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Pamila Gupta. *The Relic State: St. Francis Xavier and the Politics of Ritual in Portuguese India*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2014. 304 pp. ISBN: 9780719090615. £70.00.

Life histories of individuals both prominent and little-known now comprise an established genre in imperial histories and Indian Ocean studies. Pamila Gupta productively stands this approach on its head by tracing the long history of St. Francis Xavier's post-mortem body, using this singular focus to document the changing fortunes of the Portuguese imperial state in India. Few corpses have a four-century afterlife; fewer still are the scholars who would think look at the documentation of exhumations and celebrations of a holy relic for evidence of an increasingly secular state.

Gupta's ambitious study explicitly charts changes and continuities in Portuguese India over five hundred years. Her concerted attention to the life, canonization, and subsequent ritual celebrations of St. Francis Xavier give the project structure and make it manageable—both as a scholarly endeavour and as a book accessible to readers. She positions the investigation as historical ethnography—where the subjects of study are the colonial state, the Jesuit order, and the specifics of religious ritual practice. Inherently—and quite successfully—interdisciplinary, *The Relic State* argues that the symbolic power of St. Francis Xavier served to mediate the competing aims and shifting tensions between the Catholic Church and the Portuguese crown as both institutions sought to exert greater control over people—Europeans and South Asians—in Goa and the wider Estado da Índia. This mediation succeeded, according to Gupta, because of “Xavier's dual role as an agent of church and state in the production of the ‘local’ under Portuguese colonial rule ...” (227).

The surprise—and surprising power—of Gupta’s argument lies in a paradox: as the colonial state increasingly sought to exert control over the display and ritual celebration of Xavier’s corpse—seemingly usurping religious power—the state was growing increasingly secular. It is to Gupta’s credit that she is able to convincingly show St. Francis Xavier’s “crucial role ... in defining their [Portuguese] form of rule” (1).

She does this by highlighting five pivotal moments in the ritual display of Xavier’s body, enshrined in the book as chapter titles: In-corruption in 1554—when Xavier’s unremarkable death followed by a decided lack of physical decay first attracted attention; Canonization in 1624—when the intertwined glory of Xavier and the city of Goa served the shared interests of Church and Crown; Secularization in 1782—when the state sought to extirpate the lingering influence of the Jesuit order it had expelled 23 years earlier, and when Xavier’s desiccating body challenged literal interpretations of his miraculous preservation; Resurrection in 1859—when the state sought to counter allegation of its demise, in the face mounting evidence of its mismanagement and decrepitude, by proving it at least could continue to control Xavier’s body; and Commemoration in 1952—when Goa joined sites in Spain, Italy, France, Portugal, China, and Japan (all places that were pivotal in Xavier’s earthly life) to mark the four hundredth anniversary of Xavier’s death, move that sought to support the continued legitimacy of Goa’s status as a Portuguese colony.

This ambitious interpretation of changing ritual practice is supported by an equally broad range of evidence. Gupta marshals Portuguese royal decrees, the correspondence of kings and Jesuits, travel narratives, published Xavierian biographies, forensic reports from as early as the mid-sixteenth century, and modern newspaper

accounts to construct time-specific eyewitness accounts of the ritual display of St. Francis Xavier's dwindling remains at the five seminal moments of her study.

Intentionally interdisciplinary, the book's greatest strength lies in its anthropological focus on ritual. Gupta makes an explicit bid to revitalize ritual studies, showing that this focus need not be on the marginal or arcane, but in fact is central to governance and to understanding encounters in multiple cultural registers. Gupta documents differences in the practice and meaning of rituals among Catholics—differentiating between interventions by church and state, and differences between Portuguese and Indian Catholics—but also notes that Hindu, Muslim, and secular pilgrims sought out the shrine of St. Francis Xavier's remains—undercutting both the Church and the Crown's claims to singular authority. That ritual practice was an important historical site of encounter is an especially provocative insight.

Gupta also displays adept textual analysis, looking for meaning-making in documents intended to accomplish prosaic administrative tasks. Her reading of what amount to early-modern forensic reports—which document the deterioration Xavier's body—showcase her skills as a historical anthropologist, giving attention to the practical production and temporal context of the documents, the pervasive influence of the Jesuit order, the challenge of accounting for spiritual belief, and the conflict between competing administrative systems. The sixteenth-century autopsy reports are also especially interesting for the light they shed on a particular material challenge to the spiritual authority of Francis Xavier. A central claim of his beatification rested on the incorruptibility of his body. Miraculous as it may have been that his body did not decay immediately, and for months after his death was sweet smelling and hydrated, forensic

science documented an increasingly physical end to his remains—a tension that remains unresolved in Catholic belief and Gupta’s book. Instead, Gupta uses the tension as a way to reflect on the church-state duality at the centre of her analysis, noting that, “By investing themselves in the incorruptness of Xavier’s corpse, church and state officials reveal much about themselves and their relationship to each other” (28).

Gupta’s discussion of the forensic texts includes extended quotations from the original sources, a practice she uses throughout the book with a range of source material. The inclusion of entire letters and long passages from other texts invite the reader to think with Gupta about the specifics of her analysis. This reproduction of manuscript sources will be a useful resource for scholars, especially students who may not yet have the opportunity for archival experience. The heavy use of extended quotations from secondary sources is, however, often more distracting than productive or provocative. Gupta’s ability to marshal diverse sources and put them into coherent conversation does more for the book than the use of other scholars’ words to support its conclusions.

It is no mean feat to bring larger socio-political context and historiographic interventions to bear across five centuries—and across two continents. To do this in support of an argument that demonstrates how colonies could act as “spaces where older (and often outdated) practices get revived in conjunction with new settings” (16) is an important contribution to current-day imperial histories invested in documenting that colonies were not backwaters of history, but often the site of significant social and political innovation.

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