gaspar Coelho to the General, 24 de 
February 1589 in Cartas..., tomo II, fl.260-261.

40 Luís Fróis defined the emperor in the following way: “Trabalhamos muito o padre, & eu por ver se podíamos aue do Dayrî [emper or Ôgimachi] que he Rei & senhor absoluto de todo o Iapão, mas de ninguem obedecido, antes está em seus paços como pagode donde nunca sae […].”. Letter from Luís 
Fróis to the Jesuits, Sakai, 30 June 1566 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.208v.

41 Vide letter from Cosme de Torres to António Quadros, Bungo, 8 October 1561 in Cartas..., tomo 
I, fl.74v; and letter from Gaspar Vilela to the Jesuits of Portugal in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.143.

42 Other imperial prerogatives such as the celebration of ritual ceremonies, jurisdiction over the court 
aristocracy or the legitimization of the bakufu government by the empowering of the shogun were not 
mentioned in the missionaries’ letters.

43 Ângela Barreto Xavier, António Manuel Hespanha, “A representação da sociedade e o Poder” in 
Because he retained the power to confer honours on his subjects, thus distinguishing them, the emperor superceded all the other entities in prestige. For example, Cosme de Torres SJ (1510-1570) shows the direct relation between the military success of a warrior and his prestige in honours when he stated that, since his arrival in Japan, Ōtomo Yoshishige (1530-1587) daimyo of Bungo, had already altered his insignias, which were an external indicator of his status, thirty four times, in accordance with the increasing titles conferred on him by the emperor\(^45\). In this way, the imperial dignity, far from being reduced to a mere figurative role, showed itself to be an entity that, due to its symbolic authority, confirmed the social order.

In the Jesuit letters, the association between the Japanese government and the political concept of the *tenka* appeared only consequent to the process of unification, however, both Nobunaga and Hideyoshi already exploited the original meaning of the word, which, according to Chinese political theory designated “everything under the sky”, or “empire”, for the purpose of the notion of a unified territory\(^46\). It is exactly to designate the power that the effective government wielded, i.e. the warrior that controlled military and judicial powers in a legitimate manner, that the missionaries utilized the word. In fact, although the term *tenka* was translated by the missionaries to be the “monarchy of Japan”, the Jesuits did not in this way try to equate the Japanese political system to the monarchical regime, because, as we saw they recognised the figure of the emperor to be the element of order in Japanese society - the “supreme” lord. In resorting to this comparison, the missionaries tried aboveall to give a sense of a centralized administration, given the absence of a corresponding word in the European vocabulary.

4. In this way, the Jesuits learnt the similarities of the attitudes of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi with reference to the central role attributed to the traditional centers of power and to the perpetuation of the dual political system. However, the necessity of the missionaries to supply information about the political and social organization of the people with whom they interacted,

\(^{44}\) Letter from Cosme de Torres to António Quadros, Bungo, 8 October 1561 in *Cartas...*, tomo I, fl.74v.
\(^{45}\) See letter from Cosme de Torres to António Quadros, Bungo, 8 October 1561 in *Cartas...*, tomo I, fl.74v.
reveals a different concept of society as idealized by both warriors. While Oda Nobunaga appears as a military man who wields his authority without ever insinuating himself in the heart of the imperial hierarchy, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, on the other hand, is depicted as someone who tries, throughout his government, to reconcile the worlds of the courtier and the warrior.

There is no doubt that Oda rehabilitates the emperor, but the reports of the Jesuits show how, in public ceremonies, he is attributed a secondary role. In the description of the sumptuous party given by the warlord in Miyako in 1581, the warrior is described as a grande protagonista, while the presence of the emperor is only mentioned. The attention paid by the Jesuits in describing the games that took place, to the magnificence of the clothes of the leading lords of Japan, and the care taken by them in preparing their horses all point towards a minimal impact of the imperial presence. In it's turn, the gesture of Oda, who stands out from his guests and seated himself in a chair gifted by the Visitador Alexandre Valignano, should be interpreted as an externalization of the power of the warrior in relation to the highest political entity of Japan. In practice, this attitude of irreverence by Oda revealed an utter disdain of the courtier elite. Hideyoshi, in his turn, according to the Jesuit viewpoint, shows himself to be a warrior who tries to ensure his political activity by his elevation to courtier dignification. The missionaries show the appropriation of the courtier titles by Hideyoshi, when, in 1585, they record his elevation to kanpaku, the principal dignitary in the heart of the imperial hierarchy, that elevated him to the position of regent to the emperor. This shows the strategy of the warrior in attributing a political connotation to a title that had, since the 9th century, been a purely courtier designation. It is in the context of the concession of a licence that authorised the missionaries to preach their faith, that the missionaries reflect further on this concept of governance. Here, they reproduce Hideyoshi's speech, in which he states that his elevation to the title of regent had made him the lord of all of Japan. In assuming the position of principal dignitary in the heart of the imperial hierarchy Hideyoshi did not limit himself, as Nobunaga had done, to merely preserving the status of the institution; he ceased portraying himself as a warrior

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47 The amagement of Fróis at the extravagance of the party is obvious: “Digo a vossa Reueirencia que tiradas as cousas de Europa em minha vida vi cousa semelhantes”. Letter from Luis Fróis, Miyako, 14 April 1581 in Cartas..., tomo II, fl.5.
48 Letter from Luis Fróis, Miyako, 14 April 1581 in Cartas..., tomo II, fl.4-5.
49 On this question see Mary Elizabeth Berry, op. cit., p.179.
50 See the following description of Fróis: “[...] como eu sou o Quambacudono [kanpaku], não tenho necessidade de falar em meus reinos pois sou senhor de todo Iapão, senão que se pregue por toda a terra de Iapão”. Letter from Luís Fróis to Alexandre Valignano, Shimonoseki, 17 October 1586 in Cartas..., tomo II, fl.179.
who governed the provinces conquered by arms, to project himself instead as a courtier with a hegemony of military authority.

Likewise, the greater or lesser necessity of physical proximity to the imperial entity confirms the different social order projected by the unifiers. Nobunaga does not, at any point of time, opt to reside in the city of Miyako. This attitude does not, however, signify that he neglected the tradition of the capital\textsuperscript{51}. The position of the warrior merely reinforces the \textit{status quo}, in the sense that it preserves the perpetuation of the two elites. Further, keeping in mind that he personified the government of Kinai, this decision signified the transfer of the center of political decisionmaking from the capital of the empire to the place where he resided: initially, after the conquest of the province of Mino (1567-1568), to Guifu, and later to Azuchi, a city that he founded, in the province of Ômi. In Azuchi Oda Nobunaga not only reinforced his detachment from physical proximity to the imperial entity, as well as realized his concept of social order. The description given by the missionaries shows a city dominated by the palace of the warlord, built on top of a hill, from which radiated the residences of the warriors, while the commoners lived on the slope\textsuperscript{52}. In contrast, Hideyoshi, went to great lengths to ensure the physical proximity between the two worlds. If one goes by the report of Luís Fróis SJ, the warlord even envisioned transferring the imperial institution to Osaka, where he resided\textsuperscript{53}. However, the reluctance shown by the Emperor, the sole impediment mentioned by the missionaries to the realization of this project\textsuperscript{54}, and the later initiatives by the warlord to construct a new palace in Miyako, the \textit{Juraku}, built in 1587 near the imperial residence\textsuperscript{55}, reflects the strategy of the warlord in trying to guarantee a connection to the \textit{milieu} of the courtiers.

\textsuperscript{51} The documents show the care taken by Oda Nobunaga to maintain the prestige of Miyako with references to his care in establishing a road that directly linked the capital to Azuchi, or when it narrates his concern to have representation in Miyako, through Wada Koremasa. See letter from Luís Fróis to the General, Kochinosu, 5 November 1582 in Cartas..., tomo II, fl.61 and letter from Luís Fróis to Antônio Quadros, Miyako, 21 September 1573 in Cartas..., tomo I, fl.312.

\textsuperscript{52} See the description presented by Gaspar Coelho to the General, Nagasaki, 15 February 1582 in Cartas..., tomo II, fl.35v-36. The archaeologist Naito Akira likewise concluded, based on an archaeological study of the building, that Azuchi reflected the intentions of Nobunaga in posing himself as sole and absolute Lord, in conformance with a very personal politico-religious ideology. See Shun’ichi Takayanagi, “The glory that was Azuchi” in \textit{Monumenta Nipponica}, vol. XXXII, n°4, 1977, pp.515-516. Jurgis Elisonas is also of the opinion that Azuchi must be understood as a cult to the personality of the warlord. Cf. George Elison, \textit{“The cross and the sword”} in \textit{Warlords, artists and commoners}, ed. George Elison and Bardwell L. Smith, Honolulu, University press of Hawai, 1981, pp.64-66.

\textsuperscript{53} See letter from Luís Fróis to the General, 20 January 1584 in Cartas..., tomo II, fl.100.

\textsuperscript{54} ibidem, fl.100.
5. In this way, it is evident that the partial nature of the information contained in the Jesuit letters does not compromise the quality of the missionaries’ writings as testimony of the complex nature of the socio-political reality in Japan. The missionaries report the existence of the two social elites, defined as two homogenous bodies who are distinct in the context of their capacity to intervene in the Japanese government; they recognize the particular of the political reality when make the distinction between the two political institutions that head these hierarchies and explain the unequal roles in power relations; they present a clear picture of political vicissitudes, even though they solely portray the exploits of the more prominent warlords; and perceive the innovations of the governments of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi when they refer to the political position and social ideas conceived by the unifiers. In this sense these images reveal the awareness of the missionaries and their integration in Japanese society.

55 See letter from Luís Fróis to Alexandre Valignano, Shimonoseki, 17 October 1586 in Cartas..., tomo II, fl.175-175v.
Abstract

This article attempts to present an overview of the missionaries’ view of the social and political scenario of Japan, which resulted from their increased interaction with the Japanese elite. These impressions, reconstructed from letters sent by members of the Society of Jesus living in the Japanese archipelago in the 16th century, are however without doubt only a partial and selective portrayal of the prevalent realities. In the first place because it depended on the logic of the missionaries’ operations, i.e. the specific elite with whom they interacted and the degree of success or failure of the contact that they managed to establish. Secondly, because those impressions are based on Western cultural standards. In this way, one can comprehend in what manner the support given by the elites was reflected in a more or less distorted presentation of reality, and understand the impact of Western on the Jesuit descriptions of another civilization.

Resumo

No presente artigo procura-se reflectir sobre o olhar missionário da realidade social e política do Japão resultante da aproximação às elites nipónicas. Estas imagens construídas a partir das cartas enviadas pelos membros da Companhia de Jesus residentes no arquipélago durante a era quinhentista, constituem, sem dúvida, um retrato parcial e selectivo da realidade. Em primeiro lugar, porque depende da lógica operativa dos missionários, isto é das elites com as quais contactaram e do grau de sucesso ou insucesso dos contactos estabelecidos; em segundo lugar, porque trata-se de uma imagem construída a partir dos padrões culturais do Ocidente. Nesse sentido procura-se entender em que medida o apoio dispensado pelas elites se reflectiu numa apresentação mais ou menos distorcida da realidade, e descortinar o impacto dessa grelha nas descrições jesuítas de outra civilização.