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How to Make “Colored” Japanese Counter-Reformation Saints – A Study of an Iconographic Anomaly

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Abstract: The 1627 beatification of the twenty-six martyrs of Japan was a major milestone in the history of the Church and especially for the missionary orders. These martyrs were the first officially recognized saints from the newly “discovered” lands. However, while the majority of the twenty-six were in fact Japanese, surviving paintings depict them as white-skinned missionaries and without any physical features that would have been considered “typically Asian” at the time. This paper analyzes this iconographic tradition and shows how it can be understood as a consequence of a process of assimilation of Christian Japan into the Catholic world view. Associating particular skin color with true faith and civilization was part of discourses that blended the physical “otherness” of these martyrs. This paper demonstrates how these discourses point to the first seeds of a racial perception of East Asians, which would later become the notion of “yellow.”

Keywords: Iconography, Japanese martyrs, mission, modern period, race

In 1627, Pope Urban VIII solemnly proclaimed the beatification of twenty-six martyrs from the mission in Japan. The twenty-six martyrs consisted of missionaries and local Christians whom Toyotomi Hideyoshi had executed for their Christian beliefs in 1597.1 Their beatification and the permission granted to their cult could be now understood as a milestone in the history of the Catholic Church. It was the first approbation of the sanctity of those from what they called the “Indies”—the territories discovered in the time of European expansion. In fact, only four of these twenty-six were originally from Europe; most were non-Europeans, including, of course, people from Japan, China (a person who was


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most certainly of mixed Sino-Japanese descent), one from India, three from Korea (according to later sources), and a *novohispano*. The diversity of their geographical origins is obvious. This diversity would later have a profound impact on the formation of the identities of a Christian identity in these regions. However, this article will focus on how this diversity was interpreted in early seventeenth

2 A man called Antonio. His last name is unknown. Due to the lack of a consensus on the transcription of Japanese names in roman letters at that time, the spelling of those martyrs’ names varies in each historical document, written in Portuguese, Spanish and Latin. There are at least twelve variations according to Kiichi Matsuda, who analyzed twelve primary and secondary contemporary sources (both Franciscan and Jesuit), including manuscripts written by Luis Frois, Pedro Morejon, Avila Girón. Kiichi Matsuda, “Nihon 26 Seijin No Jinmei Ni Tsuite,” *Kinsei Shoki Nihon Kankei Nanban Shiryō No Kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1963), 899–939. See especially his table of the spelling of the names, 909–921. Diego Pacheco, a Jesuit who was the director of the Museum of the twenty-six martyrs in Nagasaki, calls him the first Chinese Saint. Diego Pacheco, *26 Seijin to Nagasaki Monogatari* (Nagasaki: Seibo no kishisha, 2002), 40.

3 In the seventeenth century, Gonçalo Garcia (a.k.a. Gonzalo García) was considered to be the only beatified in the Indian subcontinent (with exception of the legendary figure, St Thomas). See P. X. Swami, *St Gonzalo García. Indian Martyr on Japanese Soil* (Mumbai: The Bombay Saint Paul Society, 2004), 7; James H. Gense and Aloysius Conti, *In the Days of Gonzalo García, 1557–1597* (Mumbai: J. H. Gense, 1957). This book was published for the 360th anniversary of his death. In his birth town, in Bazaim, north of Bombay in India, we can find a church dedicated to him.

4 The presence of people of Korean origin in the group of the twenty-six, although not impossible in the context of the times (especially with the invasion of Korea by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1592–93), has been doubted by several researchers. For example, Diego Pacheco says that no contemporary document supports this claim. See Diego Pacheco, *26 Seijin to Nagasaki*, 29–30. The three martyrs were brothers, known in early sources as (with many spelling variations) Leo Karasumaru, and Paul and Ludovico Ibaraki. Jesuit sources of the late sixteenth century, such as Ribadeneira and Frois affirm that they originally came from the Japanese province of Owari. See Kiichi Matsuda, “Nihon 26 Seijin,” 932–934.

The earliest mention of the presence of Koreans can be found in Louis-Charles Profillet, *Le martyrologe de l’Église du Japon* (Paris: Téqui, 1895–1897), 50–51. The author claims to have used the bull compiled by the Franciscans in preparation for the canonisation of the martyrs of Japan, including the twenty-six, in 1865. The existence of this bull is confirmed by Ruiz de Medina, but he remarks that it contains many errors, and sees the inclusion of Koreans to the twenty-six martyrs as one of them. See Juan Ruiz de Medina, *El Martirologio del Japón, 1558–1873* (Rome: Institutum Historicum S.I., 1999), 294. This suggests that the inclusion of Koreans in this group, which would later have a profound impact on the peninsula itself (they were included in the Jeoldu-san Martyrs’ Memorial in South Korea), must be understood in this particular context.

century Europe. It will do so by analyzing the reception of the twenty-six martyrs and the consequences this reception had on the European world-view of the time.

The favor displayed by the Vatican for these twenty-six martyrs draws a sharp contrast with the treatment of other contemporary saints who were originally from regions outside Europe. Particularly striking is the example of Benedict the Moor (1526–1589), the Ethiopian “Black” saint, whose cult began in Sicily right after his death in 1589 and whose beatification process preceded that of the twenty-six martyrs. While depictions of Benedict normally reflect his physical otherness, the iconography of Japanese martyrs, a very popular theme for the Jesuits after their beatification, does not convey any suggestion of their actual physiognomic features—especially of their skin color. In the extant paintings that depict the twenty-six martyrs, such as those in Madrid, Munich, or Naples and also in remaining engravings, these figures are always depicted with European-like physiognomies.

This article analyzes this discrepancy. It concentrates on the process of integrating these new martyrs of missions in the narrative of Counter-Reformation Europe with its corresponding Catholic rhetoric and traditional religious iconography. It also discusses the implications this integration had on Western worldviews of the period. In fact, in the seventeenth century, the contemporary notion of race, and especially the idea of the “yellow” skin color, was not completely formed. However, the absence of this idea as a fully-fledged conceptual category does not imply that discrimination based on skin color or geographical origins was completely absent.

The word “race” itself existed, but it was mostly used to distinguish nobles from commoners. In the eighteenth century, it became a translation of the Latin word “gens,” which describes a clan or a tribe. The term acquired its cultural and political connotations mostly in the nineteenth century, when the concept

6 Benedict the Moor (1526–1589), whose image was closely linked to the African Continent, was beatified by Benedict XIV in 1743 and canonized in 1862. Martin de Porrès (1579–1639), a Dominican from modern-day Peru, was beatified in 1837 and canonized in 1962. See Giovanna Fiume, “Il Santo schiavo. Devozione e culti a Benedetto il Moro nelle Americhe,” in Ordini religiosi, santi e culti tra Europa, Mediterraneo e nuovo mondo (secoli XV–XVII), t. 2, ed. Bruno Pellegrino (Galatina: Congedo, 2009), 639–671. Also José Oscar Beozzo, “San Benedetto, il Moro: da santo siciliano a patrono in Brasile degli schiavi, dei neri e dei poveri,” in Pellegrino, Ordini religiosi, t. 2, 623–638.


itself appears in its modern sense. However, before the emergence of the notion of “race,” physiognomic traits were, of course, already perceived as a factor of difference. The notion itself was already burgeoning in the Middle Ages, as seen with particular traits attached to certain populations, such as the odor of the Jews or the Moor’s skin color.

In other words, physical traits were already perceived as a factor of “otherness.” This situation did not change in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, when Europe came in contact with the populations of other continents. While this period did not have a clear conception of “race,” skin-color already tended to be used as a factor distinguishing Europeans from the “other.” As put by Frédéric Monneyron and Gérard Siary in a recent book on the history of this idea, “race existed almost in absentia until the end of the eighteenth century.”

In fact, many precedents to race can be found in texts from Ancient and Medieval Europe, and such knowledge was passed on in the modern times. As we will see in the next pages, theological discourse in particular tended to valorize light-colored skins as a symbol of the purity of faith, an idea which can be interpreted as a precedent to racial discrimination. As we will show, such considerations had an undeniable impact on both the discourses regarding the twenty-six martyrs and their iconography. By analyzing not only contemporary written sources describing them, but also the way these figures were represented in images, this article retraces the process of accepting non-European saints in seventeenth-century Europe.

1 Colonial saints in post-reformation Europe

The modern period saw the expansion of what Serges Gruzinski calls the “Catholic monarchy,” a notion that describes mostly Spain, Portugal and

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their colonies, to new territories all over the globe. These newly “discovered” lands and their inhabitants became targets of missionary work. This process also gave birth to a series of patron saints associated with the newly evangelized territories. Besides the above mentioned St Benedict the Moor, the modern period thus saw the emergence of several such saints, especially in modern Mexico and South America. In each case, the formation of cults associated with these saints was deeply connected with the devotion of the local society and with the enthusiasm of laymen who at one time shared their lives with these particular saints. For example, there is the case of Catarina de San Juan (1606–1688), who probably had Asian Origins. She was kidnapped and forced into slavery, taken to Puebla in Mexico via Manila, later freed, and died as “saint.” Although she was never officially beatified, she attracted people’s devotion, just because her life reflected that of a typical subaltern of this time in that society. Another example is that of the Franciscan, Felipe de Jesús, who was later called the “creole saint” (“el santo criollo”) and who became the patron saint of Mexico.

Both of these cases suggest that the development of their cults was related to the formation of local identity and the dignity of their particular Christian faith. Ordinarily, colonial sainthood is thus mostly analyzed in the socio-religious context of the establishment of local or national identities. For example, the canonization of Rosa de Santa Maria (1586–1617), who was born in Peru, became a source of pride for the local population, as it showed that the New World was an integral part of the Catholic Church. The official

14 For example, we can mention the blessed Sebastian de Aparicio (1502–1600), St Rosa de Lima (1586–1617), St. Mariana de Jesus (1618–1645), Catarina de San Juan, and San Felipe de Jesus. On Brazil, see Anthony John R. Russell-Wood, “Atlantic Bridge and Atlantic Divide: Africans and Creoles in Late Colonial Brazil,” in Creole Societies in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, ed. Philip J. Havik and Malyn Newitt (Bristol: University of Bristol, 2007), 171–218.
recognition of the sanctity of such figures can also be understood as a response to more extreme discourses denying natives the ability to reach spiritual achievement.\(^\text{18}\) As a whole, these sainted figures functioned as promoters of the growth of local Christendom.

While some of them were later associated with specific territories, the twenty-six martyrs of Japan were originally very different from typical colonial saints. Their cult was not observed in the country where they were active; rather their cult was fostered in Europe and its colonies. As a matter of fact, their beatification was celebrated in many European cities, not only in the major places like Rome, Madrid, Barcelona, Milan, Paris, and Bologna, but also in relatively smaller towns, such as Castelnuovo Scrivia (in Italy), Caller (in Sardinia), Sevilla, Ronda, Carmona, Valladolid, and Wiesbaden. However, no particular festivities were reported in Japan. As Japanese Christian were almost completely destroyed by the repression of the Edo regime, the beatified martyrs of Nagasaki were not, at the time at least, national “Japanese” saints with devoted local followers; therefore, they did not contribute to the creation of a Christian identity inside the country.\(^\text{19}\) The fact that Felipe de Jesús became the patron saint of Mexico underscores this. In fact, they were rather “missionary” saints, closely related to either the Franciscan or Jesuit order. As the representations show, they were mostly designed to appeal to a specific public: first to the members of the orders themselves and then to modern Europeans as a whole. This background explains partly why the beatification of a figure such as Benedict the Moor did not happen before that of the martyrs of Nagasaki, although, in his case, the process started earlier.

\(^{18}\) For an example of such discourses regarding native women in New Spain, see Julia Boss, “Iroquois Virgin: the Story of Catherine Tekakwitha in New France and New Spain,” in Greer and Bilinkoff, Colonial Saints, 238–245.

\(^{19}\) Local hidden Christians (normally called Kakurekirishitan) had formed their own idiosyncratic style of devotion, and Catholic missionaries who came to Japan at the end of the nineteenth century accused them of superstition. Japanese anthropologists have called it “Kirishitanism,” a concept to be distinguished from the original Christianity. See Yukihiro Ōhashi, Senpuku Kirishitan (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2014), 14–15. They had actually formed a kind of cult related to a legend of their executed members and maintained this even when they lacked any contact with trained priests. However, the martyrs they worshipped were not related to the twenty-six martyrs officially recognized by the Vatican. The Holy See’s official edict could not reach local laymen in such a remote place. Kiyoto Furuno, Furuno Kiyoto chosakushū vol. 5: Kirishitanism no hikaku kenkyū (Tokyo: San-ichi Publishing Co., Ltd, 1973), 154.
2 The exceptional beatification process of the Japanese Martyrs

The entire process of beatification of the twenty-six was advanced mainly based on Franciscan efforts. It started first with several publications on their hagiographical reports written by Marcelo Ribadeneira (ca. 1560–1610), Jerónimo de Jesús (?–1601), Juan Pobre de Zamora (1550–1614, or 1615) and the governor of Manila, Francisco Tello (?–1603).20 The order did not stop at merely publishing the news, and they even produced images of the martyrs. A series of these images was displayed to the public, in the basilica of Santa Maria di Aracoeli, before the official beatification. However, the Vatican ordered the destruction of these images in 1626.21

The Jesuits were at first reticent to promote the cult of these victims, partly because they wanted to avoid inciting Christians in Japan to actively seek heroic deaths. The other reason was that the three Jesuits who were involved were not true members of the Society; rather, they were just unofficially linked to it.22 But the situation changed after the edict banishing Christianity in 1614. With the difficulties encountered on the ground, the major destination of the mission in the East Indies gradually shifted from Japan to China. Consequently, Japan became an ideal setting for martyrs’ hagiography as a literature theme, rather than a potential target of active evangelization, at least from the perspective of the Jesuits’ erudite members. In this context, the three “Jesuit” martyrs of 1597,


who could be seen in some isolated publications prior to this date, became a major subject of such literature, with other anecdotes of heroic martyrs that had originated from the Japanese mission, such as those told by Pedro Morejón (1562–1639) and Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628). By the mid-1610s, the focus of Jesuit discourse had shifted, and they were actively championing the beatification process.

Another crucial event leading to the decision of 1627 was the “embassy” lead by Hasekura Tsunenaga (1571–1622). Conducted under the initiative of the Franciscan Luis Sotelo (1574–1624) and sent by the northern warlord Date Masasume (1567–1636), this diplomatic mission arrived in Rome in 1615. It inspired many ceremonies, and the organizers made sure to insert the issue of the beatification into the agenda. Things were arranged as if the Japanese Christians officially requested it, and they brought what they claimed was an authentic relic of the martyrs. The strategy was successful, as the beatification process was greatly sped up right after the visit.

In 1616, the process officially began. Six apostolic tribunals were established, two in Mexico, and one each in Nagasaki, Macau, Goa, and Manilla. Their mission was to prove not only the martyrdom of the twenty-six but also to verify the miracles that could be attributed to them. The sessions, mainly directed by Franciscans and Dominicans, concluded in 1622. At that time, the commission of the Rota, in the Vatican, agreed to the beatification. While many miracles were cited in the official documents, the main reason for this beatification lay elsewhere. The non-European-origins of the martyrs were not identified as the main reason either. Rather, as one of the official documents on the matter put it, by shedding their blood on a cross, they did more for the faith.

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25 After the Council of Trent, the diffusion of a local cult became one of the most important issues in the beatification/canonization process. See Simon Ditchfield, “‘Coping with the beatification moderni’: Canonization Procedure in the Aftermath of the Council of Trent,” in *Ite Inflammate Omnia, Selected Historical Papers from Conferences Held at Loyola and Rome in 2006*, ed. Thomas M. McCoog (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2010), 413–440. The Hasekura delegates were in fact told to report the existence of a “cult” of the 26 in Japan at the time. No contemporary Japanese document makes any mention of such cult.


than any speech would have been able to do. It was the way they died—on the cross—that provided a perfect opportunity to present them as ideal martyrs, in a time when this very notion—and especially the martyrs of the mission, was contested in Europe.

“Martyr” was indeed one of the most litigious aspects of sanctity in modern Europe, especially with the rivalries between Catholic and Protestants that followed the Wars of Religion, as Brad Gregory has shown. “Martyr” originally meant a witness or a testimony of the true faith. Its application occurs most commonly in times such as persecution, when believers are forced to make the ultimate choice between death or survival through apostasy. Having been shaken by religious conflicts, modern European society provided Catholic and Protestant Christians with many opportunities to be recognized as victims of mutual “persecutions.” The validity of such martyrs soon became a central issue. In the Catholic context, the importance of martyrs and their relics had already been reconsidered after the “Sacco di Roma.” The subject became even more pressing with the rediscovery of the Roman catacombs, which provided a whole host of new saints and relics for the Church. However, the Wars of Religion had the greatest impact on the notion of martyrs. Since both sides claimed to have the most authentic victims of persecution directed against their absolute faith, proving the validity of their martyrs led to an ontological polemic—the means of victimizing and justifying. Confronted with such a war of “martyrs” propaganda, the Roman Catholic

29 A letter from Martín de la Ascensión even describes their trip from Osaka to Nagasaki, where they were executed, as a “via crucis.” See Diego Pacheco, “Notas sobre la ruta de los 26 santos mártires de Nagasaki,” Missionalia Hispanica 17 (1960): 229–245 (230).
30 For a general introduction on martyrdom, see Brad S. Gregory, Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
Church put forward its own original “martyrs,” especially missionaries who died outside Europe, in territories governed by what they regarded as pagans, tyrants, and barbarians.33

Indeed, during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the Jesuits, the pioneers of the Catholic Mission in the newly connected world, kept careful records of their colleagues’ deaths as “martyrs” in Brazil, Florida, India, and especially Japan. This discourse of “martyrs” was mainly European rhetoric aimed at contemporary European audiences. Designed to gloss over the unfulfilled work of Christianization, it provided a one-sided description of local incidents in targeted areas from the standpoint of Christian missionaries. This is particularly notable in the case of Japan. In Japan, Christianity was seen as a heretical sect and even legally prohibited. Hence, Christian “martyrs” did not appear as heroes in local contemporary documents; rather, they were viewed as criminals. In its essence, the term “martyr” conveys a fundamental theological concept connected deeply with the primitive pan-European penetration of Christianity, as Simon Ditchfield indicates,34 and it was untranslatable into indigenous languages, which did not share the same Christian values and history.35 Shaping the discourse of “martyrs” of Japan is thus perceived as inner-European religious propaganda.

The ecclesiastical process of integration of the Christian martyrs of Japan to Catholic Europe began with the beatification of the twenty-six martyrs in Nagasaki by Pope Urban VIII in 1627. As stated above, this group consisted not only of Europeans, but also of Japanese, a Chinese, an Indian, perhaps Koreans, and a novohispano. Thus, they were the first examples of beatification of non-Europeans after the Council of Trent. If sainthood reflects the values of the culture in which they are perceived in a heroic light, as Peter Burke has described, the officialization of their cult stood for a new ideal of sanctified death.36 Their crucifixion, inflicted on them by a pagan tyrant, “ignorant” of the true faith, offered the perfect setting to produce martyrs.

35 Hitomi Omata Rappo, « Les aventures de ‘martyre’ entre l’Asie et l’Europe ou les aléas de la traduction. »
3 The skin color of the Japanese in the imagery of modern Europe

Looking at available visual representations confirms that having Japanese origins was not a crucial issue in the beatification of the twenty-six martyrs. In all of these images, any hint of their Japanese heritage is completely absent. However, we have to wonder if this was always the case. We cannot determine the exact first visual representation of the beatified to know in which color these images were painted and how they were physically conceived. But one of the first testimonies of their painting is recorded by the famous French Jesuit Louis Richeome (1544–1625) in his “Spiritual Painting” (Peinture spirituelle) (Lyon, 1611). Many historians consider that this text provides a literary representation of how the novitiate of the Jesuits in the Quirinal in Rome was designed in the beginning of the sixteenth century. According to Richeome, portraits of the three martyrs were placed in one of the recreation rooms (salle de recreation) in this building; they are described as having faces of olive color (aux faces olivâstres) and small eyes (petits yeux). Their names—Jacques Guisai (Kisai), Paul Michi, and Jean Got(o)—correspond to those of the three Jesuits beatified in 1627.

The apparition of this notion of “olivâstre” in Richeome’s writing is quite ambiguous. Did this adjective indicate that Richeome wanted to express his perception of a special color of their skin? What color does actually “olivâstre” stand for? Could this expression “olivâstre” represent what we call “yellow” today?

37 Richeome stayed in Rome between 1607 and 1616 as an assistant of the French District. Henri Brémond, Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu’à nos jours t. 1: l’humanisme dévot (1580–1660) (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1916), 22. Hasekura’s group arrived in Rome in 1615 and met with Pope Paul V (1550–1621). In addition, there was a procession, and Richeome may well have seen it.


40 This is, however, not the first occurrence of the word “olive” or “olivastre” being used to describe Japanese. The term “olivastro” can already be found in a 1585 document mentioning the arrival of the Japanese envoys in Siena. Although there is no proof that Richeome consulted such Italian sources, but we can at least say that the notion itself had already emerged before him. For details on the Siena document, see Giuseppe Sanesi, “I Principi Giapponesi a Siena nel 1585,” Bollettino senese di storia patria 1, no. Fascicolo I–II (1894):124–130 (125–128).
In fact, the situation seems to be fairly nuanced. Unfortunately this term was not yet included in contemporary French dictionaries, but we can find it in the first edition of the Academy Française’s dictionary, published in 1694, where it is defined as “one who is yellow-colored and tanned.”\textsuperscript{41} However, outside of dictionaries, the term olive skin seems to have a very wide use even in the late seventeenth century. It is used within the same abovementioned dictionary of the Academy, in the entry for white skin, where it is said that white means “peoples who have white complexion or even olive, unlike the Mores.”\textsuperscript{42} A book published in 1676 by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689) refers to the inhabitants of the Southern part of the realm of Champā (modern Viet-nâm) as being of a darker, almost “olivâtre” skin, and describes them as “uglier” than their northern counterparts.\textsuperscript{43} The expression, also appears distinct from the concept of yellow skin itself. The prevailing opinion in the previous research attributes its appearance generally to the French physicist François Bernier (1620–1688). Long after Richeome, Bernier shaped the notion of “yellow skin” in a document written in 1684.\textsuperscript{44}

As we see with these examples, in the seventeenth century, the skin color “olive,” when applied to Asian populations, was not perceived as yellow per se. It was sometimes likened to white or black, and an autonomous category of “yellow” did not exist until nearly the eighteenth century. So how should we understand Richeome’s testimony? Did the painting hung in the novitiate really use a particular color in order to portray the Japanese martyrs? Unfortunately, the original image is now lost, and it is not possible to confirm this with our own eyes.

However, there are other sources that allow us to assess how the skin color of the Japanese was perceived by Europeans. First we have the reports of missionaries and travelers. While they do sometimes comment on the physical appearance or skin color of their host, such records are not unanimous. In fact,

\textsuperscript{41} Le dictionnaire de l’Académie Françoise dédié au Roy, Tome second M-Z (Paris: Coignard, 1694), 149.


\textsuperscript{43} See Les six voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier, deuxième partie (Indes et îles voisines) (Paris: Clousier, 1676), 431.

\textsuperscript{44} Rotem Kowner, From White to Yellow, 275–278. The elaboration of the “Yellow” skin color as a discriminative notion appeared later, around the nineteenth century. Also see Michael Keevak, Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
after Portuguese’s arrival in the middle of sixteenth century, the descriptions of the physical features of the Japanese greatly differ on the specific issue of skin color. Concretely, their testimonies swing between white and black. The first Jesuit visitor of Japan, Alessandro Valignano stated that the inhabitants of the archipelago were white.\textsuperscript{45} Another Portuguese Jesuit, João Rodrigues, known as the “Interpreter” for his excellent capacity in the Japanese language, also described the Japanese as white, but specified that their skin was not as transparent as those of the northern people.\textsuperscript{46} Other Portuguese Jesuits, however, such as Francisco Cabral, who was known for his disdain for the inhabitants of the archipelago, portrayed them as “black.”\textsuperscript{47} Unsurprisingly, the word “yellow” does not appear.

Such travelers to the Far East were not the only Europeans who had the chance to see Japanese people with their own eyes. This was made possible by an important event that preceded the beatification of the Asian saints in 1627. Between 1582–1590, four young Japanese boys who had converted to Christianity were taken to Europe on a tour. This encounter would decisively determine European perceptions of the Japanese people. The boys were introduced as “princes” and welcomed as “ambassadors” in various major cities and centers of political power of southern Europe, such as the courts of Philip II of Spain (1527–1598), Francesco I de Medici (1541–1587, the second Grand Duke of Tuscany), and Albert VII (1559–1621, Archduke of Austria).

On this occasion, depictions and portrayals of the boys on posters and brochures were also published. These publications clearly represented them with Asian features and wearing outfits reminiscent of Japanese kimonos mixed with aristocratic clothes of Europe. Similar to the missionaries’ reports, their physical descriptions vary. In a text mentioning their arrival to Florence in 1584, for example, they are described as small, well-proportioned and of pale complexion, using the word “pallida.”\textsuperscript{48} On the other hand, a letter telling of their arrival


\textsuperscript{48} Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivio Mediceo. Settimanni F. Diario Fiorentino. ms IV. : “Addì 8 di Marzo 1584. Venerdì... Tuttie quattro detti giovani sono senza barba, êd il maggiore
in Siena on 19 March 1585 stated that the Japanese boys were of “medium” stature, that their skin color was “olive,” and their features were those of “Moors.” Again, we find irreconcilable differences between European depictions of the appearance of the very same four young Japanese boys. The descriptions oscillate between white and black, while the notion of olive is present, but not in the sense of yellow, but more of a dark-skinned or tanned tone. In this particular document, the description does not seem to convey a positive meaning. In his analysis of such depictions of the Japanese envoys in Modern Europe, Rotem Kowner notes that while there was a tendency to perceive them as a group, rather than as individuals, writers did not agree on their skin colorations; moreover, none of them made the idea of “race” or racial superiority a core issue of their discourses—although this can be seen as an emerging topic in such sources.

However, beyond the mere visual impression, the fact of perceiving the Japanese as light-colored or dark was not anecdotal at all. Valignano, the original organizer of the Japanese “embassy,” regarded the Japanese as similar to “white” Europeans and made every effort in order to have them favorably received in Europe. But the treatment of the Japanese and the Europeans was not completely equal inside the Society at that time. Indigenous priesthood has long been a thorny issue for the Jesuits, and members from the Iberian countries were, unlike the Friars Minor, very reluctant to admit it. One of the twenty-six martyrs,
Gonzalo García, an Indo-Portuguese mestizo, was first educated by the Jesuits and served them. However, he was refused membership in the Society and entered the Franciscan order instead. The Jesuits barred Ethiopians and Africans from membership in the Society, and it also seems to have been the case for the Indo-Portuguese mestizos. Francis Xavier himself, the pioneer of the mission of India, had also spoken against accepting local candidates as priests.

According to the interpretation of Ronnie Hsia, the notion of blood purity, “limpieza de sangre,” may well be behind this distrust of new converts. As seen above, the term indicating “race” at that time derived from the words meaning “genealogy” or “generation” and carried a connotation of a pure lineage. In Castilian, this idea was related to the purity and nobility of unblended blood, whether with the Moors, Jews, heretics or those who had been condemned by the Inquisition. In France, as shown by a poem by Jacques de Breze, the term also described the quality of thoroughbred noble families. Such notions can explain why the Jesuits emphasized the nobility of the Japanese ambassadors, which did not actually reflect their descent.

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8 Werner Sollors, Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 93–94.


10 In this letter, the Jesuit Pedro Ramón complains that those “princes” are in fact poor, and that their lineage is that of low-level nobility, and not royalty. ARSI, Jap.Sin. 10 II, ff. 282–285v.
4 The Ambassadors as Oriental “Magi”

The whole expedition had been thought as a true advertising operation by the members of the Society. Valignano had selected the four candidates himself, and had them learn etiquette and the appropriate gestures of European courts. Their clothes were also carefully chosen, and the entirety of their travel can be understood as a long procession, where they acted as “living pictures.”61 This symbolical strategy was also deeply rooted in previously established conceptions in medieval Europe, especially regarding the otherness of people from afar.

The Ethiopian embassy of 1425 can be seen as a good precedent. Discourses from it would be later reused in 1585 and also elaborated on. In fact, contrary to Asian people, Africans already had a long history of contact with the Catholic world. In medieval Europe, there were several saints whose taxonomic characteristics were attributed to Africans, such as St Maurice, St Gregory, or St Caspar among the Magi. However, in their representations, their physical “otherness” was clearly depicted.62 As shown in Paul Kaplan’s studies on the images of black-skinned magi, such depictions increased especially after the arrival of an Ethiopian embassy to Rome in 1425. The ambassadors and Christian pilgrims from Ethiopia were rather welcomed by their European counterparts, a fact that shows how the focus was put on their faith rather than their external appearance.63

While the context and the “mise-en-scène” or their arrival had most certainly an impact on their image in late Medieval Europe, there was also a clear difference between European perceptions of Africans at that time and that of the ensuing centuries. The shift in perception can be attributed to the influence of an older legend, which would be used in the Catholic world as a new framework to make sense of different-looking extra-European Christians. It was the tale of Prester John, the mythical Christian ruler of the East, or the Indies, the exact location of whose realm was unknown. So, the Ethiopian ambassadors were

thus perceived as a delegation from the real Prester John, an association which greatly explains the favorable welcome they received.

An analogous process was at work with the Japanese ambassadors of 1585. When they arrived in Rome, they were similarly described as delegates of the King of the Indies, or Princes of the Indies. They were also included in a similar discourse and symbolism to the Ethiopian envoys of Prester John. This was clearly a part of a communication strategy, where many details were modified or enhanced to fit a particular narrative. In many of the ceremonies in which the young boys took part, especially their processions in Rome, their number—which originally consisted of four—was reduced to three. This number, as several sources attest, was meant to evoke a well-known element of the image of the East in Christendom: the three Magi who came to visit Christ after his birth.

The story of the Ethiopian ambassadors has been interpreted by scholars such as Matteo Salvadore as a proof of the importance of religious homogeneity, which surpassed physical “otherness,” in the acceptance of the Ethiopian delegates in Europe. While this may well have been partly the case, the example of the Japanese ambassadors also warns us against overestimating the open-mindedness of premodern-Europe; we need to guard against seeing in such events an early manifestation of the concept of “diversity” that derives from post-modern or postcolonial values. In fact, Europeans were aware of the appearance of the Japanese boys, and as we have seen, their characteristics, such as skin-color or stature, were not always perceived in a positive manner. While it would be easy to say that this reflects individual differences in appreciation, their acceptance by most of the public in the cities they visited was also, and mainly, the consequence of a strategy in which their otherness played an important part in a precise ideological discourse.

Their presence was particularly important in the procession (Posesso) organized after the enthronement of Pope Sixtus V (1521–1590), shortly after their arrival. In this image and in the official record of the ceremony, published by Muzio Panza a few years later, the Japanese are described as “young Indians,” envoys of the “king of Japan,” coming from the “Antipodes.”


Pansa states: “Sopra la porta si vede in un apittura l’andata solenne, che fece Sisto à Laterano quando essendo già salutato Pontefice; prese il possesso della Sede Pontificia accompagnato da i tre Giovani Indiani, che vennero dagli Antipodi à rendere obbedienza alla Chiesa Romana, & à prostarsi à i piedi del vero Vicario di Christo in terra, in nome dei loro Re del Giappone, che illuminati già dallo Spirito di Dio, havenvano ricevuto la santa Fede, & abbracciato la Croce, e l’Evangelio di Christo.” Muzio Pansa, Della Libraria Vaticana ragionamenti. Ne’
representing this glorious ceremony is also displayed on a wall of the Vatican Library, in the salon which was given the name of the Pope himself. It is described by Panza as a scene of the “Antipodes going with Sixtus to the temple.”

In all their travels through Europe, their superficial otherness provided obvious proof of the infinite distance between Europe and the territories from which they came. This geographical distance was an important element that illuminated the centrality of Rome. Another vital theme was the travelers’ Christian faith. The very fact that they had managed to travel all the way to Rome could only have been possible due to having been motivated by the depths of their faith. Therefore, the presence of such newly-converted Christian “others” efficiently established the legitimacy of the Roman Catholic true faith and also confirmed the order of their dogmas and social hierarchy.

This Roman standpoint is also confirmed by the description in Cesare Ripa’s “Iconologia.”

This guidebook of symbols and iconographies had a great influence on the iconology used in the ceremonies and images of the Baroque era, as it was broadly used to create this visual framework. In this book, the allegorical representation of the Catholic Church is arranged to emphasize its centrality and stand for its supremacy over other religions in the world. In this very context, the presence of Japanese ambassadors as decorative elements in the Roman pomp would have highlighted such discourse. The splendor of the procession in Rome was organized with the understanding that it would be presented not only for Roman eyes but also to the broader European public. This demonstration...
was all the more crucial in the context of the Counter-Reformation era, when the position of Rome was incessantly questioned.69

5 The embassy as a conversion drama

This process of accepting “others,” sharing the same Christian faith, also correlated with the diffusion of the theme of conversion in dramatic context. During this same period, depicting conversions of pagan kings was a popular subject in religious theater, especially in performances at Jesuit colleges. Dramatic works constituted another crucial element in the visual and symbolic discourses enacted throughout the ambassadors’ journey. In fact, their entire expedition was constructed as a true conversion drama.70

Upon their arrival in 1580, a public presentation accompanied by solemn ceremonies was organized at the Colegio Imperial de Madrid.71 Five years later, a record of their passage to Rome explicitly describes this way of staging the actions of the Japanese delegates as a “theatro.”72 Moreover, the Japanese

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69 At that time the procession and the public demonstration in Rome was directly connected with the pan-European manifestation of power and supremacy. Martine Boiteux, “Parcours rituels romains à l’époque moderne,” in Cérémonial et rituel à Rome (XVIe – XIXe siècle), ed. Maria Antonietta Visceglia and Catherine Brice (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1997), 27–87.


72 “Ma hoggi all’incontro si vede in Roma istessa, Theatro nobilissimo de l’universo, che questi giovani Giaponesi nati in lontanissime Regioni delle famiglie Reali, si prosternano a’ santissimi
delegates even played a role in a ceremony of this kind. During their stay in Mantua, they were actually invited to the baptism of a Jew. The convert took the Christian name of Miguel Mantio, which would have combined the names of two members of the embassy. In this context, the conversion of the Japanese delegates would have appeared as a model for the new Christians. They are deliberately depicted as figures of foreign princes, pagans converted to the true faith, and contemporary incarnations of the three Magi—the same symbols as the act of conversion.

This rhetoric of transformation was all the more apparent during the arrival of the Japanese embassy, which followed in 1615. At this time, the leader of the embassy, Hasekura Tsunenaga, was baptized in Spain. A great festival was organized in the Cathedral of Descalzas Reales for this event, which took place in 1585.


74 Their role in an edification discourse can be seen in a text published by the Swiss humanist Renward Cysat, an important figure in late sixteenth-century Luzern, the Warhaftiger Bericht von den newerfundnen Japanischen Inseln und Königreichen. This book was published the year following the embassy’s arrival (in 1586). In his introduction, Cysat insists on the importance of the diffusion of stories about Japanese Christians, which could bring light to as many persons as possible, and especially those who spoke German “...dazu auch notwendig daß solche herzliche Historien unnd Geschichten zu grossem Nutz vieler Menschen publiziert und an das Liecht geben werden möchten,” IV recto.). See Omata Rappo, “Des Indes Lointaines Aux Scènes Des Collèges,” 225.

75 Such depiction reinforces again the legitimacy of the pope as the leader of the true and only Church of the whole world. This idea is also formulated in the official papal response to the oration pronounced at their arrival in Rome, in 1585: “Ad hanc orationem ab Antonio Buccapadulio, Summi Pontificis nomine, in hæc verba responsum est. ... Quod Franciscus Bungi Rex, & Protasius Arimanorum, Protasique patruus Barptolomæus Omuræ Princeps, ab Iaponiorum insulis remotissimis vos suos propinquos huc ad se miserint, eius quam obtinet Dei benignitate potestatis coram venerandæ causa, pie illos sapienterque fecisse. Esse enim unam fidem, unam Ecclesiam Catholicam, unum huic ipsi Ecclesiæ Præfectum, Christique gregis universi, hoc est Catholicorum omnium, qui ubique terrarum sunt, Petri successionem Pastorem, Romanum Pontificem. Hoc illos una cum ceteris fidei orthodoxæ mysteriis agnescere & profiteri lætatur, immortalesque.” Acta consistorii publice exhibiti A. S. D. N. Gregorio Papa XIII. Regum Japoniorum legatis Romae, die XXIII. Martii M.D. LXXXV (Rome: Joan Mayer, 1585) 18. A French translation can be found in Les actes du consistoire public exhibe par nostre S. P. le Pape Grégoire XIII (Lyon: Benoît Rigaud, 1585), 27.

76 Historia del regno di Voox del Giapone, dell’antichità, nobilità, e valore del suo re Idate Masamune, delli favori, c’ha fatti alla Christianità, e desiderio che tiene d’esser Christiano, e dell’aumento di nostra santa fede in quelle parti. E dell’ambasciata che hà inviata alla Santità di
place in the presence of the king and queen and of other nobles from all over Europe. A report of the events states that the court ladies even shed tears of emotion at the sight of the spectacle.77

A similar ceremony was reenacted in Rome. According to the memoirs of the Roman Jesuit Giaginto Gigli (1594–1671), Hasekura was presented as a “brother of the King of Japan” who came with his companions from “the Indies.”78 The ceremony took place on 29 October 1615 in the presence of the Pope, cardinals, and various important figures of the European nobility. Three companions of Hasekura were baptized in the Eternal City.79

In some cases, the conversion was much more than a performance. In Spain itself, members of the Hasekura delegation remained in the country, and their descendants continue to carry proudly the name “del Japón” today.80 This acceptance is all the more surprising given that Spain at the time was obsessed with the question


77 “Viſtò poi con gran devozione, & humilità tutte le Cappelle, e ſante Reliquie con molta edificatione di tutte le Monache, Dame della Regina, che per ecceffo di contento interno, moſtravano di lagrimare.” Acta consistorii publice exhibiti a S. D. N. Gregorio Papa XIII, 45


79 ASV. Fondo Borghese, I-723.

of origins. In this same period, former Jews and Muslims who had converted were the
target of sometimes harsh discrimination or subjected to the interrogation of the
notorious Inquisition. This harshness was not directed towards the Japanese dele-
gates, whose descendants have never been subjected to such treatment, to this day.

Hence, the favorable acceptance of physical difference in the context of pre-
modern Europe was hardly related to a vague notion of diversity that is asso-
ciated with open-mindedness in the modern sense. Rather, it was possible only
within a very particular framework. It was only when either the Ethiopians or the
Japanese were presented as envoys or incarnations of either Prester John or the
Magi, that such a strategy worked; that is, only in the limited condition where
“others” shared the same “right” Christian faith. In turn, such acceptance of the
other showed the centrality and righteousness of the Church.

### 6 The Japanese and the sons of Ham

As seen above, the effort to assimilate the Japanese embassies that took place in
the context of Baroque pomp and ceremonies is often explained as a form of
propaganda. While this aspect was indeed crucial, it can also be understood as a
reaction to the racial considerations that have been discussed above. In the
context of modern Europe, the issue of Asian skin color was not an isolated
issue. Instead, it was linked to a much larger and deeper network of symbolic
and ideological elements.

Most scholars agree that “race” as a human category based on the taxo-
nomic differences took a clearer and more fixed form only in the eighteenth
century. Its emergence in vocabulary and as a framework of perception is seen

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82 None of the missionary accounts of the local Japanese religious activities give really accurate descriptions. Journalistic accuracy was not their primary objective. From the Catholic Church’s point of view, none of the local beliefs could be considered as equal counterparts to Christian beliefs. Therefore they were simply reduced to “idolatries,” superstitions, or rather enemies to be beaten or to be overcome. See Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Reassessing ‘the Discovery of Hinduism’: Jesuit Discourse on Gentile Idolatry and the European Republic of Letters,” in *Intercultural Encounters and the Jesuit Mission in South Asia (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries)*, eds Anand Amaladass and Ines G. Županov (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2014), 113–155.
in studies such as those of Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778). Of course this way of thinking had already been germinating through medieval times, which paved the way for the ensuing phenomena. Skin color had been used as a parameter for the categorization of people even in Ancient Greece and Egypt. However, it was from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century that the parameter of color really began to function as a criterion determining a hierarchical relationship between the “self” and the “other.” In fact, the discourse of the infamous Noachian malediction, the “Curse of Ham,” was not still firmly linked to the idea of dark or black-colored skin in the fifteenth century. For example, the original Latin and German editions (1493) of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* illustrated all the sons of Noah, including Ham, with a white skin.

Interestingly, in the following centuries, this episode of the Noachian curse is frequently used to explain differences of appearance in the description of peoples newly encountered as a result of the European expansion. The *Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, written by Gomes Eannes de Azurara (1410–1474), refers to the Curse of Ham to explain the slave-trade on the coast of Africa. Whether or not this rhetoric had been applied to the Japanese in the sixteenth century or not remains ambiguous. However, at least one text suggests that this idea may have been transmitted to them, or at least used to explain the Catholic world

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order. The text, entitled “De Missione Legatorum Iaponensium,” was published in 1590. It takes the form of a dialog in Latin between the abovementioned four Japanese “ambassadors” on their way back to Japan from Europe. While its authorship is usually attributed to Duarte de Sande (1531–1600), it may well have been at least partly written by Valignano himself. In this theatrical conversation, which did probably not reflect any real dialogue, the Japanese boys are portrayed as saying that a dark tone was a direct result of divine punishment. This is where they mention the famous story of Ham, who had allegedly disrespected his father, and was thus cursed to have “stained” skin, a characteristic that would be inherited by his descendants. This must be understood in the context of the emergence of the slave-trade. In fact, despite the interdiction proffered by the Portuguese King, Japanese were victims of this practice, and indigenous slaves from all the East Indies were gathered in Manila and sent to Mexico.

While Japan was not directly linked to the curse, some sources associated it with China. In fact, at the dawn of the Enlightenment, China was not considered to be equal to Europe. It was considered a pagan land, home to people without honor, who were cursed by the malediction of Ham. The Italian Martin Martini (1614–1661) was the first to claim that Chinese character’s could be traced back to Egyptian hieroglyphs, a theory which was further developed by Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680). He explained that Fu Xi (considered to have lived c. 2,000 BCE), the legendary figure who transmitted the characters to China, was Ham, the son of Noah. Later this idea was followed and expanded by Georg Horn, a professor of history and theology at Leiden, who considered that the Chinese were the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japhet. In this theory, the Japanese were also considered to share the same roots as the Chinese, since

88 De missione legatorum Iaponensium ad Romanam curiam rebusq[ue] in Europa (Macau: Company of Jesus, 1590).
91 Tatiana Seijas, Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians, 55–56. For the most recent study on the problem of Japanese slaves, also see Lúcio de Sousa and Mihoko Oka, Daikōkai jidai no nihonjin dorei (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 2017).
93 Zhun Xia, Chinesia, 27.
it affirmed that Korea and Japan were both founded by the Chinese.\textsuperscript{95} This widening of the populations linked to Ham correlated with frequent confluences of the images of Asians, Africans, and Native Americans, who were depicted all together with the same iconography.\textsuperscript{96}

The notion of skin color was also sometimes correlated to a certain relationship to the true faith. For example, the Protestant missionary Jean de Léry (1536–1613) describes the people he encountered in Brazil, Tupinamba, as the descendant of Ham, who was cursed and therefore unfit for Christian salvation.\textsuperscript{97} In contrast, the whiteness or clarity of skin was gradually perceived as proof of belonging to the right faith, or of the purity of the soul. In seventeenth century New Spain, the indelible “default” of the converted Jews began to be compared with the indelible “blackness” of black slaves, and the malediction of Ham was simultaneously attributed to the Jewish people, even for those whose skin was not clearly dark.\textsuperscript{98} In the case of Catarina de San Juan, a slave of Asian origin who attracted devotion in the local Mexican society, her hagiographer describes her as a fair-skinned princess rather than a dark-skinned female slave, which constituted a marginalized social type.\textsuperscript{99} Another interesting witness of the perception of white-colored skin as a proof of having the right faith is “Il Moro della Bianca Fé (“The Moor of the White Faith”) (1694), a comedy played in the Jesuit school in Rome (Seminario Romano).\textsuperscript{100} We know the outline of the story through the pamphlet printed in 1694, but it was played several times.\textsuperscript{101} The


\textsuperscript{100} Bruna Filippi, Il teatro degli argomenti gli scenari secenteschi del teatro gesuitico romano catalogo analitico (Roma: Torre d’Orfeo, 2001), 400–402.

story starts with a cortege of “moro” slaves in chains, whose presence is designed to draw a sharp contrast with the allegory of “Liberty.” The theme of the play is the freedom brought through faith and friendship, virtues which were defined with the adjective “white.”

All this evidence indicates that skin color was perceived as a projection of an individual’s faith and morality. This explains why the descriptions of the Japanese as “Moors” or “blacks” are clearly pejorative and strengthen their pagan character—it paints them as aliens or even enemies. Their depiction as “white” skinned rather reflects a form of empathy—it is an effort to integrate them into the Catholic community. It also at least partly explains why such physical characteristics were gradually erased from the images of the Japanese martyrs, who were revered as saints, and their portrayals began to take the physical features of European missionaries or priests.

7 The iconographic tradition

One of the first oil paintings depicting the three Japanese Jesuits (here I mention only the oil painting deliberately to pay attention to the color used to represent Japanese martyrs), is “Los mártires jesuitas del Japón,” drawn by Pedro García Ferrer (1583–1660, now in the possession of the Museo de Bellas Artes, Valencia, Figure 1). It was realized in 1629, shortly after the beatification of the martyrs in 1627, and therefore not long after Richeome’s description of the iconography of the martyrs with “olivastre” faces. Ferrer’s painting depicted similar features to those that Richeome described: small eyes and rather tanned faces. But a later example, “I Tre martiri di Nagasaki,” realized by Johann Heinrich Schönfeld between 1633–1650, shows little of such “Japanese” features. This is also true of the painting hung on top of the altar of the Chapelle dedicated to St Francis Xavier (actual Capilla de las Dos Trinidades) in the Iglesia del Colegio Imperial in Madrid, or “Drei Märtyrer von Nagasaki” hung on the wall of St Michael’s

102 In a fascinating article, Erin Kathleen Rowe masterfully analyzes how the hagiographers of black saints in the modern period tried to overcome the preexisting prejudice towards black skin and blackness. They either celebrated it, condemned it while insisting on the virtue needed to overcome this condition, or minimized its implications. Either way, they could not completely ignore it. See Erin Kathleen Rowe, “After Death, Her Face Turned White: Blackness, Whiteness, and Sanctity in the Early Modern Hispanic World,” The American Historical Review 121 (2016): 727–754. Bearing this in mind, it is clear that the fact of perceiving the Japanese as “white” or “black” had implications that reached beyond simple physiognomic or anatomic observations.
Church in Munich. The fact that the Japanese martyrs were depicted as white-skinned people in such paintings could also be explained by purely practical considerations, such as the visual culture of the painters themselves, or a cognitive difficulty in perceiving and expressing unfamiliar traits of bodily

Figure 1: “Los mártires jesuitas del Japón,” Pedro García Ferrer (Museo de Bellas Artes, Valencia).

However, the example of the illustrations of the Japanese and Chinese deities described by Athanasius Kircher shows that painters and engravers were able to express exoticism or otherness even while staying within the boundaries of the European visual culture. A good example of this phenomenon can be seen in the painting representing the festivities in Antwerp following the canonization of Xavier in 1622. In this painting, people from all around were represented in “exotic” attire.

Jesuit iconography like these stand in striking contrast to the Franciscan version of the same theme. Images of the twenty-three Franciscan martyrs of 1597 normally include a larger group of victims, and their number is not used to convey a particular message. Even though the Jesuits were not as eager to promote the beatification as the Franciscans, they finally grew quite attached to the iconographic triad of their Japanese martyrs. The number of surviving images dedicated to this theme amounts to twenty-two, counting those printed and recorded in the documents.

It is possible that it is only a historical coincidence that only three of their members were among the beatified and these three were also Japanese. However, purely from the point of view of the Christian iconographic tradition, such ensembles can be easily associated with the New Testament scene of Mount Calvary, the place where the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ took place besides the two robbers. This very scene also happened to be a major subject of the spiritual exercises established by the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola. Such symbolism reiterates the veritable reason of their beatification: those martyrs were crucified as Jesus Christ. To convey those allusions and devotional messages, the physical characteristic perceived as

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106 For example see the oil painting “Mártires del Japón,” now in the Convento de Santa Maria de Jesús or “Os mártires franciscanos do Japão,” Fundaçao da Casa de Bragança.


typically Japanese were no longer attributed to the martyrs; rather, they were only applied to the executioners or guards who were sometimes present in the images.

In such iconography, the “exotic” aspects of the executioners, symbols of the local authorities, are highlighted with kimono-like garments and peculiar haircuts. The role of the executioner, as Foucault indicated, is fundamental in the narrative build-up to the ultimate sacrifice.109 In addition, in the particular case of imagery of the martyrs, the more cruel, barbaric and uncivilized the executors are depicted, the more it provides theological legitimacy to the martyrs.110 That is why the representations of the Society’s Japanese martyrs rapidly were portrayed with rather non-Japanese physical features, while the executors were drawn with more exotic aspects. This pictorial rhetoric is all the more apparent in the case of the image of the Iglesia del Colegio Imperial, where the executors are stylized with turbans, the Muslim Ottoman headdress. Actually, the turban used to symbolize the challenging religious power of the Ottoman Empire in post-Renaissance Europe. The expression “taking the turban” was even considered synonymous with conversion to Islam.111 Because of the geographical vicinity, the Ottoman

![Figure 2](image.png)

**Figure 2:** “Mártires del Japón,” by Sebastián de Herrera Barnuevo, (Capilla de las Dos Trinidades, Iglesia del Colegio imperial, Madrid).

Empire and the “Turks” appeared as the immediate pagan threat to contemporary Christian Europe.112 Thus, in this particular picture (Figure 2), it is unsurprising that the same pagan Japanese, who executed the Christians for their faith, were associated with the “Turks,” whose images were more familiar than the Japanese.

8 Conclusion

The martyrs of Nagasaki were a special case, as they were not martyrs of the colonies but were “Europeanized” in discourses about them, in the iconography, and in popular devotion. Their recognition as saints was especially crucial in the context of Post-Reformation Europe, as it gave the Church, and the religious orders, “true martyrs,” who were a tangible result of the mission. Their exceptional beatification process really started after the Hasekura embassy. The main justification for this decision was the fact that they died on the “cross.” Their foreignness, however, did appear to be a factor.

This article explores the reason why the “racial” features of the Japanese martyrs were not reflected in their surviving iconography. We started by asking if this was indeed always the case. In fact the skin color of the Japanese in modern times was a difficult problem. Richeome’s testimony introduced us to the notion of “olivastre,” which may seem related to the contemporary notion of “yellow” but was in fact a different concept. It seems to have described a dark, tanned skin, but could also be understood as a type of whiteness. Earlier sources, such as missionaries’ letters, show us that Europeans did not have a unified perception of the skin color of the Japanese people. Some of them saw it as pale or close to white, while others described it as dark. The same pattern can be seen in the records of the first “Japanese embassy” to Europe, which arrived in 1585. In fact, one of my main arguments is directly related to this embassy, which was conceived as a way of propagandizing the Japanese mission.

This strategy also made ample use of earlier discourses related to the people of the East, such as the story of Prester John, and, above all, to the three oriental magi who came to see the newborn Christ. The four Japanese were included in a visual and symbolic strategy that went beyond their otherness—as it was perceived by the European public—to include them in the Catholic world order. Thus, their presence showed not only the centrality of the Church but also its domination over the whole world.

Skin color also had a moral implication, related to a certain relationship with the true faith. The journey of the four Japanese boys throughout Europe was also designed as a living “conversion drama,” and they served as models of this act on more than one occasion. This also implied that the relative accept ance of the Japanese stemmed from their unquestioned adherence to the true faith. In this context, it is quite telling that a document published after their departure that depicts them as debating issues such as the different “races” in the world makes use of the story of the Curse of Ham. In fact, this biblical topic was also used to delineate a form of hierarchy of the people of the world at the time, and certain seventeenth-century authors saw China as a country founded by the sons of Ham. This created an ideological framework in which dark skin was seen as a sign of one’s distance from the true faith and even reflected moral depravity. The moral and physical “whiteness” of the Japanese martyrs might even partly explain why they were beatified, and not the “black saints” of the colonial world. Figures such as Teresa Juliana de Santo Domingo (d. 1743), an african born slave who lived in Madrid, remained indeed the subject of local cults, despite their hagiographers’ efforts to create new models of sainthood integrating their skin-color.113

The iconographic tradition of the Japanese martyrs, especially in the Society of Jesus, was clearly influenced by such matters, and also actively included them in a preexisting symbolic background. Depictions of the martyrs themselves, who were three in number, were associated with Christ and the two robbers on Mount Calvary. To emphasize this relationship, they were shown as simple missionaries or priests; their figures were presented as white skinned and lacking any features that were used in other sources to depict typically “Asian features.” In fact, such exotic otherness was transferred to the executioners, the enemies of the faith. Far from being due simply to practical considerations, this iconography was the product of a complex conglomerate of symbolic, doctrinal, and ideological elements that were used to integrate these “foreign” saints into the devotional context of modern Europe and its colonies. In doing so, the paintings also incarnate what can be seen as the first seeds of a racial perception of Eastern Asia and its inhabitants, which would later evolve to become the notion of “yellow.”114

113 See Erin Kathleen Rowe, “After Death, Her Face Turned White,” 442.
114 This article was written with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF).