

Martyrdom, Witnessing, and Social Lineages in the Tamil Country (Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)

Margherita Trento

In the sandy village of Oriyur, nestled on the banks of the Pambar river just before it enters the mangrove forest that covers long stretches of the Coromandel coast, stands a shrine dedicated to the Portuguese Jesuit saint João de Brito. The shrine is an important devotional site in this remote corner of Tamil Nadu. Its origins and popularity are connected to the martyrdom of Brito, executed on this spot in 1693 by order of the local ruler Rakunāta Kīḷavaṅ Cētupati, also known as Rakunāta Tēvaṅ.¹ From that moment onwards, the region's Catholics and non-Catholics alike have regarded Brito as a holy man whose powers manifest in the village. Throughout the centuries, they have traveled to Oriyur to make offerings, asking for his protection while referring to him deferentially by his Tamil name, Aruḷānanta swami (a literal translation of João, “blessed by divine grace,” with the honorific title for “teacher”). Brito's shrine (fig. 1), built roughly fifty years after his death, has become the center of a dense network of pilgrimage routes, starting from the towns and villages of the Maravar region where the missionary preached and proselytized during his lifetime.

Today, the people who make the pilgrimage to Oriyur mostly belong to three local castes: the Maṛavar, Kaḷḷar, and Akamuṭaiyār, collectively known as Tēvar or

This article was first published in French as “Martyre, témoignage et lignées sociales en pays tamoul (xvii^e–xviii^e siècles),” *Annales HSS* 78, no. 1 (2023): 35–71.

1. The transcription of Tamil personal names reflects the language and conventions of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century source texts. Toponyms are given in the modern English form.

Figure 1. The shrine of João de Brito at Oriyur (2017)



Source: Margherita Trento.

Mukkulattōr, literally “the three castes.”² Regardless of religious confession, members of these groups view Brito as one of the tutelar deities of their clan.³ Both Catholic and Hindu Tēvar visit this remote hamlet, especially during the three annual festivals that honor Brito’s feast day (January 26–February 4), the anniversary of

2. These groups have been the subject of many anthropological studies. Louis Dumont’s first ethnographical investigation was conducted among one sub-group of the Kaḷḷar: Dumont, *Une sous-caste de l’Inde du Sud. Organisation sociale et religion des Pramalai Kallar* (La Haye: Mouton, 1957). On the same group, see also the recent work by Zoé E. Headley, “Of Dangerous Guardians and Contested Hierarchies: An Ethnographic Reading of a South Indian Copper Plate,” in *New Dimensions in Tamil Epigraphy: Select Papers from the Symposia Held at EPHE-SHP, Paris, in 2005, 2006, and a Few Invited Papers*, ed. Appasamy Murugaiyan (Chennai: Cre-A Publishers, 2012), 253–81.

3. Selva J. Raj, “Transgressing Boundaries, Transcending Turner: The Pilgrimage Tradition at the Shrine of St. John de Britto,” in *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the Lines*, ed. Selva J. Raj and Corinne G. Dempsey (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 85–111, here p. 87.

his canonization (June 20–22), and the Nativity of Mary (August 30–September 8). Arriving on foot or on bullock carts, and more recently by bus, the pilgrims perform rites including animal sacrifices (usually goats or chickens) and take part in processions where they lead cattle around the shrine. Participation in these rituals is organized according to a grammar of castes and sub-castes, but the practices are common to all visitors.

Most fundamentally, pilgrims to Oriyur share the belief that the power of the saint is strong in the village because his blood was shed there. This reflects a belief common to different religions in South India, where blood is linked with spiritual charisma and its spilling is often the source of the power of village gods and holy places.⁴ In this case, the sand on the banks of the Pambar river, at the point where it runs nearest the shrine, is said to have turned red as the decapitated martyr's blood flowed from his neck. This sand is reckoned to have miraculous healing properties, especially for skin diseases. When I was in Oriyur in 2017, it was available for a few rupees, packaged in small plastic bags, a ready-to-go relic that visitors could easily bring home with them.⁵ The devotional and ritual life of the Tēvar and the other pilgrims to Oriyur thus recognizes the day of Brito's death, February 4, 1693, as the moment that the saint's power took root in the soil of the village.

But how did a Portuguese Jesuit, an agent of modern global Catholicism, become such a locally anchored figure? How did the last day of Brito's life become the beginning of a Tamil devotion that has lasted three centuries and continues to this day? So far, such questions have been approached from separate angles. On the one hand, historians of the Jesuit mission have stressed the central role of the strategy of accommodation, a form of radical social and cultural adaptation predicated on the missionaries' ability to identify and participate in non-religious spheres of life around the globe.⁶ The Madurai mission, to which Brito belonged, was no exception. Founded in 1606, it extended over the Tamil-speaking territory ruled by many local dynasties, most important among them the Nāyaks of Madurai and Thanjavur (fig. 2). In this context, Jesuit missionaries fashioned themselves as local teachers of a new religion, the Christian "sect" (*kiristava matam*). On the other hand, anthropologists, starting with Susan Bayly in the late 1980s, have explained the origins and local forms of Tamil Christianity according to the religious pluralism and integration that characterized this part of South India, especially before

4. This logic is described in David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). It was applied to village gods, and by analogy to South Indian Muslim *pirs* and Christian saints like Brito, by Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and David Mosse, "Catholic Saints and the Hindu Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu, India," *Man* 29, no. 2 (1994): 301–32.

5. As I observed during fieldwork in Oriyur in February 2017 with Fr. Anand Amaladass SJ.

6. This approach was pioneered in Ines G. Županov, "Le repli du religieux. Les missionnaires jésuites du XVII^e siècle entre la théologie chrétienne et une éthique païenne," *Annales HSS* 51, no. 6 (1996): 1201–23.

Figure 2. Map of the Madurai mission in the eighteenth century



Source: *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus*, vol. 15 (Paris: Nicolas Le Clerc, 1722), 1.

colonialism.⁷ The existence of a “Tamil way” of being in the world, cutting across religious affiliations, is still at the center of anthropological explorations of contemporary village life in Tamil Nadu.⁸

In this essay, I suggest that the anchoring of Brito’s cult is better understood through the *interplay* of these very different scales—of global dynamics and local logics—and especially through their interaction in the local context. This position is to a large extent dictated by the archives themselves. I first had the idea to research the figure of Brito in Tamil Nadu, after seeing his statue in so many churches (fig. 3). Yet my first breakthrough on the ways in which his martyrdom was interpreted and appropriated on a local level came while working on the Tamil collections of the Bibliothèque nationale (BNF) in Paris, where I found a palm-leaf

7. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*.

8. I paraphrase here E. Valentine Daniel’s expression in *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). The works of Ā. Civacuppramañiā, a long-term associate of the Department of Folklore at St. Xavier’s College in Palayamkottai, have explored Tamil village culture in a granular way, with a special attention to Christian rituals.

manuscript containing a life of Brito composed by one of the catechists who witnessed his death.⁹ As I began exploring other archives, the apparent contradiction of Tamil voices preserved in locations thousands of miles from South India continued to emerge. The records of the first inquiries into Brito's martyrdom, for instance, organized in Mylapore in 1695 and 1726 under the supervision of the Roman Congregation of Rites, are now preserved in the Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (AAV) in Rome. These documents are traces of the theological and juridical functioning of the Catholic Church and its institutions in the early modern period. Yet, with the formal Latin of their legal architecture mingling with the spoken Tamil of the witnesses themselves, they are also, in all likelihood, some of the earliest transcriptions of speeches made in Tamil to survive.¹⁰

Figure 3. Statue of saint João de Brito at Oriyur (2017)



Source: Margherita Trento.

9. I discovered this manuscript (Paris, BNF, Indien 469, discussed in more detail below) in the context of the project “Texts Surrounding Texts” (TST, FRAL 2018, ANR & DFG).

10. Witness statements recorded during canonization inquiries have so far attracted relatively little attention, especially compared to those used in other types of canon-law trials and notably by the Inquisition. There has been much historiographical debate over the possibility of reading these depositions—even given the biases introduced by the inquisitorial process itself—*against* the official discourse of the Church to reveal the lives of subaltern actors and their place in wider historical narratives. The most famous example is the case of the miller Domenico Scandella, known as Menocchio, studied in Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* [1976], trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). Another study of the same case is Andrea Del Col, ed., *Domenico Scandella detto Menocchio: I processi dell’Inquisizione, 1583–1599* (Pordenone: Ed. Biblioteca dell’Immagine, 1990).

Relying on the close reading of such archival sources in multiple languages (not only in Tamil and Latin but also in Italian and Portuguese), occasionally nurtured by ethnographic insights, the following pages engage with a long chronology and different scales to analyze the effects reverberating out from the specific and situated event of Brito's death. These effects extend in two directions. On one level, as soon it was claimed as a martyrdom, Brito's death was woven into the discourse of spiritual and political authority mobilized by the Jesuits in South India. It thus helped missionaries to justify their strategies and negotiate their place vis-à-vis the leaders of the Society of Jesus and the Church in Rome. On another level, Brito's Tamil catechists and disciples, who witnessed his suffering and death, identified that moment as the origin of their own spiritual and social authority, to be harnessed and mobilized locally.

Still, in the translation of Brito's death into a cult at once global and rooted in Oriyur, and in the entanglements of the actors who made this possible, one device emerges as central. This is *witnessing*, in all of its multiple dimensions.¹¹ From the point of view of the Catholic Church, martyrdom is the ultimate witness of the faith, guaranteed in the seventeenth century by the elaborate juridical-theological process of canonization, in turn based on legal witnesses speaking under oath.¹² At the same time, in South India witnessing martyrdom became key to the establishment and crystallization of local devotional communities, as well as a source of transmissible authority at the origin of spiritual and social genealogies.

The Martyrdom (February 4, 1693)

The journey that led Brito to face the sword of his executioner on February 4, 1693, had many twists and turns.¹³ He was born in 1647 in Lisbon to illustrious parents. His mother, Brites Pereira da Fonseca (ca. 1615–1695), had married the nobleman Salvador de Brito Pereira (ca. 1610–1651) in Portalegre in 1637.¹⁴ The couple had three children before Salvador died, just two years after his appointment as governor of Rio de Janeiro in 1649. Even as a boy, João had decided to become a Jesuit and a missionary. Overcoming the resistance of his mother, who would have preferred him

11. Pascal Marin, "Penser la croyance à la lumière du témoignage. Lorsque l'adhésion à la parole d'un autre permet de devenir soi-même," *Revue française d'éthique appliquée* 2, no. 8 (2019): 77–89.

12. Christian Renoux, "Une source de l'histoire de la mystique moderne revisitée: le procès de canonisation," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* 105, no. 1 (1993): 177–217.

13. I take the narrative framework of Brito's biography, especially his early years, from Augustin Saulière SJ, *Red Sand: A Life of St. John de Britto, S.J., Martyr of the Madura Mission* (Madurai: De Nobili Press, 1947), and Albert M. Nevett SJ, *John de Britto and His Times* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1980), enriched by the primary sources presented later in the article.

14. The available information on Brito's family has been summarized in Marquês de São Payo, "A ascendência de S. João de Brito," *Brotéria* 44, no. 6 (1947): 634–39.

to have a career in the service of the Portuguese Crown, he took his first vows in 1664. Equipped with the knowledge gained during a decade of study and teaching at Jesuit colleges in Coimbra and Lisbon, he left for India in 1673. After a stint in Goa, the capital of Portuguese Asia, where he concluded his studies in theology, Brito joined the Madurai mission in the far south of India.

The territory assigned to him was the Maravar region, a dry land inhabited by the Kaḷḷar, one of the three Tēvar castes, referred to as “robbers” in Jesuit sources of the time.¹⁵ When Brito arrived, the Cētopati dynasty, which ruled the Maravar from their capital of Ramnad, was in the process of gaining political independence from the Nāyaks of Madurai. This was thanks to Rakunāta Tēvaṅ (r. 1674–1710), an enterprising state-builder who did not favor Catholic missionaries and disapproved of their implication in local religious and political life.¹⁶ Likely irked by the increasing number of conversions performed by Brito and his local collaborators, Rakunāta had the missionary imprisoned for the first time in 1686 and forced him to abandon the Maravar. Brito’s decision to flee would prove important in the legitimization of his actual martyrdom some years later. In an only apparent contradiction, martyrdom was to be desired but also avoided for as long as possible. Many other Jesuit missionaries to South India, all too eager to die for their faith, never attained the status of martyrs.¹⁷

After fleeing the Maravar, Brito was sent back to Portugal to advocate for the mission at the royal court. His family connections to the empire’s administration certainly meant that he was better equipped than many for the game of Jesuit diplomacy. However, Brito did not forget the Madurai mission, nor the possibilities for martyrdom it offered. In 1690, once his embassy was over, he returned to India. His former local helpers and catechists were waiting for him and—as they tell the story—brought him back to the Maravar, where he began to preach and proselytize again. This time, Brito managed to reach Taṭṭiya Tēvaṅ, a relative of Rakunāta Tēvaṅ who had once been a candidate to the Ramnad throne. Now in charge of the small domain of Siruvalli, Taṭṭiya Tēvaṅ asked for the missionary’s help with a disease that had been plaguing him and, after listening to the catechist Brito sent to cure him, converted. This choice impacted the local order in multiple ways. Not least, the new convert had to reject all but one of his wives, among them Rakunāta Tēvaṅ’s niece.

15. Lennart Bes, “The Setupatis, the Dutch, and Other Bandits in Eighteenth-Century Ramnad (South India),” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 44, no. 4 (2001): 540–74.

16. Rakunāta Tēvaṅ, better known in the historiography as Rakunāta Kiḷavaṅ, took the title of Cētopati, “Lord of Adam’s Bridge,” and established Ramnad as a small kingdom: S. Khadhirvel, *A History of the Maravas, 1700–1802* (Madurai: Madurai Publishing House, 1977), 33–50. Unlike the Nāyaks of Madurai, who had a policy of mild acceptance of the mission, he did not encourage Jesuit missionaries. See Margherita Trento, *Writing Tamil Catholicism: Literature, Persuasion and Devotion in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 77–81.

17. This was the case, for instance, of Antonio Crimalini (1520–1549), whose death in South India might have been related to a systematic pessimism (or even clinical depression). See Gian Carlo Roscioni, *Il desiderio delle Indie. Storie, sogni e fughe di giovani gesuiti italiani* (Turin: Einaudi 2001), 39–40.

This was both a social and a political slander. Bayly has argued that, given Taṭiya Tēvaṅ's earlier claims to the throne, his conversion was a political move to gain the support of a growing Christian lobby. Her interpretation is convincing, and this may well be why the king of the Maravar, seeing Taṭiya Tēvaṅ's adoption of Catholicism as an attack on his power, held Brito responsible and ordered his second imprisonment.¹⁸ The Jesuit was arrested on January 8, 1693, while preaching in the village of Muni.¹⁹ He was accompanied by a catechist, João (or Aruḷānantaṅ in Tamil) and by two young boys, Mariyatācaṅ and Aruḷānantaṅ (aged seventeen and thirteen), who were brought to Ramnad and imprisoned along with him. Other disciples and catechists followed at a distance, trying to bring them comfort in their captivity. For several days, Brito and his companions were tortured while Rakunāta Tēvaṅ deliberated the best course of action. The king finally decided to transfer Brito to Oriyur and have him decapitated.

After hearing the news of Rakunāta Tēvaṅ's decision, two of Brito's lay followers turned themselves in to share in the suffering of his last night. The following morning, on February 4, 1693, less than a month after Brito's imprisonment, he was beheaded. The next day, his hands and feet were cut off and displayed alongside his headless corpse as a warning to those who might dare to cross Rakunāta Tēvaṅ. The two laymen were released a few days later, and despite the torture endured during their captivity organized a nocturnal expedition to rescue what remained of Brito's body. They brought these relics-to-be to Francisco Laines (1656–1715), who was at that time the Superior of the Madurai mission and the only Jesuit in the vicinity.

Brito's gory end seems to have caught the Jesuit imagination: an image of his corpse, severed head, hands, and feet hanging on a cord around its neck, was painted in 1737 in the Jesuit college of Ponta Delgada on the Azores island of São Miguel. Yet with time, the bloodier details of the story waned in importance in Jesuit accounts. The most comprehensive version of Brito's life, *Red Sand*, published for his canonization in 1947 by the Jesuit missionary Augustin Saulière, does not even mention the severed feet and hands.²⁰ However, these elements remained central to local accounts of Brito's death in Tamil Nadu. In the 1980s, Bayly's interviewees stressed that Brito's head, hands, and feet were tied to a post, suggesting that even after death he was seen as a figure endowed with dangerous powers that needed to be restrained. Rakunāta Tēvaṅ likewise feared those powers and the promise of change they entailed, especially since they were deployed in support of Taṭiya Tēvaṅ, the relative who had once challenged his royal authority. His plan to ground Brito's power at Oriyur was successful. Almost immediately after

18. An analysis of Taṭiya Tēvaṅ's conversion, Brito's role in it, and the political context of the Maravar can be found in Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, 397–404.

19. The exact location of this village, surrounded by a forest, is not clear; a possible identification is proposed in S. Ponnad SJ, "Through Marava in the Footsteps of St. John de Britto," *Caritas* 45, no. 1 (1961): 58–65.

20. Although hagiographic in purpose, Saulière's *Red Sand* contains an accurate, well-documented account of his life, including the earlier years.

the missionary's execution, the pace of conversion in the Maravar slowed, even as Oriyur (and the location of the stake to which Brito's hands and feet were tied) became a site of worship and miracles.

Jesuit Witnesses

From the perspective of the Catholic Church, many questions remained unanswered after Brito's death. First of all, was he really killed "in hatred of the faith" (*in odium fidei*) and therefore a martyr? His confrères immediately thought so, and claimed as much in the very first account of the martyrdom, a letter written in Portuguese by Laines to the other members of the Society on February 11, 1693, just a few days after the events. This letter, preserved in the Ajuda Library in Lisbon, contains what was to become the standard account of Brito's death. In it, Laines recounts how he heard the whole story from eyewitnesses, the catechist and the two young converts imprisoned with Brito. He was able to collect their testimonies since he had traveled to the Maravar as soon as he heard of Brito's incarceration: as he emphasized, he wrote the letter from the very same hostile region where the missionary had found his martyrdom. What is more, as he did so he was in possession of Brito's severed hands and feet, which had been recovered by the two laymen. Laines could thus retell Brito's story while holding the relics of a future saint.²¹

After declaring and describing Brito's martyrdom, Laines closes the letter by stressing the hardship he had suffered on his journey to the Maravar. He also explains how he changed his plan to reach Brito before the execution to better assist some local Christians persecuted by the same hostile king who had condemned Brito to death. Laines's account of this choice, and of his role in events, seems to imply that he could have died with Brito, and was thus on the verge of becoming a martyr himself, but renounced this ultimate glory in order to accomplish his duties as a priest and a missionary. This terse passage thus stages the tension between life and death implicit in the idea of martyrdom, while also foregrounding the duty of any Christian to choose life. Laines was showing his Jesuit brothers that, even

21. Letter in Portuguese from Francisco Laines to the Fathers of the Society of Jesus (Madurai, February 11, 1693), in Frederico Gavazzo Perry Vidal, ed., *Um original do beato João de Brito conservado inédito na Biblioteca da Ajuda agora dado à estampa e seguido da publicação de outras espécies respeitantes a este Missionário-Mártir existentes na dita biblioteca* (Lisbon: Divisão de publicações e biblioteca Agência geral das colónias, 1944), 69–70. The original letter can be found in Lisbon, Biblioteca da Ajuda (BAL), Cod. 51-VI-34, fols. 73r–85r, here fol. 84v (my translation from Portuguese): "On the same day that the news of our glorious Confessor's imprisonment reached me, I immediately set out for the Maravar to attend to whatever was necessary. Having walked for some days with great diligence and unbelievable suffering, I received the news of his martyrdom. I wanted to continue, but the Christians who accompanied me, like the Gentiles who were present, explained to me that if I went ahead, I would expose this poor Christendom to a new persecution without hope of any favorable outcome. So, I have had to change my resolution and retire to a small village where I can more comfortably help those who are still in prison, and collect the holy relics of the martyr or have them decently buried."

though they came to the mission to become saints and fervently hoped for their own martyrdom, they should always be ready to renounce it, as he had done. Their death would only be glorified if it were not actively sought.

Yet in the very act of writing about Brito's martyrdom, and in his choice to remain a witness, Laines was also presenting his fellow Jesuits with an alternative way of contributing to the glory of the Church. They could participate in the martyrdom of *someone else*, in this case Brito, by witnessing and writing about it. Pierre-Antoine Fabre has recently highlighted the connection between experiencing and witnessing martyrdom in the Jesuit texts of the seventeenth century—what he calls a “*displacement* of martyrdom onto its witness.”²² The same displacement was at work not only in the Madurai mission and the letter by Laines, but also among Brito's catechists, as we will see below.

Soon after this first letter, accounts of Brito's martyrdom began to appear in print.²³ They quickly multiplied as both the Society and Brito's family lobbied for his recognition as a martyr through paintings, pamphlets, and biographies.²⁴ These early accounts sometimes cite the letter by Laines among their sources, an influential example being Jean-Baptiste Maldonado's *Illustre certamen* of 1697, which also contains the most famous iconography of Brito (fig. 4).²⁵ Yet the text of the letter itself only resurfaced in print in 1707, fourteen years after its composition, when it was translated into French for the second volume of the collection of missionary correspondence known as the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (fig. 5).²⁶ This translation transformed the letter from a private document, circulating among Jesuits, into a keystone of Catholic orientalism and a building block of Jesuit rhetoric concerning their overseas missions.²⁷

At this later date and for this larger public, the passage where Laines described his own role in the events resonated with new meanings and implications. Some years before, between 1703 and 1704, the Apostolic legate Carlo Tomaso Maillard

22. Pierre-Antoine Fabre, “Vocation et martyre dans les *Vocationes illustres*,” *Rivista storica italiana* 132, no. 3 (2020): 1032–48, here p. 1035 (emphasis in the original).

23. For a list of lives and biographies of Brito, see Auguste Carayon, *Bibliographie historique de la Compagnie de Jésus, ou catalogue des ouvrages relatifs à l'histoire des Jésuites depuis leur origine jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1864), 233–36.

24. The way the family was able to use the martyrdom to pursue their own interests is clear in two recommendations for office signed by Pedro II of Portugal for a member of Brito's family, including on the basis of his relationship to the martyr. These documents published in Gavazzo Perry Vidal, *Um original do beato João de Brito*, 106–10.

25. On Maldonado, see Stefan Halikowski-Smith, “*Tempestatem, Quæ cum Adventuro D. Francisco Pallu Timero Potesit*: Jean-Baptiste Maldonado SJ, a Missionary Caught between Loyalties to the Portuguese Padroado and the Political Ascendancy of the Missions Étrangères de Paris in the Siam Mission,” *Revista de Cultura/Review of Culture (International Edition)* 34 (2010): 34–51.

26. *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus*, vol. 2 (Paris: Nicolas Le Clerc, 1707), 1–56.

27. On the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, see Sylvia Murr, “Les conditions d'émergence du discours sur l'Inde au siècle des Lumières,” in *Inde et littératures*, ed. Marie-Claude Porcher (Paris: Éd. de l'EHESS, 1983), 233–84.

Figure 4. João de Brito dressed as a Madurai missionary

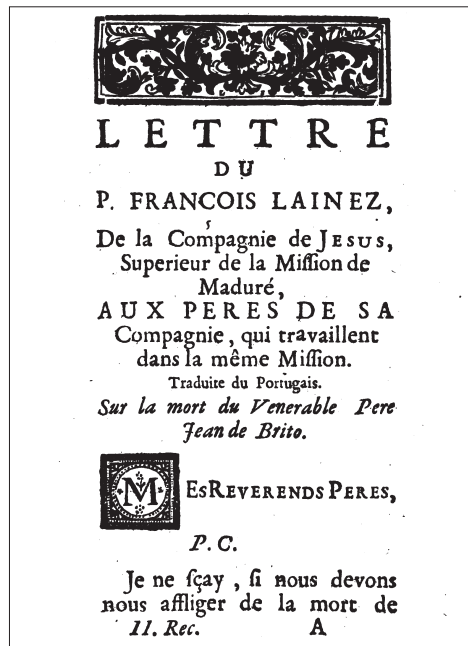


Source: Jean-Baptiste Maldonado SJ, *Illustre certamen R. P. Ioannis de Britto e Societatis Iesu Lusitani, in odium Fidei à Regulo Maravâ trucidati, quartâ die Februarij 1693* (Antwerp: apud Petrum Iouret, 1697).

de Tournon (1668–1710) had spent eight months in Pondicherry on his way to China. While there, he issued a decree—the *Inter graviores*—that criticized and proscribed many of the habits that the Jesuits of the Madurai, Mysore, and Carnatic missions had adopted to integrate into Tamil society. Collectively known as the Malabar Rites, these practices ranged from variations on sacramental rites to accepting the separation of the castes, and Tournon did not find them very Catholic.²⁸ Yet these accommodations were at the core of the strategies and ways of life that Jesuit missionaries had deployed in South India since the inception of the Madurai mission in 1606. Many Jesuits, and Laines in particular, felt that forbidding them would prove a mortal blow to the nascent Catholic communities.

28. On the Malabar Rites controversy, the work of Paolo Aranha is key. See in particular Paolo Aranha, “Sacramenti o *samskārāḥ*? L’illusione dell’*accommodatio* nella controversia dei riti malabarici,” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 31 (2010): 621–46; Aranha, “The Social and Physical Spaces of the Malabar Rites Controversy,” in *Space and Conversion in Global Perspective*, ed. Giuseppe Marcocci et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 214–32.

Figure 5. First page of the letter by Francisco Laines to the Fathers of the Society of Jesus



Source: Translated into French and published in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus*, vol. 2 (Paris: Nicolas Le Clerc, 1707), 1.

In the context of Jesuit opposition to Tournon's decree, in 1707 Laines published a lengthy Latin treatise in defense of their missionary strategies in South India, the *Defensio indicarum missionum* ("Apology for the Indian Missions").²⁹ Brito's name is sparsely cited in this volume but his model is everywhere, his sufferings and martyrdom a metonymy of the life that missionaries and local Christians alike were leading in those regions.³⁰ Laines once again speaks in the first person, as one who experienced both the fruits of the spilling of Brito's blood—the harvest of

29. Francisco Laines SJ, *Defensio indicarum missionum: Madurensis, nempe Maysurensis, & Carnatensis, edita, occasione decreti ab Ill.mo D. Patriarcha Antiocheno D. Carolo Maillard de Tournon visitatore apostolico in Indiis Orientalibus lati; & suscepta a Francisco Laineze Societate Jesu electo Episcopo Meliaporensi ... Superiorum permissu* (Rome: Ex Typographia Reverendæ Cameræ Apostolicæ, 1707).

30. *Ibid.*, 83 (my translation from Latin): "Indeed, after I entered the Maravar region, and found it wonderfully fruitful with the blood of the Venerable Father John de Brito, I gathered there a most abundant harvest. During the two years I spent there, I purified more than 13,600 [people] at the sacred font, meaning that in a single day I baptized 550. Not only were my arms scarcely able to bear the work, but my whole body was almost dying from the sweetest exhaustion of the Holy Ministry."

converts, inspired by the martyr and seeking to imitate him—and the persecutions that followed his execution. As the *Defensio* and the letter published that same year in the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* seem to suggest, these sufferings culminated as the entire Madurai mission was set to be martyred by Tournon's decree of condemnation. As the controversy over the Malabar Rites gathered pace and overlapped with the early stages of Brito's canonization, the entire mission seemed to be on the verge of dying for its faith in the possibility of converting South India by adapting to its social norms.

In weaving Brito's story into his treatise, Laines created an association between martyrdom and accommodation. This challenged the idea, common among the Jesuits' detractors, that accommodation was merely a strategy to make easy converts, who could keep their cultural habits after embracing the new faith. He wanted to show that the Indian way of life was one of sacrifices and great risks, which were carrying the missionaries ever closer to their sanctification. The way Jesuits interpreted their work in South India, and the role of Brito in the negotiations between the Society and the Catholic Church during the Malabar Rites controversy, is just one thread of a story that unfolded between Pondicherry, Lisbon, and Rome in the first decades of the eighteenth century. It can be roughly mapped onto the series of inquiries held by the Congregation of Rites (known since the Second Vatican Council as the Congregation for the Causes of Saints) between 1695 and 1741, when it was declared that Brito's practice of accommodation was not an obstacle to his canonization. During those forty-five years, the Jesuits organized multiple hearings in Mylapore, Goa, Cochin, and Rome (table 1), which are crucial to understanding the role of Brito's death within the Society at this time.

In 1741, the Sacred Congregation of Rites explicitly declared that the condemnation of the Malabar Rites by Tournon, confirmed by Clement XII in the 1734 brief *Compertum exploratumque*, should not impede the process of Brito's canonization. This declaration came just one year after the election of Cardinal Prospero Lambertini as Pope Benedict XIV. The new pope was an expert on the issue, having served as *Promotor fidei* of the Congregation of Rites for twenty years: his function as “Devil's Advocate” had implied raising all possible doubts and objections against candidates for beatification, including Brito.³¹ Although to my knowledge no explicit transaction was established in writing, it is an uncanny coincidence that, in the context of the controversy over the Malabar Rites, the pope granted this opening to such a staunch practitioner of accommodation. Perhaps this was the best the Jesuits could obtain after almost half a century of legal proceedings at

31. See Vincenzo Criscuolo, “Prospero Lambertini (Benedetto XIV) Promotore della Fede presso la Congregazione dei Riti,” in *Signum in bonum: Festschrift für Wilhelm Imkamp zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Nicolaus U. Buhlmann and Peter Styra (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2011), 125–217. Lambertini (1675–1758) played a crucial part in the redefinition of modern sainthood via his treatise *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*. The authoritative edition was published as the first eight volumes of his twenty-volume complete works: Emmanuel de Azevedo, ed., *S.S.D.N. Benedicti XIV opera in duodecim tomos distribuita* (Rome: Nicolaus et Marcus Pallearini academiae liturgicae conimbricensis typographi, 1747–1751).

Table 1. Some documents of the early phases of the process of Brito's canonization

Year	Phase of the process	Place	Language(s) of the surviving documents	Archival location
1695	<i>Processus super Martyrio</i>	Mylapore	Portuguese, Latin, Italian	AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1699 Copy in ARSI, APG-SJ 717
1699	<i>Processus super Virtutibus, Martyrio et Miraculis</i>	Rome	Portuguese, Latin, Italian	AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1698 Copy in ARSI, APG-SJ 718
1701	<i>Processus super Martyrio et non cultu</i>	Cochin	Portuguese, Latin, Italian	AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1693 Copy in ARSI, APG-SJ 719
1714	<i>Positio super dubio</i>	Rome	Portuguese, Latin, Italian	Printed, to be found in ARSI, APG-SJ 720
1715	<i>Processus super non cultu</i>	Rome	Latin, Italian	AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1694 Copy in ARSI, APG-SJ 723
1718	<i>Processus super non cultu</i>	Goa	Portuguese, Latin, Italian	AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1695 Copy in ARSI, APG-SJ 724
1726	<i>Processus super Martyrio, causa Martyrii et Miraculis</i>	Mylapore	Tamil, Portuguese, Latin, Italian	AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697 Copies in ASV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1696 and ARSI, APG-SJ, 726
1737	<i>Positio</i>	Rome	Latin	Printed, to be found in ARSI, APG-SJ, 727
1738	<i>Memoriale super dubio objectorum rituum</i>	Mylapore	Portuguese, Latin, Italian	ARSI, APG-SJ, 729
1741	<i>Decretum</i>	Rome	Latin	Printed, to be found in ARSI, APG-SJ, 745-752
1744	<i>Secunda Positio</i>	Rome	Latin	Printed, to be found in ARSI, APG-SJ, 730

the Curia, in a political context that was quickly turning against them in Lisbon as well as in Rome.³² Still, in 1744, just three years later, Benedict XIV finally banned the Malabar Rites with the bull *Omnium sollicitudinum*, and the process of Brito's canonization also came to a halt. Less than fifteen years later, the Society of Jesus would be suppressed within the Portuguese Empire, which would mark the beginning of its end.

Yet another thread, this time a local one, can also be traced through the events and documents of those years. As described above, Brito's martyrdom, which Laines narrowly escaped and yet also assumed through his role as its first and principal

32. This historical turning point is sketched in Sabina Pavone, "Propaganda, diffamazione e opinione pubblica: i gesuiti e la *querelle* sui riti malabarici," in *L'Europa divisa e i nuovi mondi. Per Adriano Prosperi*, vol. 2, ed. Massimo Donattini, Giuseppe Marcocci, and Stefania Pastore (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2011), 203–16.

witness, was ultimately passed on to a collectivity, the Madurai mission.³³ However, this collectivity did not consist solely of Jesuit missionaries posted in South India. It also included the many lay helpers working as catechists, translators, or accountants within local Christian communities. Even though Laines does not emphasize the role of these laymen in his writings, they too were witnesses of Brito's death for the faith—perhaps even more so than Laines himself.

Catechist Witnesses

Let us return to the events of 1693, and consider what happened next in the Maravar. How did the consequences of Brito's martyrdom unfold on the local scale? The first letter by Laines does not place much stress on the role of the laymen who accompanied Brito and were imprisoned with him. Yet even in this Jesuit-centric account they play a part in the events leading up to the missionary's death: we understand that several Tamil men surrounded Brito, shared in his suffering, witnessed his death, and recovered his body. If Laines (with some rare exceptions) barely identifies them, their stories and names forcefully emerge in another set of documents, not meant for global public circulation: the minutes of the inquiries organized by the Society of Jesus in South India and sent to the Congregation of Rites in Rome to support Brito's canonization. Four such inquiries took place, two of them in the coastal city of Mylapore, an old Portuguese settlement and nowadays a suburb of Chennai. These two inquiries, held in 1695 and 1726, will be my focus here.

The first inquiry, organized a couple of years after the martyrdom, included among its witnesses all those who had shared Brito's last days. They were interrogated between January and May 1695, and besides giving legal testimony that Brito's death occurred *in odium fidei*, they took the opportunity to talk about themselves and their role in events as well as in the contemporary life of the Madurai mission. Though their original Tamil statements have been lost, the Portuguese translations are bursting with their names, their stories, their descriptions of their role in Brito's martyrdom, and ultimately with proof of their own claim to holiness.³⁴ Those interviewed included Aruḷānantaṅ, the Brahmin catechist who was imprisoned with Brito in 1693 and shared his name (though not the title of swami); Aruḷānantaṅ and Mariyatācaṅ, the youths also arrested alongside the Jesuit; Muttu, another catechist imprisoned as he sought to join Brito in the Maravar; Ciluvai Nāyakkāṅ, Brito's old catechist and Mariyatācaṅ's father; Kaṇakkappā, a catechist

33. On the tension between collectivity and individuality in martyrdom, see Pierre-Antoine Fabre, "Les quarante 'martyrs du Brésil' (1570) et leur procès en béatification (1854): historiographie et hagiographie dans la longue Compagnie de Jésus," *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo* 15, no. 2 (2018): 321–40.

34. The original documents of the 1695 inquiry, written in Portuguese, are held in the Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (hereafter "AAV," formerly Archivio Segreto Vaticano), Cong. Rit., Proc. 1699. An Italian translation of the same inquiry is held in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (hereafter "ARSI"), APG-SJ 717, *Processus super Martyrio* (Mylapore, 1695).

who had followed at a distance during Brito's arrest and acted as a liaison between him and his supporters; Kastūri Paṅikkaṅ and Aruḷ Paṛaiyaṅ, two laymen who asked to be martyred with Brito, had their noses and ears cut off, and were part of the group that recovered Brito's remains; Vētappaṅ, yet another elderly catechist who, along with Ciluvai Nāyakkāṅ, had been with Brito during his first imprisonment nine years earlier; and many others.

The first to be interrogated was Kastūri Paṅikkaṅ, who had directly witnessed the missionary's death, unlike some of the other catechists kept in Ramnad while Brito was taken to Oriyur to be decapitated. Kastūri Paṅikkaṅ declared that he "was with the aforementioned Father [Brito] from his first day in prison until the hour of his martyrdom, and was among those who stole his remains." He also claimed that whatever he saw and reported was common knowledge among his peers, and could be confirmed by most of the men listed above:

... the Brahman Arlapā [Aruḷappā], now married and living in Madurai ... ; three catechists who served the Father, namely Mutū [Muttu], Arlandren [Aruḷānantan], and Mariadasso [Mariyatācaṅ], who followed Brito after being caught in Kandaramanikam ... ; Xikvenaiquem [Ciluvai Nāyakkāṅ] and Arlapā [Aruḷappā], who stole Brito's relics together with the witness; and Cheganadā, Chinapen [Cinnappā], Anddi, and Arlapa Cottegarā, who all live in the Maravar country and followed the Father in disguise from a distance until they saw him set on his knees in the place of his martyrdom and, unable to disguise themselves anymore, let themselves be caught together with him; one of them lost his nose and ears, while the other only the ears.³⁵

From this account, we see that Brito's martyrdom was not an individual affair. Until his very last moments, Brito interacted with his catechists, sought their assistance, taught them, and shared his suffering with them. As soon as he died, they began to tell his story. As is apparent from some of their names, and as they declared in the course of the canonization hearings, these men belonged to different castes and groups.³⁶ What they had in common was that they were recruited by Brito, usually

35. AAV Cong. Rit., Proc. 1699: "... acompanhou ao dito P[adre] do primeiro dia da sua prisão, athe a ultima hora do seu martyrio, e foy hum dos que furtarão suas reliquias, e o viram tambem com seus olhos o Bramane Arlapā cazado e morador em Madurey, q[ue] a ocasião de sua prisão se achava com o dito P[adr]e; e fou co' elle prezo; o cathequista Mutū, Arlandren, e Mariadasso todos tres servidores do dito Padre, q[ue] selhe ajuntarão vindo prezos de Canddamaniquam aldea do dito Maravā, onde assistião em huā igreja, que tinha a aly o dito Padre, Xilvenaiquem, e Arlapā, q[ue] furtarão co' elle testemunha suas reliquias; Cheganadā, Chinapen, Anddi, Arlapa Cottegarā todos moradores nas terras do Maravā, que incubertos seguiã de longe ao dito Padre, e os sois ultimos vendo ai Padre ja posto de joelhos no lugar do martyrio por não poder incubirse mais, se forão abraçar come elle, e a hum lhe cortarão o narij, e as orelhas, e a outro as orelhas só."

36. The title "Nāyakkāṅ" attached to Ciluvai's name, for instance, refers to a group of Telugu origins, sometimes called "northerners" (*vaṭukar*), who settled in the Tamil region at the time of Vijayanagara. Ciluvai Nāyakkāṅ and his son Mariyatācaṅ therefore belonged to this caste. Aruḷ Paṛaiyaṅ, one of the men who asked to be imprisoned with Brito on his last day, likely belonged to a Dalit group (*paṛaiyar*). Unfortunately,

quite young. They had all spent at least some time following the missionary and sharing his itinerant life of preaching, but later settled and established themselves as leaders of their communities.³⁷ Indeed, by the end of the seventeenth century, laymen hired by the Madurai mission as catechists were crucial to the workings of Christian life on a local scale, even though they would not be permitted to join the Society of Jesus until well into the nineteenth century.³⁸ They also had little chance to work locally as priests (though they could be ordained, for instance, in Goa), since there was no regular clergy in the territory of the Madurai mission.³⁹

Laymen were employed by the mission as either itinerant preachers or “resident catechists” (*vācal upatēciyar*).⁴⁰ The latter were responsible for communities of local Christians and took part in the administration of villages, a role they retained into the nineteenth century.⁴¹ They also fulfilled paraliturgical functions and led Sunday celebrations when missionaries were unavailable to say Mass.⁴² The two roles attributed to laymen are described in a letter written in 1740 by a newly arrived missionary to his brother:

Each missionary in his residence chooses eight or more catechists, belonging to the various populations where there are Christians. ... Two among them must always follow the missionary as he moves every few months from one church to another for the convenience of the Christians. This being so, when the Christians come to take confession they make the sign

witnesses only sporadically declared their caste in the 1695 hearings. This information is more consistently recorded for later inquiries (including the one held in 1726, discussed below).

37. The list of the catechists who supported Laines on the Malabar Rites, given as an appendix to his treatise, includes many of Brito’s catechists who had by then settled in other regions, away from the Maravar: Laines, *Defensio indicarum missionum*, 605–28.

38. The only exception was Pero Luís Bramane, the subject of a short article that remains a good analysis of the choice not to allow Indian recruits into the Society: Joseph Wicki, “Pedro Luis Brahmane und erster indischer Jesuit (c. 1532–1596),” *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 6 (1950): 115–26.

39. Carlos Mercês De Melo, *The Recruitment and Formation of Native Clergy in India (16th–19th Century): An Historico-Canonical Study* (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar Divisão de Publicações e Biblioteca, 1955).

40. The term is explained and analyzed in Fr. Perroquin SJ, “The History of Vadakkankulam Christianity” [1908], Shenbaganur, Jesuit Madurai Province Archives (hereafter “JEMPARC”), 217/459.

41. The resident catechist (*vācal upatēciyar*) is listed among the local administrative roles in a manuscript concerning the history of the village of Sarugani compiled by a Jesuit parish priest in the late nineteenth century. See Anonymous, “Crāmam de Sarougany” [ca. 1882], JEMPARC, 217/278.

42. While the paraliturgical role of the catechists is implied in many Catholic documents of the period, it is (pejoratively) described in Lutheran reports. See, for example, Johann Lucas Niekamp, *Histoire de la mission danoise dans les Indes orientales, Qui renferme en abrégé les relations que les missionnaires évangéliques en ont données, depuis l’an 1705 jusqu’à la fin de l’année 1736*, vol. 1 (Geneva: Henri-Albert Gosse & Comp., 1745), 234: “In certain parts of the Kingdom of Madurai where there are no missionaries, the catechists perform their duties, which consist in reading a few shreds of devotional books, reciting the prayers of the Mass, and singing a Litany.”

[of the cross] and are gathered in the church. There, either the missionary or the catechists of that residence examine each of them (with no exceptions) about whether they know the Christian doctrine and the prayers. On important days, all the catechists of a given residence gather, each of them bringing the Christians of the population subject to them, and then all together they examine the penitents about the doctrine and so on. ... Having thus prepared [the Christians], [the catechists] give them a piece of palm leaf with a written evaluation, which they have to give to the missionary when they go for confession, as proof that they know the Christian doctrine and the acts of the Theological virtues and that they are prepared for confession.⁴³

Notice how the missionaries chose catechists who belonged to various local “populations” (*popolazioni* in the original Italian, a term that could be either a Lusitanism for “villages” or stand for “castes”) and gave them spiritual jurisdiction over them. Lay leadership and the work of resident catechists were thus envisioned along geographical and caste lines. It is also interesting that the process of instruction and confession described in this letter involved the written evaluation of worshippers, with the catechist inscribing texts on fragments of palm leaf to be read by the missionary. This humble writing practice points to a world of popular literacy and to the cultural role of the catechists as small-scale literati among their communities, something that also emerges from the canonization inquiries into Brito’s death.

Of all the catechists who testified in the 1695 inquiry, two figures became especially important over time.⁴⁴ The first is Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ, a catechist from Thanjavur, who by the time of the martyrdom had known Brito for nine years. In his witness, Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ recounts that he was arrested with Brito the first time the missionary was imprisoned in 1686. On that occasion, a soldier beat him with a rope, hitting him on the right side of his face and causing his eyeball to fall out. Brito replaced it in the socket with his own hands, then blessed the catechist’s eye, which from that moment never gave him any problems. Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ’s story, recording one of the first miracles attributed to Brito during

43. Gianbattista Buttari to his brother (Madurai, September 4, 1740), Rome, Archivio della Pontificia Università Gregoriana (hereafter “APUG”), Miscellanea 292, pp. 655–67, here pp. 663–64. “Ciascun missionario nella sua Residenza elegge otto, ò più Catechisti divisi in varie Popolazioni, dove sono i Cristiani. ... Or due di questi debbono sempre stare dove in quel tempo risiede il missionario, mentre p[e]r alcuni mesi stà in una Chiesa, e poi si porta in un altra, per comodo de’ Cristiani. Ciò presupposto, quando vengono li Cristiani per confessarsi, dato il segno, e radunati tutti in Chiesa, ciascuno (nemine excepto) viene esaminato, o dal missionario, o dalli Catechisti di quella residenza, se sà la Dottrina Cristiana, e l’orazioni: e ne’ giorni di grande concorso si radunano tutti i Catechisti di quella residenza, e ciascuno viene con li Cristiani delle Popolazioni a lui soggette, e tutti esaminano li penitenti sopra la Dottrina &c. ... Così preparatisi si da loro un pezzetto di foglia di palma scritto quale essi in andare a confessarsi devono dare al missionario in contrasegno che sanno la dottrina Cristiana, gli atti delle virtù Teologali, e che si sono preparati per la Confessione.”

44. The Italian translation of Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ (Xilue Naiquen)’s witness can be found at ARSI, APG-SJ 717, fols. 42v–46r.

his lifetime, also needed witnesses. He declared that “Vētappā and Kaṇakkappā, both of them from Mysore and also working as catechists with Fr. Brito, witnessed the whole episode.”⁴⁵ This is a recurring pattern in the documents produced during this first inquiry. The catechists who testified were all witnesses of Brito’s martyrdom, but they were also witnesses of the miraculous events involving each and every one of them.

Besides his close, miraculous relationship with Brito, Ciluvai Nāyakkaṇ was exceptional for two reasons. He was among those who had rescued Brito’s mortal remains, but more importantly he was the father of Mariyatācaṇ, one of the youths imprisoned with Brito in 1693. In a way, even though Ciluvai Nāyakkaṇ did not spend time in prison the second time, he did so vicariously through his son. This impression is reinforced by the short testimony given by Mariyatācaṇ in 1695, which follows almost word for word that of his father. After mentioning that he had also known Brito for nine years (that is, from when he was eight—incidentally, the age at which students traditionally began to study Tamil and Sanskrit), the youth retells the story of his father’s eye, dedicating very little space to his own experience of sharing a cell with Brito.

The miracle of Ciluvai Nāyakkaṇ’s eye caught the imagination of almost everyone who testified in 1695, as well as during later inquiries. It was so closely bound up with the growing fame of Ciluvai Nāyakkan and his son Mariyatācaṇ that, while recalling these events during a hearing in Rome in 1715, the missionary Pierre Martin confused the two. He declared that Brito restored the eye of one of his catechists’ sons, and that the boy bore no trace of the heavy injury he had suffered. Martin added that he was sure that the boy had perfectly healed, since he had later become one of his own catechists in the Maravar and he had never noticed any scarring on his face.⁴⁶ This confusion might well be Martin’s fault. Recalling his missionary days long after returning to Rome, he may have mistakenly connected the miracle to the catechist he knew better. But perhaps this was the version of the story circulating at that time—a version in which the young Mariyatācaṇ had become the main protagonist of this first miracle and the true recipient of Brito’s spiritual inheritance.

45. ARSI, APG-SJ 717, fol. 44r: “... anche fù carcerato con esso lui esso testimonio, e dando ad esso testimonio un soldato diversi colpi con una corda, et havendolo colto uno sopra l’occhio destro gli saltò fuori, il quale dal detto Padre gli fu messo di nuovo dentro colle sue mani et havendoglielo Benedetto, rimase esso testimonio immediatamente sano, e che viddero questo Vedapà, e Canagapà nativi di Maissur, et abitanti di Tanjaor, che erano anche catechisti del detto Padre.”

46. Witness of Pierre Martin, given on December 17 and 18, 1715, recorded in Italian in AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1694, fol. 124r (my translation from Italian): “For I have been told that a few days before he [i.e., Brito] was killed, the son of one of his catechists was beaten by those barbarians. They struck him in the eye, which came out of its socket, but the servant of God consoling him with his own hands put back his eye, making the sign of the cross, or so I have heard. So that the said son of the catechist remained without a scar, or any other mark, and I have seen him several times, since that son later became my catechist in the Madurai Mission, in the Maravar region.”

Catechist lineages

The central role that Mariyatācaṅ acquired over the years appears clearly in later sources. The most important of these are the minutes of the second inquiry held in Mylapore in 1726, promoted by the local bishop João Pinheiro roughly thirty years after Brito's death.⁴⁷ Unlike the 1695 inquiry, which centered on his martyrdom, this one concerned Brito's fame and the miracles obtained through his intercession—a crucial proof of sainthood. The new focus meant that the composition of the witnesses differed from previous inquiries. The people testifying had all been either the recipients or the witnesses of Brito's miracles, and the list includes a remarkable number of women. It may well be that in the early eighteenth century, as today, miracles and possession were ways for women to negotiate their place vis-à-vis familial and religious authority.⁴⁸ But it was also the case that many of the men who were with Brito at the time of his imprisonment, and who had testified in 1695, were dead or too old to travel in 1726. Among Brito's older followers, only Kastūri Paṅikkaṅ was still alive, but on this second occasion he did not testify. He worked instead as a scribe (*scriptor deputatus*) for the inquiry—a minor detail, perhaps, but one that shows how his role and identity remained tied to Brito's sainthood over the years, and thereby to the life of the mission.⁴⁹ That he could occupy the role of *scriptor* also shows that Kastūri Paṅikkaṅ was literate in both the languages of the inquiry, Tamil and Portuguese, a skill that allowed him to materially inscribe his own memory as collective memory.

Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ was not among the witnesses, for by 1726 he had died. His son Mariyatācaṅ, on the other hand, was by then a mature man working as a catechist in the Maravar. Though his imprisonment of 1693 was much further removed in time, the testimony he gave in 1726 is longer and more detailed than his statement in 1695, made when he was only a boy.⁵⁰ After three decades, he had made the story of Brito his own and could connect with it in different ways, not least because of his profession and the social prestige he had acquired over the years. Indeed, Mariyatācaṅ began his testimony in 1726 by stating that he was a catechist like his father and had “the means of living honorably.”⁵¹ He then declared that he could talk about Brito

47. The original minutes of the hearings of the 1726 inquiry, written in Tamil and Portuguese, are in AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697. An Italian translation of the same documents is preserved in ARSI, APG-SJ, 726, *Processus super Martyrio* (Mylapore, 1726).

48. See Kristin C. Bloomer, *Possessed by the Virgin: Hinduism, Roman Catholicism, and Marian Possession in South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

49. AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697, fol. 224v.

50. ARSI, APG-SJ 717, *Processus super Martyrio* (Mylapore, 1695), fols. 39r–43v. In this early statement, Mariyatācaṅ does tell the story of his father, but only in brief. There was no need to add further details, since Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ was interrogated as a witness immediately after his son.

51. Mariyatācaṅ's original statement in Portuguese is in AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697, fols. 172r–178v, here fol. 172r. The Italian translation of the same statement is in ARSI, APG-SJ 726, fols. 664r–694v.

because he “had seen, dealt with, known, and served” the Jesuit.⁵² Compared to his brief statement three decades earlier, Mariyatācaṅ here inhabits and mobilizes his role as a companion and a witness to Brito’s life and death with ease.

In this second testimony, Mariyatācaṅ also retells and appropriates at greater length the story of his father, mentioning both his role during Brito’s first imprisonment in 1686 and the miracle that saved his eye. He describes how Brito, “opening [his father’s] eyelids, put the eye that had been knocked out and was dangling back in its place, making the sign of the cross.”⁵³ But significantly he places these episodes before the story of his own imprisonment, which he relates in similar words. Mariyatācaṅ thus positions the story of his father’s imprisonment as a prefiguration of his own trajectory, which also included a span in prison at Brito’s side in 1693. Moreover, by 1726 Mariyatācaṅ was himself recognized as the recipient of a miracle, and a very important one at that. If Brito restored Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ’s eye while he was still alive, Mariyatācaṅ was among the first devotees to experience a miracle through Brito’s post-mortem intercession. Five months after the martyrdom, the youth was suffering from a skin tumor so severe that he was in great pain and badly disfigured. Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ prayed to his old master Brito to heal his son, and his request was granted.

Even though it had not been mentioned in the inquiries of 1695, Mariyatācaṅ’s miracle rapidly became one of the cornerstones of Brito’s canonization process. To this day, one of the most important healing powers attributed to the red sand of Oriyur is that it cures skin diseases when rubbed on the body. In 1726, the miracle was already one of the key points interrogated at the hearings. All the witnesses had to testify that they had heard about it, and Mariyatācaṅ himself added several details to the story.⁵⁴ He described how, on the night his father asked Brito to heal his sickness, he had a vision of the Holy Virgin with the Venerable Father Brito

52. AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697, fol. 172v.

53. AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697, fol. 173r.

54. The miracle of Mariyatācaṅ (Mariadagen)’s skin tumor had already been described in a letter from Carlo Colano to João da Costa (September 14, 1696), in AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1698, fols. 104r–109r, especially fol. 108r. The same miracle is recounted in one of the articles of interrogation in the 1726 inquiry, AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697, fols. 20v–21r (my translation from Latin): “43. How true it was, and is, [*qualiter veritas fuit, et est*] that in the city of Vaipur on the Malabar coast there was a boy named Mariyatācaṅ, afflicted by a similar pustular disease and close to death, ... so disfigured by the tumor that his body was not human in shape, according to what informed witnesses said, it was and is public, &c. [*prout testes informati deponunt fuit et est publicum &c.*] 44. How true it was, and is, that the parents of the aforesaid Mariyatācaṅ, destitute of all other human aid, implored the support of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the intercession of the Venerable Father João de Brito, the father of the child having been his catechist. They were reciting the litanies with the bystanders when the sick boy, who had lost his speech for a long time, immediately turning to his father with a cheerful countenance, told him that the most holy Virgin had appeared to him surrounded by a host of angels, together with the Venerable Martyr John of Brito at her right hand, and offered him good health from God; and after the interval of one hour, all the swelling disappeared, the fluid flowed out, and the child was completely free of all the draining humors, according to what informed witnesses said, it was and is public, &c.”

at her side. Brito called the youth by his name and, making the sign of the cross over him, told him that he had been cured.⁵⁵ Seeing is a vital metaphor throughout Mariyatācaṅ's testimony, implying that miraculous transformation was at once reflective (the boy's healing being a mirror for Brito's power) and reflexive (impacting Mariyatācaṅ's vision of himself).

Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ trusted in Brito's power and was cured—an eyewitness, one might say, to the miracle that restored his sight. At the beginning of his story, Mariyatācaṅ's relation to the saint was less direct, for Brito's intercession came in response to the prayers of his father; nevertheless, that the martyr called the youth by his own name suggests that his vision was also a moment of self-recognition, in which he too became someone worthy of faith—and of miraculous healing. Through this complex construction, Mariyatācaṅ testifies not only to Brito's martyrdom and miracles but also to his father's role as a witness and, ultimately, to his own role as both witness and heir to the spiritual and social charisma of both men.

Mariyatācaṅ's 1726 testimony is also remarkable for other reasons. First of all, it was both given and recorded in Portuguese. Apart from a handful of statements from the catechists also in Portuguese, all other witnesses in this inquiry were recorded in Tamil, the language in which they were given, and only later translated into Latin. Moreover, among the thirty-eight lay witnesses, only four signed their names in Tamil—the others used a cross or a symbol, indicating that they did not know how to write. Mariyatācaṅ was among these four.⁵⁶ That he was literate in Tamil, and that he knew Portuguese so well, is proof that he had a missionary education. Besides his work with Brito, he may have spent some time on the Fishery coast in the Jesuit colleges of Manapad or Nagapattinam. Once he returned to the Madurai mission, he was able to work as a catechist for the Tamil converts as well as an interpreter, since Portuguese was still a *lingua franca* along the Coromandel coast in the eighteenth century.⁵⁷ In other words, Mariyatācaṅ's testimony reveals not only his proximity to the missionaries but also that he possessed the cultural and social capital to be a leader among local Catholic converts even at his relatively young age.

How did Mariyatācaṅ arrive at that point? The main clue to his trajectory lies in the association he maintained with his father's story. As he was narrating his own life, marked by his close relationship with Brito, Mariyatācaṅ also felt the need to recount that of his father and his very similar experiences. His account thus suggests that being a catechist, a witness of Brito's martyrdom, and a recipient of his miracles was becoming a recurring pattern in the lives of the men in

55. AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697, fol. 176r.

56. See AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697, fol. 52r. Catechists in this inquiry gave their witness in Portuguese, but signed in Tamil, while the schoolmaster Āṭṭippan testified and signed in Tamil.

57. As shown, for instance, by the fact that the Lutheran missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719) began by translating the Lutheran doctrine for the local fishing communities in Tranquebar (Tharangambadi) into Portuguese, and only later switched to Tamil. See also the short note by Julien Vinson, "La langue portugaise dans l'Inde," *Revue de linguistique et de philologie compare* 41 (1908): 292.

this family. It gave them the spiritual and social authority to assume the role of intermediaries between local converts and the institutions of the mission and the global Church. As we will see below, missionaries used Brito's martyrdom to show that God's workings in South India were part of the universal Church, made up of new saints emerging across the globe wherever Jesuits carried its message. By positioning themselves in a spiritual genealogy, Ciluvai Nāyakkaṅ and Mariyatācaṅ were able to tie together this global dimension and their local authority as catechists, allowing them to imagine and inscribe their own lives at both scales and to mediate between them.

Martyrdom and Witnessing

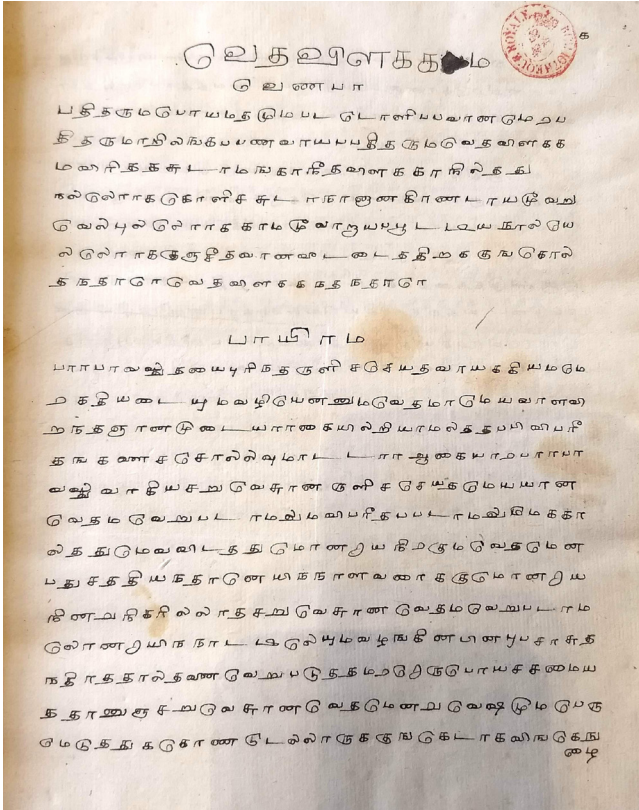
The documents analyzed thus far throw light on local understandings of Brito's death. And yet the original manuscripts of these inquiries are preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Archives (among the documents concerning the Congregation of Rites), with copies in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu. Both these archives are in Rome—thousands of miles from South India. How might these documents, and the polyphonic narratives they incorporate, have reverberated in the remote, sun-scorched villages of Tamil Nadu where the men we have encountered lived and worked? Besides their act of witnessing, what did the catechists understand not only about Brito's death but also about the process of his canonization and the texts it produced? In other words, what were the effects of the inquiries into Brito's martyrdom on the ground? Some clues can be found in the Tamil prose works of the Jesuit missionary Costanzo Giuseppe Beschi (1680–1747), also known as Vīramāmuṇivar (the “Great Heroic Ascetic”), which show how the Jesuits sought to control the local circulation of Brito's story in the same way they controlled the global one.

It is important to note that Beschi was the appointed interpreter for the 1726 inquiry and in charge of translating the Tamil testimonies into Latin. In the letter accompanying the records of the inquiry, he explains that he had been instructed to provide transcriptions of the original testimonies. However, since most of the witnesses only knew Tamil (with the exception of Mariyatācaṅ and a few others), and virtually no one in Rome could understand, let alone read, that language, it was decided to systematically include a Latin translation. Beschi adds that he is sure that the witnesses spoke in good faith, since he knew them to be simple people, terrified at the idea of perjury.⁵⁸

Thanks to his work as a translator, Beschi was intimately familiar with the story of Brito's martyrdom as retold by its witnesses. He wrote about it in his *Vētaṅṅaṅṅam* (“The explanation of [the true] religion”), a treatise composed around 1730 that set out the characteristics of the true Catholic Church for his Tamil audience—mostly composed of catechists—and sought to counter the Protestant ideas beginning

58. The original Latin letter by Beschi is in AAV, Cong. Rit., Proc. 1697 (unnumbered page at the beginning); a transcription can be found in ARSI, APG-SJ 726, fols. 9r–12v.

Figure 6. Manuscript of the *Vētaviḷakkam* (written around 1730)



Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF), Indien 481, fol. 1r.
Photograph by Margherita Trento, courtesy of the BNF.

usual refined prose. It is more colloquial, syntactically simple, and extremely vivid, for in fact Beschi is not using his own words here but ventriloquizing the witnesses collected during the 1726 hearings. A comparison with the original statements in Tamil reveals that the lively stories of Aṭippan, Pūvāy, and the other men and women healed by Brito are taken verbatim, with very little retouching.⁶² Besides the interesting linguistic exercise, what is key here is that the witnesses of Brito’s inquiries could access their own words, either in writing or when someone read Beschi’s text aloud. Just four years after the inquiry, their statements had entered a Tamil text written by a missionary—and not just any text, but one which set out to trace the contours of the true faith and the true Church.

Through this exercise of ventriloquism in Tamil, for a Tamil audience, Beschi gave those voices the authority to write the narrative of their new Catholic

62. Trento, *Writing Tamil Catholicism*, 118–21.

faith and the Church, and inscribed them within it. In so doing, he also made Brito's catechists and the other witnesses of the 1726 inquiry into the audience of their own life stories. By reading, listening to, or even just hearing about the *Vētaviḷakkam* and their own words contained within it, they could discover their role in the global expansion of the missions and the Catholic Church. The *Vētaviḷakkam* circulated widely, especially as a reference manual in the heated debates between Catholic and Protestant catechists taking place in the kingdom of Thanjavur in the 1730s and 1740s.⁶³ So, while in a sense appropriating their words, Beschi also allowed these men and women to discover themselves in new, more militant ways. The reason the missionary felt entitled to draw so closely on their accounts has once again to do with the logic of witnessing. Beschi states that he had spoken directly with the people who were healed, and could verify the miracles he recounts in the *Vētaviḷakkam*:

I myself have seen and spoken with the people who recovered their health through the miracles I have mentioned. Thinking that I wanted to investigate what they told me, I summoned one by one many people who had been summoned as witnesses (cāṭci), I interrogated them in detail, and in truth, since each one ... described the time, place, and manner in which those miracles took place without any disagreement in their accounts, I listened as they gave their matching witnesses (cāṭci).⁶⁴

In this passage, which concludes the section of the *Vētaviḷakkam* on Brito, Beschi claims for himself the role of witness of the truth of those miracles—"I myself saw (*nāmē kaṇṭu*) their effects." And yet the Tamil language forces him to recognize that the men and women who told their stories to him were also witnesses (*cāṭci*), since he had summoned them to give their testimony within the legal framework of the 1726 inquiry. Here the etymological power of the word *cāṭci* in Tamil provokes a short circuit, and the same chapter of the *Vētaviḷakkam* which had opened by talking about Brito as a *cāṭci*—a witness in the sense that he was a martyr—ends by describing the people who witnessed his death and miracles as *cāṭci*, witnesses in an inquiry. The underlying question is, how far did the new Christian meaning of the term also apply to these men and women? Did they remain mere legal witnesses, or did their actions take on some symbolic shades of the notion of martyrdom? If so, were they able to appropriate that notion and turn it into a source of spiritual and social authority? To answer the questions raised by Beschi's text, we can turn to another, lesser-known work, a life of Brito written in Tamil.

63. V. M. Gnanaprasadam, "Contribution of Fr. Beschi to Tamil" (PhD diss., University of Madras, 1965), 49–50.

64. Beschi, *Vētaviḷakkam*, 230–31: "coṇṇa putumaikaḷāl ārōkkiyam aṭainta pērkaḷ ellāriyumu nāmē kaṇṭu pēciṇōm. avarkaḷ coṇṇatai āraya vēṇṭum eṇṇu cāṭciyāyḱ kūṭa niṇra anēkam pērkaḷai vevvērē aḷaittu, nuṇukkamāyē cōtittu, cattiyamuṇ koṇṭu kēṭṭa iṭattil ellārum antap putumaikaḷ campavitta nēramum iṭamum vakaiyuṇ coṇṇatilē caṇṇum vēṇṇumaiyiṇṇi otta cāṭciyai colla kēṭṭom."

Witnessing and (Self-)Writing

The BNF in Paris preserves a palm-leaf manuscript containing a relatively short life of Brito, identified by his Tamil name of Aruḷāṅanta swami, written in Tamil prose on forty-four folios (fig. 7).⁶⁵ This is the only copy I know of this text, but in his catalog of the BNF’s Tamil collection, Julien Vinson claims that the same life was printed in Pondicherry in the nineteenth century. Vinson is not always right in this catalog, and I was unable to find any trace of a printed edition. Nevertheless, the text must have circulated in either manuscript or printed form in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, because it seems to be the source of most of the details we have regarding Brito’s movements in the Tamil region between 1683 and 1693. Certainly, Saulière in his biography of Brito possessed information that, to the best of my knowledge, is only contained in this text.⁶⁶ This life of Brito is exceptional because it was written by one of the men who worked with him during his second period in the Maravar, knew about his daily travels, and was with him during his final incarceration.

Figure 7. Manuscript of the life of João de Brito by his disciple Aruḷāṅantan



Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF), Indien 469. Photograph by Margherita Trento, courtesy of the BNF.

65. BNF, Indien 469, “Vētacāṭṭiyar rācarīṣi aruḷāṅantacuvāmi tivviya vētattukkāka maḡavaṅ cīrmaiyl piṭpaṭṭup pāṭuppaṭṭa avaruṭaiya carittiram” (“Life of Martyr João de Brito, Captured and Tortured in the Maravar for the Sake of the True Faith”).

66. This information seems to form the basis for chapters 23 and 24 of Saulière, *Red Sand*.

This is a shorter version of the life and martyrdom of Brito, or Aruḷāṇanta swami, told from the perspective of the young Aruḷāṇanta's life. Two aspects are key to understanding the complex spiritual and social dynamics of this passage. First, Aruḷāṇanta underlines his filial bond with Brito, who considered himself "like a real father" to his young disciple. Aruḷāṇanta signals this spiritual genealogy in several ways. Brito is the one who baptized him, thus giving him the possibility of eternal life and passing his charisma on to him. This is emphasized by the fact that the youth's baptismal name is the same as Brito's name in Tamil: to distinguish between the two, the text refers to the boy as simply Aruḷāṇanta and to Brito as "Aruḷāṇanta swami." This homonymy is both striking and intentional, and was a well-known way of demonstrating spiritual genealogy in South India, including in the context of the mission. A century earlier, when the closest disciple of Roberto de Nobili, founder of the Madurai mission, had to abandon his native town of Madurai for Goa, he also changed his name. Originally called Śivadharma, he was baptized as Bonifacio before adding the surname Nobre (=Nobili) on arrival in Goa, thereby claiming spiritual descent from his first teacher.⁶⁸

The second striking element is the way Aruḷāṇanta weaves together the acts of sharing in, witnessing, intimately knowing, and writing the martyrdom of Brito. This happens at the very end of the passage via a succession of three verbs in the first person and the past tense, culminating in a fourth verb in the present tense. Aruḷāṇanta claims that "I was with him (*aṇupavittu ... kūṭa iruntēn*), as his conduct (*carittiram*) was truly that of a witness of the faith (*vētacāṭci*)." Both the nouns for conduct and witness of the faith are strongly charged in this sentence. *Carittiram* literally means the unfolding of a series of events, and is usually used in reference to a life story. It can also denote a person's nature or quality apparent in their conduct, as in the case of a martyr. The noun used for martyr is *vētacāṭci*, or "witness of the faith," a compound whose second element is the word *cāṭci*, discussed above. The first, *vēta[m]*, is extremely polysemic. Originally referring to the Hindu scriptures, and to scriptural authority as a means of knowledge, in a Christian context it could refer by the eighteenth century to the Bible, as well as to the Revelation more generally, and to the Christian faith. In combination, these two words evoke martyrdom both as witnessing the truth of the Catholic revelation (*vētacāṭci*) and as an individual trajectory or conduct (*carittiram*).

avaruṭaiya pātattil avarukkup pūcaikk' utavi ceytu koṇṭu, kaṭṭalai yiṭṭa maṇravūliyamūñ ceyt', avarai viṭṭup piṇiyāmal iruntēn. Ippaṭi yirukkīra pōtu maṇavañcīrmaiyl anta cīrmaikk' uṭaiya rekuṇātāvēvaṇ tivviyavētattukku virōtiyāy iruntatiṇālē avaraip piṭṭikkīra pōtu ṇāṇ kūṭap piṭiṭaṭ', avarōṭē kūṭa cīraicālaiyilē yiruntapaṭiyiṇālē avar aṇupavitta kasttina vātai yavamāṇam aṭi nīṇpantam itu mutalāṇa turitaṅkaḷai yaṇupavittu, kaṭaciyaṇ avar vētacāṭci-yāṇa carittira meyākavē kūṭa yiruntēn, kaṇṇāka kaṇṭēn aṇintēn: ippō naṇanta carittiram caṇuvēcūraṇukku stōttiramuṇṭāka yeḷutikīrēn."

68. Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 244; Margherita Trento, "Śivadharma or Bonifacio? Behind the Scenes of the Madura Mission Controversy (1608–1619)," in *The Rites Controversies in the Early Modern World*, ed. Ines G. Županov and Pierre-Antoine Fabre (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 91–121.

As well as being with Brito at the time of his martyrdom, Aruḷāṇantaṅ states that he saw (*kaṇṭēṅ*) everything with his own eyes, thus claiming for himself the status of eyewitness and the right to say “I knew” (*aṟintēṅ*), another past tense verb in the first person. Because he saw, Aruḷāṇantaṅ knew and still knows, for knowledge is transformative. Once acquired, its action stretches beyond the past moment in which it was created to invade the present. And indeed, the last verb of the sequence is in the present tense. The present action connected with Aruḷāṇantaṅ’s witnessing of Brito’s martyrdom in the past, and knowing in a way that forever transformed him, is the action of writing. I am about to write, he says, what I have shared, witnessed, and known, precisely because I have done those things. Writing is the last action in a chain of events and transformations, an action made both possible and necessary by Aruḷāṇantaṅ’s status as a witness. In this text, composed outside the framework of the official inquiries, we finally understand how witnessing Brito’s death meant sharing in his martyrdom, and offered to his Tamil helpers at the same time spiritual investiture, transformative knowledge, and the authority to write their own selves into the spiritual lineages of the Church (which of course were also social lineages).

Let us take a closer look at Aruḷāṇantaṅ’s text itself, since his viewpoint reveals much about the life of Brito as the locus from which the spiritual and social authority of the catechists emerged. The account is in a colloquial prose, a register that was rarely set down in writing in this period, and would not be defined as Tamil “literature” according to tradition. Indeed, the narrative retains the flavor of an oral testimony and is rooted in the same chronological and geographical settings as the statements given by catechists during the canonization inquiries. The text devotes only two sentences to Brito’s origins and life in Portugal, and does not even describe the time he spent in Goa or elsewhere in India. When it recounts that Brito sailed on a ship to India, his destination is the Tamil country and the Madurai mission. The whole story unfolds there, with a great abundance of details. Told from the perspective of someone who knew Brito personally, it begins in earnest at the time this witness met—or perhaps first knew of—the Jesuit. Moreover, the text maps with precision Brito’s movements during his second period in the Maravar, drawing the contours of a sacred geography of places connected with him that persists to this day.⁶⁹

The manuscript uses direct speech to present not only Brito’s conversations with his friends and enemies but also the dialogues between his catechists and the people they healed and converted. One such instance is the exchange between Brito’s catechist and Taṭiya Tēvaṅ, the young prince seeking to be healed through the power of the Christian “guru,” as Brito is called throughout the text.⁷⁰ The author underlines that the prince was related to Rakunāta Tēvaṅ, but does not mention explicitly what we know from other sources, namely that Taṭiya Tēvaṅ had also

69. See Raj, “Transgressing Boundaries, Transcending Turner.”

70. The titles attributed to Jesuit missionaries from the early seventeenth century on include several terms originally associated with Hindu spirituality: swami (*cuvāmi*), guru (*kuru*), raja-rishi (*rājarīṣi*).

been a suitor to the throne of Ramnad. Here we read simply that after regaining his health, Taṭiya Tēvaṅ converted to Christianity and renounced all his wives but the first, including one of the nieces of Rakunāta Tēvaṅ, who was furious as a result. By showing the active role of the catechists in this conversion, Aruḷāṅantaṅ's life of Brito indirectly positions these men at the center of the political and social events of the Ramnad kingdom.

This version of the story also throws light on the local logics of power and authority intersected by Brito's life and especially his martyrdom. Like Laines, Aruḷāṅantaṅ describes Brito's decapitation and the mutilation of his body the following day. Unlike Laines, however, the Tamil text offers a reason for this butchery. We read that Brito

*... offered his head to the Maravaṅ [Rakunāta Tēvaṅ], and gracefully attained liberation as a martyr (vētacāṭci). The following day, they severed his two hands and his feet. If you want to know the reason, people thought that such a sorcerer (pillikkāraṅ) might rise again and fly away, and so they cut off his hands and feet.*⁷¹

Clearly, people in the Maravar saw the martyr as a powerful figure able to perform magic (or, in Brito's own logic, miracles). The word used to describe Brito as a sorcerer, *pillikkāraṅ*, literally "one who does magic tricks (*pilli*)," is the same term Christians used around this time to refer to the tricks played by local village gods through their own intermediaries. In a ballad composed by an anonymous Christian Tamil author, for instance, these gods are identified as the source of the "lies of sorcery" (*pilli vañcaṅai*).⁷²

This semantic overlap suggests that, for ordinary villagers used to commerce with spirits and their powers, Christianity followed the same logic as other belief systems. While missionaries actively sought to flag up analogies between their role and that of local savants and religious leaders (hence their claim to the title of *paṅṭāram*⁷³), the Tamil men and women they encountered made connections of their own. Local beliefs in the effective nature of Catholic prayers and the

71. BNF, Indien 469, fols. 41v–42r: "... tamatu ciracai maravaṅukkuk koṭuttu vētacāṭciyāy mokṣattukk' eḷunt' aruḷiṅār. Tiṅapīrak' avaruṭaiya iraṅṭu kaikaḷaiyuṅ kālkaḷaiyuṅ tarit-tārkaḷ. At' eṅ eṅṛāl eḷunt' iruntu paṅantu pōvāṅ pillikkāraṅ eṅṛu kālkaḷaiyuṅ kaikaḷaiyuṅ tarittuppoṭṭārkaḷ."

72. For more information on this anonymous ballad on the life of Saint Margaret, likely composed in the eighteenth century, see the introduction to K. Jayakumar, R. Jayalakshmi, and R. Rajarathinam, eds., *The Defender of the Faith: Arc. Marikarutammāl ammāṅai* (Chennai: Institute of Asian Studies, 1996). The expression *pilli vañcaṅai* appears on p. 30 of this edition of the text.

73. The history of this title in the medieval period is unclear, though it likely referred to non-Brahmanical groups in charge of devotional practices in temples. From the early modern period onwards, *paṅṭāram* came to indicate the members of a non-Brahmanical monastic institution (*maṭam*). See Margherita Trento, "Translating the Dharma of Śiva in Sixteenth-Century Chidambaram: Maṅaiñāṅa Campantar's *Civatarumōttaram* with a Preliminary List of the Surviving Manuscripts," in *Śivadharmāmṛta: Essays on the Śivadharmā and Its Network*, ed. Florinda De Simini and Csaba Kiss (Naples: UniOr,

healing abilities of priests have been observed by historians and anthropologists.⁷⁴ The sources suggest that this belief also concerned catechists and other laymen linked to the mission, who often received this power from a missionary in a partially ritualized setting such as the public performances of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* that began in 1718.⁷⁵ With Brito's death, one source of such power took root locally, and remained available for Christian believers to draw on even beyond his martyrdom.

Thanks to the efforts of his Jesuit confrères, Brito was declared Venerable soon after his death. Though the campaign for his canonization ground to a halt with the controversy over the Malabar Rites and the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, it resumed after its restoration in 1814. Brito was declared Blessed in 1853, a Saint in 1947, and his martyrdom and sainthood are nowadays recognized by the Indian faithful and by the Catholic Church. The history of his official cult is one of continuities and ruptures, and it offers a good observation point on the history of the Church in India, its internal conflicts, and its links with the global Church.⁷⁶ Brito was martyred, beatified, and canonized at moments of political transition. In the late seventeenth century, as we have seen, his martyrdom was tightly bound up with the politics of the emerging Ramnad kingdom and its relation to the mission. In the early eighteenth century, the approval of his beatification was a strategic move in the ongoing Malabar Rites controversy. In the mid-nineteenth century, when that beatification was finally enacted, his cult was promoted by the Jesuits who had returned to Tamil Nadu in 1836 following the restoration of the Society. They sought to mobilize the figure of Brito as a symbol of their historical role in the Tamil region, in contrast to the Goan priests who had assumed charge after the suppression. In the twentieth century, Brito's canonization in the year of India's independence seems to mark an attempt by the Catholic Church to demonstrate its long history in the country, and to remind the faithful that Catholic blood had been spilled in the subcontinent long before the British colonial conquest.

Still, none of these "official" moments explains why Brito's cult has become so important at Oriyur. The threads we have followed in this article show that if his power was harnessed so effectively on the local scale, it was thanks to the catechists and laymen who witnessed his martyrdom and construed it as a moment of both spiritual and social investiture. The importance of Brito for local genealogies of social authority was still evident in the ethnographic work of the Jesuit S. Ponnad,

2021), 101–44, here p. 131. By imitation, from the early eighteenth century Jesuits took up the role of non-Brahmanical *pañtāram* missionaries.

74. Ines G. Županov, "Conversion, Illness and Possession: Catholic Missionary Healing in Early Modern South Asia," in *Divins remèdes. Médecine et religion en Asie du Sud*, ed. Ines G. Županov and Caterina Guenzi (Paris: Éd. de l'EHESS, 2009), 263–300.

75. Trento, *Writing Tamil Catholicism*, 60–68.

76. J. Pujó SJ, "The Cult of St. J. de Britto," *Caritas* 57, no. 2 (1973): 73–81.

who visited the Maravar in 1960. Ponnad found that both Catholic and Hindu leading families in the region traced their genealogies back to ancestors converted by Brito.⁷⁷ He was able to speak with a descendant of the first woman converted by Brito in Muni, the village where the missionary was working the day he was arrested. Still observing the Catholicism of their ancestor, this person expressed the wish to be buried in the exact location where Brito had preached and lived.

Ponnad also met Cokku Tēvaṅ, a descendant of the “little king” (*pāḷayakkārar*) of the region where Muni is located, whose ancestors had welcomed Brito and been converted by him. The family had later returned to Hinduism, and was still Hindu in the 1960s, probably an indication that after Brito’s death Catholicism stopped being an attractive religion for the ruling class in the Maravar. Yet, when reciting the list of his ancestors, Cokku Tēvaṅ still began with Brito, and the relationship with the saint remained a source of authority for his family, just as it was for the catechists whose lives we have glimpsed in this essay. This genealogy of authority, along with anthropological elements centered around the spilling of blood, offer important clues to why local Hindus continue to accept the magical powers attributed to Brito, especially regarding healing.⁷⁸ References scattered in the sources also suggest that for Tamil Catholics the act of witnessing became a way of appropriating the martyr’s powers while simultaneously inscribing themselves in the global history of salvation. Over time, this evolved from an impromptu tactic into a well-rehearsed strategy.

During the interrogations of 1695 and 1726, Brito’s catechists reacted on the spot and under great pressure, using all the tools available to them to claim their place next to their teacher. These included their social status, caste, and education, as well as ideas of Christian selfhood centered on devotion, self-sacrifice, and self-sanctification, which these laymen had learned by working closely with the missionaries.⁷⁹ It is likely that they viewed Brito as a powerful spiritual guru whose charisma was transmitted to them through their teacher-student relationship. This was an old and important form of transmission in South India that took on new meanings in the early modern period, when such genealogies allowed certain Brahmanical actors to define themselves as subjective individuals through their place in these spiritual, intellectual, and emotional networks.⁸⁰ In the seventeenth century, new lineages developed as a result of non-Brahmanical groups entering the religious, intellectual, and political arena. Vēḷāḷar lineages in the newly founded

77. Ponnad, “Through Marava in the Footsteps of St. John de Britto.”

78. This makes Brito part of the small group of Christian saints also invoked for healing by Hindus and Muslims. For another example, see the case of Saint Anthony studied by Brigitte Sébastia, *Les rondes de saint Antoine. Culte, affliction et possession en Inde du Sud* (Paris: Aux lieux d’être, 2004).

79. On Christian literature and the training of catechists at the turn of the eighteenth century, see Trento, *Writing Tamil Catholicism*, especially chapters 1 and 2.

80. Talia Ariav, “Intimately Cosmopolitan: Genealogical Poets and Orchestrated Selves in 17th–18th Century Sanskrit Literature from South India” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2022), 12–24.

monasteries (*maṭam*) of the Kaveri delta, for instance, must have offered a convincing example to generations of aspiring Christian gurus such as Mariyatācaṅ.⁸¹

These kinds of dynamics are not unique to Brito's martyrdom. In the years and decades that followed, the laymen who had known him, their colleagues, and their successors continued to refine the ways in which connection with a saint could be creatively used to accrue authority. This is clear in the story of the convert and martyr Saint Tēvacakāyam Piḷḷai, imprisoned by the king of Travancore in 1749 and killed in 1752 at Kattadimalai, just outside of Nagercoil.⁸² Unlike Brito, Tēvacakāyam was an Indian soldier who converted to Catholicism shortly before his death thanks to the joint efforts of three men: Eustache de Lannoy (1715–1777), a Frenchman employed to train the army of the king of Travancore, Mārthānda Varma; the Jesuit missionary Giovanni Battista Buttari (1707–1759), residing at Vadakkankulam, the most important Catholic village in the far south of Tamil Nadu, who baptized him; and the Tamil catechist Ṇāṇappirakācam Piḷḷai (ca. 1685–1757). Each of these men interpreted and capitalized on Tēvacakāyam's conversion and martyrdom in different ways. Most importantly for this essay, Ṇāṇappirakācam Piḷḷai constructed his personal story and family lineage in connection with the story of Tēvacakāyam in ways that closely resemble how Brito's catechists told their own lives in relation to his martyrdom.

Several texts concerning this vēḷāḷa family have survived, chiefly a genealogy written in the early twentieth century and the Tamil diary of one of its members, Cavarirāya Piḷḷai, who later converted to Anglicanism.⁸³ The family was at the center of social life in Vadakkankulam well into the nineteenth century, when it began to write its own story, and it mobilized its relationship with Tēvacakāyam in different ways at different times to navigate the political and social changes of the colonial era. The tradition has it that Ṇāṇappirakācam taught the catechism to Tēvacakāyam in Vadakkankulam, thus actively making him a Christian. He later braved the wrath of the king of Travancore to recover the mortal remains of the martyr, including the bones that would eventually be buried in the cathedral of the Kottar diocese.⁸⁴

81. On these Śaiva monasteries, see Iva Kathleen Koppedrayar, "The Sacred Presence of the Guru: The Velala Lineages of Tiruvavatuturai, Dharmapuram, and Tiruppanantal" (PhD diss., McMaster University, Ontario, 1990); Trento, "Translating the Dharma of Śiva."

82. Tēvacakāyam Piḷḷai was canonized on May 15, 2022.

83. The main source on this family, on which I am preparing a parallel article, is Fr. Marianus Arpudam SJ, "A Genealogical Study of the Catholic Vellala Families at Vadakkankulam," [1915] JEMPARC 217/463; the diary and family history of Cavarirāya Piḷḷai were first published in Yōvāṇ Tēvacakāyaṅ Cavarirāyaṅ, ed., *Cavarirāya Piḷḷai vameca varalāru: The Ancestors of Savariraya Pillai, a Catechist of the Church Missionary Society* (Palayamkottai: Sri Vijaya Laksmi Vilasam Press, 1899), and *Cavarirāya Piḷḷai Carittiram: The Life of Savariraya Pillai, a Catechist of the Church Missionary Society*, vol. 1, *From 1801 to 1836* (Palayamkottai: Sri Vijaya Laksmi Vilasam Press, 1900). The two texts were later reedited in Ā. Civacuppiramaṇiyaṅ, ed., *Upatēciyar Cavarirāyapiḷḷai (1801–1874)* (Nākarkōyil: Kālaccuvaṭu patippakam, 2006).

84. Anonymous, *Vētaacēciyāṇa tēvacakāyam piḷḷai carittiram: iḥtu cēcucupaikkurucuvāmi-yārkaḷil oruvarār ceyyappattatu* (Putuvai: Caṅmavirākkiṇi mātākkōyilaic cērnta accuk-kūṭam, 1892), 77.

Ñāṇappirakācam also retrieved the martyr's turban and left it in Vadakkankulam, where it remains to this day. There is an uncanny similarity between this rescue mission and the story of the party organized by Ciluvai Nāyakkan to recover Brito's remains. In the case of Ñāṇappirakācam, we know that his association with Tēvacakāyam and his role in the martyrdom afforded him the prestige to found a catechist dynasty that lasted into the early twentieth century.

Even from this brief account, the story of Tēvacakāyam and the catechist Ñāṇappirakācam suggests that in South India after Brito, the life of a witness of martyrdom followed a certain pattern, even a script. It thus became possible to reenact that script at different times and in different contexts. This possibility emerges for the first time in the sources linked to Brito's canonization, chiefly in the way Mariyatācaṅ modeled his own life on his father's story. These early sources do not allow us to follow the story of a specific family over the *longue durée*, but, as we have seen, Catholic catechists in the Maravar continue to trace their genealogies back to Brito. In the eighteenth century, such genealogies were a crucial way for Tamil catechists to negotiate their role within their communities as well as within the universal and global Church. How could they affirm their authority, if they could not be priests? We should not forget that in the territory of the Madurai mission, Indian converts were only rarely ordained and could not enter the Society of Jesus. Though these men were supposed to be leaders of their people, their conversion created a displacement, as the source of their spiritual power was primarily located elsewhere, in Goa or Rome. Bearing witness and, in so doing, appropriating martyrdom, became an effective and specific means of accessing and articulating that power on a local level.

The moment of Brito's death in Oriyur on February 4, 1693, thus embodies and articulates at least three different dimensions of witnessing, whose effects unfold at distant but intersecting scales. It was the martyrdom of a Portuguese nobleman and Jesuit missionary who practiced the method of accommodation, and the ultimate testimony of his faith in the eyes of the Catholic Church worldwide. It gave rise to a number of judicial investigations where sworn witnesses, both in South India and in Europe, attested to its veracity. Finally, it was also the moment when Brito's spiritual powers were harnessed by the local men who witnessed his death, and could thus be passed down through newly forged spiritual and social lineages in Tamil Nadu.

Margherita Trento
EHESS

margherita.trento@ehess.fr