



Looking for interpreter zero: (7) Rodrigues Tçuzzu, a Jesuit interpreter in Japa

João Rodrigues lived in Japan from 1577 to 1610 where he took vows, learned Japanese, and interpreted for the Society in a land sceptical of foreigners.

Christine ADAMS.

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Tsukku-san's my nickname as Japanese cannot pronounce my name ... Tsukku's a pun on the Japanese word tsuyaku – to interpret. [\[1\]](#)

The Jesuit mission in Japan recognised that the Christian faith had to be somehow freed of its European features if they were to make converts – and that involved learning Japanese. The need to acknowledge the realities of life in Japan gave a worldly edge to the Society's endeavours there: communication, transactions and negotiations with local governors, powerful barons and the shogun himself – as well as traders from Macao - addressed issues well beyond doctrinal matters. The complications of the Jesuit mission are embodied in the man who came to be known as Rodrigues Tçuzzu: Rodrigues the Interpreter.

Journey to Japan

In his account of this interpreter's life, Michael Cooper, SJ, rehearses the reasons why a young man might find himself sailing from Lisbon to Nagasaki via the Cape of Good Hope, Mozambique, Goa and Macao. It is not clear whether João Rodrigues was sent for the express purpose of serving the mission or whether he was a fortune seeker who found that he had a vocation after his arrival in Japan in 1577 at the age of 16. He was to live there until he was expelled in 1610, during which time he took his vows, learned Japanese, interpreted at high level meetings and defended the Society's financial and doctrinal interests in a Buddhist land with an abiding scepticism about foreigners complicated by a desire to trade.

During his second visit, in 1591, Alessandro Valignano, Visitor of the Jesuit Mission in the Indies was granted an audience with Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the Japanese ruler. Hideyoshi had expelled the Jesuits from Japan four years earlier. While the decree was not enforced, the mission had to keep a low profile and it is doubtful that Valignano would have been received had he not been sent to Japan as the Ambassador of the Viceroy of Portuguese India. As Ambassador, Valignano took a limited number of missionaries with him as well as four young converts who had spent years on a diplomatic mission to Europe that he had organised. The party included Rodrigues, who was one of two interpreters.

Ambassadorial pomp

People lined the streets of Kyoto to see the first ever European embassy procession to the capital on 27 February 1591. The embassy came bearing gifts, pride of place being given to “a fine Arab stallion, resplendent with silver harness, golden stirrups and black velvet drapes.” [ii] Diplomatic ceremony was duly observed once the party was inside the ruler’s palace. This included the ambassador and *Kampaku* sipping sake from the same cup in testimony to their friendship; in this *sakazuki* ceremony “two or more persons drink alternatively from the same cup as a sign of uniting their hearts into one or their souls into one.” [iii] The visitors were then presented with gifts; Rodrigues and his colleague received thirty bars of silver and two silk robes each. Rodrigues then interpreted during exchanges between Hideyoshi and his visitors.

At that time Rodrigues had not yet completed his theological studies; he had to take frequent breaks before his 1596 ordination in order to interpret. His command of Japanese and familiarity with local customs meant that he had an increasingly important role to play in the sometimes tense relations between the Jesuits and their hosts. (The Jesuit mission did not teach modern languages to its students, so there were few Japanese interpreters available. When one of the young diplomats who had been to Europe interpreted at an encounter between two Spanish Franciscan friars and a Japanese general, the working languages were Latin and Japanese [iv])

Rodrigues Tçukku had a rare skill and was much in demand. He participated in 1593 negotiations with the governor of Nagasaki when a dispute over money involving a Portuguese merchant led to Jesuit property being destroyed. There was more trouble in 1597 with the *San Felipe* affair, a complicated series of misunderstandings that began with the confiscation of the cargo on a Spanish vessel shipwrecked off the coast of Japan. The captain of the vessel allegedly allowed as to how missionaries were the vanguard of military conquerors, which led to further tension about the presence of the Jesuits and the Franciscans, and then to the execution of 26 Christians on 5 February 1597.

Trade

The Jesuits were tolerated in Japan because people thought there would be no trade without them, and there was strong interest in the exchange of Chinese silk and Japanese silver in which Macao-based Portuguese middlemen played a significant role. The perceived link between trade and religion marked the history of the Portuguese presence in Asia. [v] The Jesuits themselves funded their mission in Japan by investing in silk shipped in from Macao.

Rodrigues is a good instance of the blurred boundaries between spiritual and temporal concerns. In June 1601 he made his solemn religious profession to Valignano, vowing perpetual poverty, chastity and obedience. That same year, Hideyoshi’s successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu, made him his commercial agent in Nagasaki. He was also the Society’s treasurer, responsible for managing its affairs and dealings with the outside world. His high profile made him vulnerable to criticism and political pressure.

In 1610 when there was another trade dispute and a torched vessel, the governor of Nagasaki made friendly relations with the Portuguese traders and Jesuits conditional upon Rodrigues’s expulsion. The mission felt that it had no choice but to send him to Macao, where he spent the rest of his life. His departure did not save the Jesuits’ mission in Japan: all priests were expelled in 1614.

During his years in Macao, Rodrigues revised his first publication, the first ever grammar of the Japanese language, *Arte da Lingoa de Iapam*, which demonstrated the deep familiarity with the islands that informed the material collected for his *História da Igreja do Japão*. The book was not completed but there are eighteenth-century copies of the first two sections of the introductory section

which use his own experience of life in Japan to describe its geography, architecture, ceremonies and language.

His deep knowledge of the language and culture clearly informed his work as an intermediary. Like others before and since, however, his unclear status and high profile made him a vulnerable messenger.

[i] Clavell, J (1975). *Shogun*. London, Hodder and Stoughton

[ii] Cooper, M. (1974). *Rodrigues the Interpreter*, p 75. New York, Weatherhill.

[iii] Cooper, M. (Translator & Editor) (1973). *This Island of Japon: João Rodrigues' Account of 16th Century Japan*, p 213. Tokyo & New York, Kodansha International, Ltd.

[iv] Moran, J.F. (1993). *The Japanese and the Jesuits*, pp186-187. London, Routledge.

[v] Massarella, D. (1990). *A World Elsewhere*, pp 16-17. Yale University Press.

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