

**Beyond Incommensurability: Understanding Inter-Imperial Dynamics  
in the Early Modern World**

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‘Nature has not established her borders between remote lands in vain (...).  
And does not Nature revenge every insult offered her ?’  
- J.G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*.<sup>1</sup>

On 26 June 1976, a rather curious event took place in the history of modern sport. The world-famous heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali, who not long before (in October 1974) had defeated George Foreman in the epic ‘Rumble in the Jungle’ in Kinshasa, Zaire, found himself in the Nippon Budokan Hall in Tokyo, fighting the Japanese pro wrestling (or *puroresu*) champion Kanji Inoki, better known as Antonio Inoki on account of a childhood spent in Brazil. The fight lasted fifteen rounds, and has been termed ‘the most boring match of the century’. The two fighters came from different sports, and the problem was essentially one of producing a set of rules that would suit both and compromise neither. The consequence was that Inoki, who was barred from using suplexes and submission holds, stayed low on the floor for most of the fight. Ali managed to land a mere handful of punches, while Inoki repeatedly kicked him in the legs, in a manoeuvre that later came to be known as the sliding ‘Ali Kick’. Eventually, the affair was declared a draw. Ali was rumoured to have been hospitalized briefly for damage to his legs, while Inoki gained much in terms of publicity but was saddled with huge debts. Less than six months later, partly on account of these debts, Inoki agreed to fight in the Karachi National Stadium in Pakistan against Akram Pehalwan, a member of the locally celebrated Bholu family – which had once produced the famous wrestler Gamma. Now the South Asian free-style wrestler (or *pehalwān*) tradition is better known for the amount of food and milk that the wrestlers consume than any other element. One of the Bholu family claims even now, incidentally, to eat 33 pieces of *nān* bread and 4 kilograms of meat in every meal. The far-from-nimble Akram was still apparently confident that the

incompatibility between the two styles of fighting would once again lead to the same result as in Budokan. What resulted was instead a humiliation. In a minute and five seconds, Inoki had managed to put an arm-lock on Akram, and then actually broke his arm. Akram was rendered *hors de combat* and perhaps unconscious.<sup>2</sup> The fight came to an ignominious end. Even the passage of a quarter-century has not erased the memory of this defeat from Pakistan's popular culture. A mocking story tells of how, as Akram lay in pain on the mat, members of his family tried to rouse him by saying '*Uttho bhāi, TV wāle āgaye hain*' (Get up buddy, the TV guys are here).<sup>3</sup>

If I begin with this rather odd anecdote, it is for two reasons. One is purely chronological, for these incidents took place even as Tzvetan Todorov was putting his final touches on his theory of how the conquest of America was the outcome of a sort of semiotic incommensurability between the conquistador Hernán Cortés and the Mexica ruler Moctezuma.<sup>4</sup> The second is of course that these incidents involving Inoki can serve as a metaphor for the problem I wish to deal with here. What happens when two or more imperial systems encounter each other? Is the result a boring draw, as in Budokan, or does one side get a 'chicken-wing arm lock' on the other, with altogether disastrous consequences? The central notion that I will be returning to is that of 'incommensurability', rendered famous in the early 1960s by Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, and then taken into other contexts. The principal concern of Kuhn in his initial work was with the incommensurability of scientific theories, in which he argued that there was a relation of methodological, observational and conceptual disparity between paradigms. In a later phase, Kuhn began to argue using – albeit with some looseness – the work of W.V. Quine, that incommensurability was essentially a problem in the semantic sphere, and further proceeded to argue that the fundamental problem was one of the 'indeterminacy of translation'. Yet, where Quine had argued that there was an indeterminacy between equally good translations, Kuhn seemed to imply that incommensurability was more an issue of a failure of exact translation; this suggested, first, that correct translation was actually possible in principle, and second, that existing translations were not only indeterminate but also bad.<sup>5</sup>

The next step chronologically was the transfer of the idea of incommensurability, used first in the context of the relations between two (or more) 'paradigms', to the

relation between two or more cultures. This gives us the idea of ‘cultural incommensurability’, which I see as a particular form of cultural relativism, and one through which anthropology came to influence the practice of historians in the late 1980s and 1990s. The view here is of largely impermeable cultural zones, perfectly coherent in and of themselves, but largely inaccessible to those who look in from the outside. To be sure, as Anthony Pagden has forcefully reminded us, the roots of such ideas can be traced back at least to the later eighteenth century, when writers such as Denis Diderot and above all Johann Gottfried Herder produced powerful, and in the case of Herder, rather dangerous, arguments on this subject. For, in Pagden’s words, “Herder pushed the notion of incommensurability to the point where the very concept of a single human genus became, if not impossible to conceive, at least culturally meaningless”.<sup>6</sup> Where does this leave us with respect to the study of the interaction of empires ? We know what Herder himself thought very poorly of empires, for he wrote, “Nothing therefore seems more contradictory to the true end of governments than the endless expansion of states, the wild confusion of races and nations under one scepter. An empire made up of a hundred peoples and a hundred and twenty provinces which have been forced together is a monstrosity, not a state-body”.

I myself do not find this reflection by the father of a certain style of nationalism very helpful. So let me begin instead by making a simple, even crude, distinction. Some empires of the early modern period were obviously genealogically related, or belonged to overlapping cultural zones. Such was the case of the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals, who seem for many purposes to have even formed a single sphere of elite circulation for calligraphers, Sufi mystics, warriors and poets. Thus, for example, we may take the situation in the late 1660s, when Husain Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Basra, decided to desert his master Sultan Mehmed IV (r. 1648-87) and go over to the Mughals. The governor, as a high Ottoman official, was obviously well-versed not only in Ottoman Turkish, but presumably also had at least a smattering (if not considerably more) of both Arabic and Persian. We are thus not predisposed to assume that when he arrived in the court of Aurangzeb, he was like a fish out of water. We also know that the Pasha prepared his ground for several years before his desertion, and that on his arrival in western India he was escorted with full dignities into Shahjahanabad-Delhi in July 1669,

and – as the Mughal chronicles have it – “by the touch of the royal hand on his back, his head was exalted beyond the sky”.<sup>7</sup> In concrete terms, this meant that he received extensive gifts of rubies and horses, a great mansion on the banks of the river Jamuna, as well as a high *mansab* rank of 5000 in the Mughal hierarchy. Very quickly he also rose to be governor (*sūbadār*) of the central Indian province of Malwa, itself no mean achievement. Two of his sons, Afrasiyab and ‘Ali Beg, were also given respectable ranks and taken into imperial service. Seen from a certain angle, the short Mughal career of Islam Khan Rumi (as Husain Pasha came to be known) until his death in battle in late June 1676 suggests how easy it was to cross the boundary between these two empires. The fact that the Mughals and Ottomans shared a genealogy of some kind, and a common heritage in Turko-Persian courtly culture, is what leads us to this predisposition. I shall have occasion to return to this problem presently, looking to some lesser-known aspects of Husain Pasha’s career, but let me state it here bluntly: there is a tendency to think of ‘cultural incommensurability’ as particularly acute at moments of ‘encounter’, when two disparate (and perhaps historically separated) politico-cultural entities come into contact. We think of Cortés and Moctezuma, Pizarro and Atahualpa, Captain Cook in Hawai’i, or Vasco da Gama and the Zamorin of Calicut. It is rare to talk of ‘incommensurability’ in relation to an Englishman visiting seventeenth-century Denmark, or when the Safavids send an ambassador to the Mughals.<sup>8</sup> Husain Pasha among the Mughals is thus not what one thinks of as an ‘early modern encounter’.

But it is not by showing that at some times and places, such an issue did not arise that we can wish away the idea of incommensurability itself. I will try and explore the issue of incommensurability in relation to three substantial early modern themes: diplomacy, war and art. These are distinct themes as I well know, lending themselves to rather varied treatment. But they are also themes regarding which I can draw upon a considerable body of materials at a monographic level, which is crucial for the sort of *tour d’horizon* I have in mind. I shall proceed through a series of examples, pausing from time to time for provisional reflections, before attempting a broad conclusion at the close. So to the first of my themes: namely, diplomacy.

## I.

The cut and thrust of diplomatic negotiations was for long the focus of traditional historians, whether those of the celebrated French *Ecole des Chartes* or others elsewhere in the world. These studies focused in very large measure on the documents that were produced by diplomacy, or around it: texts of treaties, but also instructions given to envoys and ambassadors, and the reports submitted by returning envoys. One great example will suffice to show the crucial significance of such materials. Leopold von Ranke, one of whose major works entitled *Die Osmanen und die spanische Monarchie im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (first published in two volumes in about 1830) concerned the relations between the Ottomans and the Spanish Habsburgs, used as a major source for his work the *relazioni* of the Venetian ambassadors to the Sublime Porte, a strategy that has since then been revived by Lucette Valensi with a rather different purpose in mind.<sup>9</sup> Where Ranke had tended to focus on these reports as sources, crucial in view of his lack of direct access to Ottoman materials, Valensi has tended to use these rather more in the tradition of the ‘history of representations’, even though she shies away from any association with a Saïdian analysis of ‘Orientalism’. Similar attempts have been made elsewhere. The Dutch East India Company’s presence in Asia was the basis for a great collection entitled *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum*, edited by J.E. Heeres, and in the case of the Portuguese, we have the massive *Colecção de Tratados e Concertos de Pazes*, edited by Júlio Firmino Judice Biker. These materials have been used sporadically by historians to study relations in a bilateral framework, thus for example between the Sultans of Johor and the Dutch, or the Portuguese and the Mughals. However, a good many years ago, a warning note was sounded by a Sri Lankan historian, K. W. Goonewardena.<sup>10</sup> He argued that if one considered the texts of treaties signed between the Dutch Company and the rulers of Kandy, not in the Dutch version alone (as is the case with Heeres) but with the two versions in Dutch and Sinhala, it became clear that there were at times massive divergences in content. These divergences can explain why treaties subsequently became battlegrounds, with one or the other side claiming that they were not being adhered to, and the other denying it. Now, what was unclear was the source of the divergence. Was this merely a case of the interpreter, the Dutch *tolk* or the Portuguese *língua*, being sloppy at his job? Were there in fact deeper issues of translation involved? Whatever be the case, the examples that he produced flew in the face of a view, that had

gained much ground in the 1950s and 1960s, to the effect that the diplomatic experiences of the early modern period allowed for the creation of an unproblematic and quite transparent ‘Law of Nations’, which is to say a set of common conventions or mutually agreed framework within which diplomacy could be conducted.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporaries too were aware of the problem in some incarnation or the other. Thus, the Portuguese chronicler of the 1570s, António Pereira Pinto, described the process of translation between Portuguese and Persian in some detail, and attempted to reassure his readers that the diplomatic materials that he provided them – even if they originated in a distant tongue – were credible. In his *História da Índia*, Pereira thus reproduces the Portuguese version of certain letters of the Sultan of Bijapur, ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah to the viceroy of the Portuguese Indies, Dom Luís de Ataíde, and what is remarkable is that he describes the form of the letters as well as his mode of access to them. I quote him at some length.

‘It seemed right to us that these letters should be inserted into this history in the same form that the *Hidalcão* [‘Adil Khan] wrote them, for we saw their originals in the possession of the Viceroy, under the sign and seal (*chapa*) of the *Hidalcão*, written in two languages – Persian and Portuguese: primarily in Persian, in which they write the authoritative version, and on the same piece of paper, below the same seal and sign, appears the translation in Portuguese by one Bernardo Rodriguez, a New Christian of Goa, who was resident there [Bijapur] as he had fled with a married woman, and on account of many worse crimes which among the Moors are [however] not considered strange; and as he is most able, and fluent in languages, principally in Persian, and eloquent in that language and in Portuguese, the *Hidalcão* makes use of him as a secretary in external matters (*nas cousas de fora*), and in his hand they were translated from the Persian script, which since it is most compendious and comprehensive, one page (*huma lauda*) of it occupied more than six in Portuguese, on account of the characters which are all very similar, curved in the manner of a half-moon, with the differences being on account of the little points that they carry on the inside and outside, as also in the part where the body of each letter opens up’.<sup>12</sup>

This extensive introduction precedes the verbatim reproduction of two translated letters, the first undated and the second dated 26 September 1570. In these missives, which seem to have accompanied the respective embassies of a certain Rodrigo de Moraes on the Portuguese side, and Khwaja Lutfullah on the side of Bijapur, the ‘Adil Shah complains bitterly of the treatment of his own ships, and those of his subjects, by the Portuguese officials at fortresses such as Hurmuz, Diu and Chaul, who ransack them, and ‘take away on land the boys and girls they find there, to convert them by force into Christians, which include the sons of honoured Moors, and their daughters and wives, and their Abyssinian and Moorish [slave] boys’.<sup>13</sup> These matters, he declares, and in particular the issue of forcible conversion, are causing much strain to his friendship with the ruler of Portugal, and it is up to the Portuguese viceroy to resolve the tension. Other issues dealt with in the letters include the treatment of the vessels of anti-Portuguese Muslim traders in the ports of Bijapur; the free passage of certain crucial goods (in particular opium) into ‘Adil Shahi territories; and the treatment of Christian slaves who flee from Goa to Bijapur – whom the Bijapur ruler agrees to hand over to their masters. Having reproduced them, Pereira in his commentary treats these letters as mere ‘dissimulation’, and as ‘pretended signs of friendship’, when in fact the ‘Adil Shah planned all the while to mount a war on the Portuguese. Yet, the presence of these letters in their ‘raw’ form is of some utility, since it already provided sixteenth-century readers with an implicit counter-argument to the claims of the Portuguese chroniclers that no real reasons for war existed between the two parties. These then are diplomatic materials that are not necessarily partisan to the Portuguese, and cannot be read simply in terms of a conspiracy theory.

In some of our collaborative work, Muzaffar Alam and I have attempted an exercise, following in the spirit of the work of the late Jean Aubin.<sup>14</sup> We have used the original Persian letters (with chancellery seals) of an Asian monarch, in our case Sultan Bahadur of Gujarat (r. 1526-37) to establish modern English translations. We have then compared these translations with contemporary translations into Portuguese produced in the 1530s, and inserted into the Portuguese chronicle of Fernão Lopes de Castanheda. Our conclusions are provisional but that they may be stated as follows. We do not find an enormous divergence in terms of content of the type that Goonewardena found. Further, it is interesting to note that the Portuguese of the translations attempts to hold quite

literally to certain expressions in the Persian original. And finally, we note that this lends to the Portuguese of the sixteenth-century translation a certain curious quality, which distinguishes it from the language of the rest of the chronicle in which it is embedded. These conclusions seem to broadly confirm the view of Aubin with regard to letters exchanged in the context of the Persian Gulf. However, he had also noted two features that we must mention here. First, wordplay or *double entendre* usually does not pass in the translations. Second, the identity of the translator does have some incidence on the translation, as was noted also by Georg Schurhammer in his analysis of the career and writings of a certain António Fernandes, a converted Muslim in Portuguese service.<sup>15</sup> A translator such as Fernandes tends to write a more ornate Portuguese, and sometimes even introduces phrases into the Portuguese that can only be seized if one has some background in Persian. The Portuguese historian Luís Filipe Thomaz has made similar helpful comments while recently reediting and translating the Malay letters of Abu Hayat, Sultan of Ternate in the early 1520s.<sup>16</sup>

These conclusions may appear banal. But for my part, I find them somewhat reassuring when dealing with situations where two versions of the document do **not** exist, such as a valuable letter from Islam Shah Sur to the Portuguese governor Dom João de Castro dating from October 1546 (Sha‘ban 953 H.).<sup>17</sup> The long and extremely interesting letter that the Ottoman commander Hadim Süleyman Pasha wrote to Ulugh Khan, the *wazir* of the Gujarat Sultanate, after his unsuccessful expedition in 1538, is also a case in point.<sup>18</sup> We do not have the Ottoman original, only a Portuguese version. Yet, what then should we make of this text? A similar problem arises with respect to a quite important, albeit economically written letter, from Vira Narasimha Raya, ruler of Vijayanagara, to the Portuguese governor (later viceroy) Dom Francisco de Almeida, in 1505. Here too, we do not possess the original (which must have been in Kannada, or less probably in Telugu), only the contemporary Portuguese translation. Yet this letter is quite surprising in terms of what it proposes. But before getting to the contents of the letter, I should probably say a little in terms of its background. The empire of Vijayanagara, or Karnataka, was already known to Europeans in the fifteenth century, largely on account of the writings of Niccolò de’ Conti. Yet, in their first expeditions, the Portuguese did not seek to establish relations with Vijayanagara, even though this empire had ports on both

sides of the south Indian peninsula. They concentrated instead on the kingdoms of Kerala, in the extreme south-west of India. Nevertheless, unofficial contacts were made with Vijayanagara through a Franciscan friar, Frei Luís do Salvador, who made his way to the great interior city of Vijayanagara at the time of a dynastic struggle. Eventually, a powerful warlord, Narasa Nayaka, founded a fresh dynasty, and left it to his son and successor Vira Narasimha Raya, who seems to have received Frei Luís – though with little knowledge of the power that he claimed to represent. He then sent Frei Luís, accompanied by one of his own representatives and a letter, back to the port of Cannanore in Kerala, where Dom Francisco de Almeida had just landed.

The letter came accompanied by gifts of cloth and bracelets, as we learn from accompanying documentation. Its contents were brief but wide-ranging. It made note that a Brahmin from Portugal (*hum teu bramene por nome chamado Frey Luis*, that is Frei Luís, a priest) had arrived in Vijayanagara as an emissary. He had been well-received, and his words had been heard very positively. As a consequence, the king of Portugal was offered an alliance. He could have access to one or more of the ports of Vijayanagara, preferably Mangalore. The two kings would be allied for the purpose of joint actions on land and sea. And, to seal all this, a marriage alliance was proposed so that the blood of the two royal houses would mingle. (*‘[se] quisereis minha filha ou irmã por molher eu ta darey e asy tomarey tua filha ou irmã ou cousa de teu samgue por molher’*).<sup>19</sup> A daughter of the king of Portugal could marry the Vijayanagara ruler and come to India, while a girl of the Vijayanagara family would be sent to Portugal for a similar, and suitable, marriage. This is a most curious proposal, quite unlike any other that the Portuguese received in the first decades of their presence in Asian waters. In Kerala, they had been treated with hostility, arriving as they did in the form of armed traders with specific demands, such as the expulsion of all Muslim merchants from the port of Calicut. Yet, where Vijayanagara is concerned, we find not suspicion and a volition to keep the distant foreign power at an arm’s length, but an eager desire to cement an alliance. We are aware that the proposal did reach the Portuguese court, and that there was a certain excitement that stemmed from it. Yet, nothing came of it, even though it fitted well enough with certain of the more ambitious claims of Dom Manuel, the Portuguese king. The suspicion one has was that it was the reciprocity of the

arrangement that posed a problem in Portugal, even though this very reciprocity was clearly a device to level the playing field. In the political vocabulary of Vijayanagara, simply to give away a daughter would have been to place oneself in a situation of inferiority. This was the reason why the marital exchange had to be mutual. And this was something that the Portuguese court could not countenance: namely, sending a Portuguese princess to a 'pagan' court in distant India. There was an interesting and significant asymmetry here between the attitudes of the two courts.

Yet we know that the Portuguese court did entertain marital alliances with England, Spain, and even Savoy. Vijayanagara rulers did so with other kings in southern India, and Orissa. Safavid princesses were married into the Mughal royal family, as indeed were princesses from (subordinate) Rajput households with royal pretensions. In some cases, such alliances involved a measure of coercion, but in others they did not. What defined the limits of such possibilities? Were these limits that we can see as coterminous with the limits of communication as opposed to incommensurability, or would this be too simplistic a thesis ?

We may also approach the issue of diplomacy from the other end, namely that of radical breakdown. We are aware that in the last years of his life, relations between Amir Timur (d. 1405) and the Chinese emperors had taken on a rather problematic aspect. In what must be seen as one of the world's most spectacular displays of the breakdown of diplomacy, Timur had Chinese envoys sent to him by the Ming emperors Hung-wu and Yung-lo executed in 1395, 1402, and 1403, and letters of insult sent to the emperor, addressing him as 'Pig', in a rather crude play on the emperor Hung-wu's family name of 'Chu'. This was preparatory to mounting a campaign to the east, which Timur's death in February 1405 prevented him from prosecuting.<sup>20</sup> This must be seen as a rather extreme case, the equivalent of denying that the source from which the envoys come has any standing at all, though Timur clearly knew this was not the case. If Osama bin Laden were to send official envoys to the United States Presidency, would they be protected by any conventions, written or unwritten ? This incident is paralleled in some ways the fate of the Portuguese envoys from Macao, who made their way to Nagasaki in July 1640. They did so in spite of the order issued by the Japanese state council (*rōjū*) in late August 1639, declaring that no further Portuguese vessels would be entertained in Japanese ports,

and that any ships attempting to enter would be destroyed and their crew and passengers put to death. Clearly, the Macao Senate did not realize how deadly serious the shogunate in fact was. In a meeting of 13 March 1640, it was hence resolved to send an embassy with a galliot to present a petition asking that the Edict of Expulsion be repealed. The ship left Macao on 22 June, and as soon as it entered the port of Nagasaki on 6 July, it was seized and the embassy and crew-members were imprisoned on the island of Deshima. In early August 1640, a message from Edo arrived accusing them of defying the earlier order. The envoys pleaded that they were not there to trade but to present a memorial to the Japanese government. Despite this, they were sentenced to the death. The next morning, those slated for execution were given the choice of renouncing Christianity. Sixty-one refused and were decapitated. Thirteen were spared and returned to Macao in a small Chinese junk with the grim and insulting message to the Senate that the shogunate meant business.<sup>21</sup>

In this instance, as with Timur, we can perhaps argue that the radical breakdown of the diplomatic process was not a breakdown of communication. It was instead a very particular form of communication, a sort of unilateral redefinition of the rules of the game. It was not as if the Japanese and the Portuguese of Macao did not know each other well: they did, and indeed – if one is to follow Jurgis Elisonas – the Japanese knew rather too much about the Portuguese and their possible intentions. What did transpire was that the Macao Senate was desperate to keep the Japan trade open, and willing to take very high risks for this purpose. Disengagement could only take place through a radical symbolic action, and this is what in fact took place – with both sides reading the sign for exactly what it was. The situation of the Chinese envoys to Samarqand is a somewhat different one. For Timur's actions did not in fact produce an end to relations. Rather, shortly thereafter, in 1409, other Chinese envoys arrived at the court of his son, Mirza Shahrukh and resumed relations with his successor, in spite of a further exchange of rancorous missives. In this exchange of embassies, one of the Chinese envoys, an experienced civil servant by name Ch'en Ch'eng, was sent to Herat in late 1413. Ch'en even produced a very valuable account of life in the Timurid domains of the southern part of Central Asia, entitled 'Monograph of the countries of the western regions', to accompany his travel log, 'Record of a journey to the western regions', which we are told

formed the basis of Chinese textual knowledge of certain areas such as Herat and its environs until as late as 1736. The account, a recent analyst remarks, “is remarkably free of bias [except] ... when his [Ch’en’s] Confucian sensibilities were offended”, even taking time out to praise the quality of the bathhouses and masseurs that he encountered. The incident of the decapitated ambassadors was placed, as it were, within parentheses.

Let me draw a first set of conclusions here. Writing some decades ago, the late Bernard Cohn proposed a version of the Todorov thesis drawing upon a diplomatic narrative of the type that I have discussed above. Cohn re-read the ambassadorial account of Sir Thomas Roe, sent by James I of England in the 1610s to the court of the Mughal emperor Jahangir, which had often been used as a major account of Jahangir’s lifestyle and court, even though Roe returned to England with nothing accomplished on behalf of master.<sup>22</sup> Denying the informational utility of this account, Cohn concluded that it was in fact based on a radical misunderstanding of the functioning of the Mughal court, as well as Indian society in general. The problem, as he saw it, was that Roe came from seventeenth-century England, a mercantile, bourgeois culture that was obsessed by prices, values and mercantile transactions. On the other hand, Jahangir, a thoroughly Indianised Mughal, reasoned – or so Cohn thought – in terms of the transfer of substances, in a way that was wholly antithetical to the reasoning of the English ambassador. Roe was hence constantly ‘mistranslating’ Jahangir’s own actions, as well as various events that transpired in the Mughal court, and this mistranslation was in Cohn’s view an issue (although these are not his words) of incommensurability between two cultures, the English and the Mughal-Indian. As Cohn put it then, “Europeans of the seventeenth century lived in a world of signs and correspondences [while] ... Hindus and Muslims operated with an unbounded substantive theory of objects and persons”.

Cohn’s view met with much success, particularly in view of the more or less structuralist language in which it was posed, and which resonated with the radical view of the ‘different’ nature of India that Chicago anthropologists enthusiastically espoused at that time. (It is another matter that some of them have since then decided that such a fetishising of ‘difference’ is a grave Orientalist malady). In recent years, strenuous attempts have been made to stand Cohn entirely on his head. The work of William Pinch, for example, attempts to revisit both the episode of Roe in Jahangir’s court, and the

history of the British Empire in India more generally, arguing with more passion than reason that Roe and Jahangir were in more-or-less perfect communication, inhabiting exactly the same world of signs. He writes that any differences were “primarily differences of detail, not of substance. The differences were translatable”.<sup>23</sup> Pinch has since gone to suggest that there was also effectively no cultural difference or dissonance between the British rulers of India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their Indian subjects; and indeed quite simply that “India was not a British colony” because “to refer to the British domination of India as ‘colonialism’ suggests that Indians did not take part, but simply watched from the shrinking sidelines while Britons appropriated to themselves the wealth and territory of the sub-continent”.<sup>24</sup> This then is a view of absolute commensurability, and indeed far more, that totally rules out the need to pursue the discussion I have in mind, besides being the construction of a rather patent straw-man according to which colonies and colonialism have never existed anywhere historically. Yet, when one scratches the surface of the argument, Pinch’s own view seems to rest on a sort of missionary’s faith that all of God’s creatures must be able to communicate, somewhat like the politically incorrect cartoon in which a missionary who is being cooked in a pot by a savage tribe, is advising them to go easy on the salt.

My own view of the Roe embassy, as well as the narrative that it produced, differs from those of both Cohn and Pinch.<sup>25</sup> I would argue, first of all, that Roe’s lack of success (for which there were myriad reasons) meant that he had to portray the Mughal court as unreasonable, and incommensurable with the standards he had brought from Europe. This would make it appear that his own lack of success was simply a function of the incompatibility between the two systems, which is where Roe’s account slots well into the accumulating dossier on Oriental Despotism in the seventeenth century. The second point to be made is a procedural one. Translation was a genuinely complex issue at the time of this embassy, involving sometimes three or four layers of mediation, between Roe (with his broken Spanish) and Jahangir’s Persian. By the eighteenth century, procedural matters had been much simplified, with the growing number of what are sometimes termed *passeurs culturels* – cultural go-betweens – men like James Steuart, Din Muhammad, or Antoine Polier.<sup>26</sup> The structural opposition proposed by Cohn excludes the possibility of a dynamic, where, say, a hundred years after Roe, some

different outcome might emerge than the initial one. In this view, the twain could never meet, an outcome that even Kipling was willing to permit in exceptional circumstances.

## II.

This brings me to my second set of examples, namely those relating to war. Here too, let me start with a radical example, namely the celebrated hypothesis of David Ayalon regarding the end of the Mamluk state in Egypt in the 1510s. Ayalon argued that, despite their long cohabitation, the Mamluks and the Ottomans had by the early sixteenth century, come to make war in very different ways.<sup>27</sup> The Mamluks were committed to forms of heavy cavalry warfare, to severely limiting the place of firearms, and to a certain composition of their armies. The Ottomans were far more flexible, far less concerned with social hierarchies on the battlefield, and far more exposed – on account of their proximity to European states – to the use of gunpowder in its various incarnations, from sieges to the battlefield. This led, in Ayalon's view, to the rapid collapse of the Mamluk forces in 1516-17, once Sultan Selim began a campaign against them. The two styles of warfare were simply not compatible, and no rules of engagement existed to protect the Mamluks. In a certain sense, Ayalon wound up suggesting that the Mamluks faced with the Ottomans were not unlike the Mexica faced with the forces of Hernán Cortés. An amusing footnote can be added to this. It is reported by one Spanish chronicler, Fernández de Oviedo, that Cortés in the mid-1530s accompanied Charles V on his victorious expedition against Tunis. Cortés and those in his entourage were apparently much given to boasting on the short voyage across the Mediterranean, until one of the other captains on the fleet retorted cuttingly (if inaccurately) that they were fighting the Ottomans, and that Cortés would soon see that this was not the same as fighting 'half-naked savages' in America. The same remark was also made by a certain António Real, while criticizing the actions of Portuguese governor Afonso de Albuquerque in India. The only serious (and by implication, honourable) warfare was Mediterranean warfare, and all else was a matter of fighting 'naked little niggers' (*negrinhos nuus*).

To return to our Ottoman-Mamluk example, there are reasons to extend the comparisons further. Ottoman warfare by all accounts did not appear at all compatible with how combat was conceived by the Safavids in the 1510s. The Qizilbash of the latter, obsessed with chivalric ideas such as *jawānmardi*, were really no match for the Ottomans

in such engagements as the celebrated battle of Chaldiran in 1514. We might argue here that the Ottomans at this moment represented a particularly pragmatic, efficient and flexible war-machine, in comparison to their neighbours and rivals in the Islamic world. Their culture of war was of a different order, it would seem, from either that of the Mamluks or Safavids, although the three obviously shared many other cultural traits, as well as a common heritage in terms of concepts of state-building, and a similar politico-institutional vocabulary.

Let me return here to the example with which I began, namely that of Husain Pasha who became Islam Khan Rumi in Mughal service in the 1660s. The schematic view I presented of his career passed over two matters, one important, the other one less so. To take the less important matter first, it is notable that after a brief honeymoon period, his star began to wane. This was because he came accompanied by two sons, but had left behind his wives and a third son in Ottoman 'Iraq. He apparently did not comprehend that in the eyes of the Mughal court, this was seen as a sign of potential disloyalty. In this matter at least, everything was not transparent when one moved from the Ottomans to the Mughals. The second matter is more serious, and concerns his death. For Islam Khan eventually managed, after several years in the wilderness, to return to favour, and was granted a high post in the Deccan fighting the Marathas and the forces of Bijapur. This required him however to fight from the back of an elephant, a common enough practice in India, but one that he was clearly unprepared for. This is what led to his death, for in the course of an engagement, in late June 1676. The Mughal chronicles report that at the moment of his engaging the enemy (*dar 'ain tarāzū būdan-i jang*), his elephant bolted at the sound of artillery, so that he fell into enemy hands and was immediately put to death, along with his son 'Ali Beg. This somewhat ridiculous end, which the Mughal chronicler notes, shows that a quite successful warrior in the Ottoman context could not always transfer his skills to another state, even one as proximate as the Mughals. Indeed, already in the sixteenth century, this had been the complaint of Hadim Süleyman Pasha after his short and disastrous expedition to Diu in Gujarat in 1538. Suleyman Pasha had a very poor opinion of Indians indeed, if we may believe the letter that I have briefly mentioned above. He thought that they were poor Muslims, who did not care to observe the proprieties of their religion; as he wrote, "when they should be

giving thanks to God at the hour of prayer, they do nothing else than dance their dances, and the greater part of them are really infidels and Christians [*cacizes*]”. But he also believed that they were poor fighters, unable to meet the testing standards he set them.

So much for anecdotes. My intention is after all to address the question of the incommensurability (or not) of military cultures when imperial formations encountered each other in the early modern period. The generalization of Ayalon’s hypothesis was made a decade and a half ago by Geoffrey Parker, in a chapter of his deservedly celebrated work on ‘the military revolution’, which he also presented in the form of an essay entitled ‘Europe and the wider world, 1500-1700: The military balance’.<sup>28</sup> Let me attempt here to summarize his main conclusions, hopefully without doing too much damage to them. Parker argued that differing culturally-inflected conceptions of warfare played a crucial role in most conflicts between Europeans and non-Europeans in the years from 1500 to 1700. His is therefore, if one likes, a deeply culturalist mode of explanation, though he does not much explore the content of the notion of ‘culture’ itself, beyond stating that it was not a question of “social, moral or natural advantage”. The non-West in this view is further to be divided into three sub-categories. First, we encounter those areas where the Europeans had triumphed for the most part by 1650. In areas such as central and northeast America, some coastal areas of sub-Saharan Africa, in Indonesia and the Philippines, and in Siberia, Parker argued that Europeans “fought dirty and (what was worse) fought to kill”, something that went against prevailing norms there. In these regions, he hence noted, Europeans triumphed because their technology and their modes of war were superior, and above all because their adversaries had “no time to adopt western military technology”. He then went on to contrast this situation with a second group of areas, where European expansionary ambitions were stymied until 1700, but not thereafter, namely in what he termed the “Muslim world” (meaning the Ottoman and Mughal domains principally). Here, Parker argued that local military organization while initially flexible, eventually atrophied, so that no significant changes were made after the sixteenth century. In other words, the Ottomans in the eighteenth century were allegedly still fighting “as in the days of Suleiman the Magnificent”, and Parker quotes the Maréchal de Saxe, who in 1732 claimed: “It is hard for one nation to learn from another, either from pride, idleness or stupidity (...). The Turks today are in this situation. It is not

valour, numbers or wealth that they lack; it is order, discipline and technique”. I am not certain whether Ottoman specialists would agree with this judgement, and Rhoads Murphey’s recent and authoritative work on Ottoman warfare does not in fact discuss Parker’s views on the matter.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, writers on the Mughal empire have in recent times tended to doubt some aspects of this portrayal, and this is an issue to which I shall return.

But let me complete my summary of Parker’s portrayal here. For his non-European world also includes a third category, one which – he wrote – was “able to keep the West at bay throughout the early modern period because, as it were, they already knew the rules of the game”. In other words, this was a part of the world where there was, so to speak, no incommensurability of military cultures, if this is indeed what we should understand by ‘rules of the game’. The reference here is to China, Korea and Japan, which in Parker’s view, were regions of the world that “were perfectly prepared to take over Western military innovations [but] ... always adapted them to local conditions in a distinctive way”. Why were these regions better able to keep the West at bay ? It would seem that, at bottom, it is a question of culture, or of broad cultural conceptions that are also embedded in the institutions of war. East Asia here is seen as the closest to Europe, the ‘Muslim world’ of West and South Asia is some distance off, and Indonesia, parts of Africa and pre-Columbian America are perceived as having the highest degree of incommensurability, or in other words, played by ‘rules of the game’ that were the most different.

Let me say that I do not find this portrayal entirely improbable. As late as the eighteenth century, Indian rulers and warlords were often heard to complain about the manner in which the English Company (and the Europeans more generally) made war. Thus, Telugu texts often tell us that the English are characterised above all by ‘deviousness’ (*kāpatyamu*), and a profound incapacity to keep their promises and agreements. The problem of compatibility or commensurability is also highlighted in certain texts discussing the Battle for Bobbili in January 1757, which ended in the total massacre of a fortified town in south-eastern India, aged men, women and children included, at the hands of a force spearheaded by the French *seigneur de guerre* Charles de Bussy. Here, at least one text tells us explicitly that one of central problems was that

“he [Bussy] does not understand our language apparatus (*bhāshā-yantramū*), and we don’t understand his”, as also that the French have a “gibberish-making language apparatus” (*kikkara-bakkara bhāshā yantramū*).<sup>30</sup> The problem is not one, in this portrayal at least, of a literal lack of translation, for there are indeed translators (or *dubāshis*) available. Rather, it is a problem of the larger apparatus, which includes a mix of values, notions of admissible and inadmissible conduct, and so on. Indeed, the outcome of the battle is a serious shock to Bussy, and a contemporary European chronicler, Robert Orme, tells us that at the end, “the slaughter of the conflict being completed, another much more dreadful presented itself in the area below: the transport of victory lost all its joy: all gazed on one another with silent astonishment and remorse, and the fiercest could not refuse a tear to the deplorable destruction spread before them”.<sup>31</sup> Jos Gommans, in a general work on Mughal warfare, has attempted lately to sum up the contrast between the English Company in the late eighteenth century and the Mughals – two imperial formations locked in a very complex form of combat; thus, in his view, at the heart of the matter was the fact that the Mughals and the Europeans had two quite different conceptions of honour. The Mughals, he writes, had ideas that were characterised by notions of “openness and flexibility” and even “playfulness”, all of which were part of what he terms their “fluid politics”. He adds that “Mughal policy was usually aimed not at destroying but at incorporating the enemy, preferably by means of endless rounds of negotiations”.<sup>32</sup> Contrasted with this are the tactics and strategy of the East India Company under Clive and his successors, which Gommans sees as aimed at monopolising power, which he – in a similar metaphor to that used by Parker – argues “suddenly and unilaterally changed the rules of the ongoing game”.

But could the Mughals really not adapt to the new rules ? And if they could not, what of other players, whether the Marathas or the Afghans ? Indeed, Gommans’s own earlier work shows clearly how ‘Afghan innovation’ between the time of Nadir Shah in the 1730s and that of the Abdalis in the 1760s significantly changed northern Indian warfare in the eighteenth century quite independently of the European presence. In a similar vein, we are certainly aware that the rulers of Mysore, Haidar ‘Ali and Tipu Sultan, adapted their style of war in the 1770s and 1780s, and managed in the process to give the East India Company’s armies quite a scare. The Anglo-Mysore Wars were

fought with grim earnestness by both parties, rather than being a series of combats between two wholly incommensurable styles, one earnest and the other playful. It is certainly true that such contrasts lend themselves to a stark portrayal, as we see from Satyajit Ray's film *The Chess-Players (Shatranj ke Khilādi)* (1977), dealing with a plot that is framed by the East India Company's overthrow of the ruler of Awadh, Wajid 'Ali Shah in 1856. Much ink has been spilt on whether Ray's portrayal here is one that lampoons the Awadh ruler by making him excessively 'effeminate', and whether Ray himself was in this process buying into colonial stereotypes concerning Indians. But what is clear is that Ray's fundamental intention is to suggest a vast gulf in styles and cultures, but also in conceptions of kingship and warfare, between mid-nineteenth century British colonialists and 'traditional' north Indian aristocrats. In this sense, he too visits the idea of 'incommensurability', while offering a tantalizing suggestion that there were indeed some 'in-between figures', notably the fictitious character in the film of a certain Captain Weston, who though English understands and participates fully in the aesthetics of Hindawi poetry, thus suggesting a greater sympathy for the Awadh monarch than for his own superior, General Outram.

It is time, I believe, to come to my principal point. This is really quite simple, and I have already made it implicitly in discussing Bernard Cohn's work, contrasting the British and the Mughals. This is the location of most theories of 'cultural incommensurability' in structuralist understandings of culture. In sum, it is usually difficult for those who argue solidly in this vein to account for the issue that after all is central to the historian's concerns, namely the problem of historical change. In this respect, a last example from early modern military history may be useful, and concerns a relatively obscure empire, namely that of the Merina in late eighteenth-century Madagascar, from the time of king Andrianampoinimerina (1745-1810). The rise of the Merina was quite rapid and spectacular over the course of the eighteenth century, and it lasted some four decades, from 1780 to 1820, replacing the earlier dominant power of the Betsimisaraka (literally, the "Great-Never-Divided"), ruled over by Ratsimilao and his successors. Both polities arose in a context in which firearms and gunpowder, which play a crucial role in the narratives of both Parker and Gommans, were quite central. Yet they do not fit the comfortable categories that we know of, since they are neither incapable of

adapting (and hence doomed to fall by the wayside) nor predestined to adapt and hence capable of riding the crest (as Parker views the Japanese). Rather, and here I follow the work of Gerald Berg and Maurice Bloch, it would seem that the Imerina polity used but significantly transformed the significance of firearms, which (in Berg's words) became of "relative technical insignificance in determining the outcome of battle", and yet of some deep symbolic significance in the polity at large.<sup>33</sup> This means that a novel military technology was neither rejected, nor simply accepted in order to mimic another polity that was perceived as more successful. Here then is the key to the third leg of my argument, which I hope to develop using the field of inter-imperial interaction in the field of the visual arts.

### III.

Before doing so, I must however clear the undergrowth once more of the weeds of former quarrels. If inter-imperial dynamics must be perceived then not through the master-concept of 'incommensurability' but through some theory of interaction, the spectre immediately arises before us of the idea of 'acculturation'. Originating in the 1880s, and given much respectability by Robert Redfield and Melville Herskovits from the mid-1930s to the publication of the latter's study entitled *Acculturation: A study of culture contact* (1958),<sup>34</sup> it then fell into disuse until being revived in the mid 1970s by the French historian and anthropologist Nathan Wachtel, a specialist in the interaction of the Spanish and Inka empires in the Andes. Redfield and others had defined acculturation as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups". Wachtel was more cautious, pointing to how acculturation could be the result of conquest and imperial domination (as in the Andes), but that groups could also come into "continuous first-hand contact" without any tangible changes being produced; these then were phenomena of cultural disjunction, as opposed to other situations of what he termed integration, assimilation or syncretism.<sup>35</sup>

The fashions of more recent decades have seen a move away from this vocabulary, and instead we are insistently told to favour concepts such as *mestizaje* (or *métissage*) and 'hybridity'. At the forefront of those championing the former usage is

French historian Serge Gruzinski (a specialist of colonial Mexico, whose work has most recently focused on the imperial Habsburgs), while the latter boasts such powerful champions in the academy as Homi Bhabha, whose empirical examples are almost exclusively drawn from the history of the British Empire. Politically correct usage apparently requires today that ‘hybridity’ should only refer to “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization”,<sup>36</sup> which then rules out other, non-colonial, forms of contact and interaction, as well as their products. No substantive aspect of the interaction between the Portuguese and the Mughals can be dealt with using this vocabulary; and indeed, it would seem to rule out most of the history of the early modern world from its ambit. Others will want to raise more fundamental objections. Does the concept of ‘transcultural’ escape from any of the problems that dogged ‘acculturation’? Are we not in the same position of reified cultures, with a ‘third zone’ or a ‘contact zone’ between them, something like the rather puerile Wallersteinian subterfuge of the ‘semi-periphery’, in order to deny that his model was one of binary core-periphery interaction?

Let me insist once more that these problems are not just our own, but were already faced head on by thinkers in the early modern period. One thinks for example of the Jesuit Luís Fróis, who in 1585 wrote his *Tratado em que se contém muito sucinta e abreviadamente algumas contradições e diferenças de costumes entre a gente de Europa e esta provincial de Japão* (‘Treatise in which most briefly and succinctly is contained some of the contradictions and differences in the customs of the people of Europe and this province of Japan’).<sup>37</sup> Fróis begins by noting that one should not confound the Japanese who live around the Portuguese in Kyushu with the Japanese in general. For “though one may find amongst them some things that may make the Japanese appear like us”, it is in fact not so; this is an artificial effect, “acquired through the commerce that they have with the Portuguese”. The reality in fact is that “many of their customs are so remote, far away and distant from ours that it seems almost incredible that there could be so stark an opposition with people of such culture (*polícia*), liveliness of spirit and natural knowledge as they have”. The point then is not to divide civilized Europeans from savage Japanese, nor a subjugated people from a conquering one. Instead, Fróis goes about systematically – indeed chapter by chapter – and point by point, contrasting what is done

in Europe to what is done in Japan. By the end of his fourteen chapters, he has discussed men and women and their apparel; children and their habits; monks; temples; eating and drinking; arms and warfare; horses; medicine and doctors; books and writing; houses, gardens, and fruits; boats and boat-building; plays and music; with a last chapter on diverse things.

Fróis does not say much though about an aspect of inter-imperial (or inter-polity) interaction that has of late been the subject of much discussion, namely visual representation. He thus does not comment the Japanese representations, whether of their own society or of Europeans, or indeed the visual projection in this context of what Gruzinski would call *la pensée métisse* (whether or not we embrace that term).<sup>38</sup> Yet, it does not take a great deal of reading to gather that – in spite of what Fróis thought was a vast gulf separating Japanese and Europeans – much interaction did take place. Elisonas has written eloquently and persuasively of these changes in the following terms: “The withered and dreamy ideals of medieval aesthetics gave way to an exuberant and forceful spirit. New forms of expression came to dominate in the pictorial, performing, and musical arts, and were introduced into that peculiarly Japanese ritual, the tea ceremony. European traders and Catholic missionaries contributed further novelty to the varied genre scene of Japan. The [sixteenth] century witnessed a dazzling burst of cultural creativity, crowned by the Momoyama epoch, which chroniclers exalted a golden age”.<sup>39</sup>

So the twain could meet, even if only for a time. But we are now aware that even after the expulsion of the Portuguese, Japan did not close. European influences came to be felt there, in various visual fields – as indeed did those from Korea and China. Ronald Toby reminded us quite a while ago now that the idea of *sakoku*, the closed country, was not to be taken as literally as the panegyrist of Commodore Perry projected. Elsewhere in Asia, and the Americas, the inter-imperial sphere produced important innovations. Safavid artists from the mid-sixteenth century influenced key changes in visual representation in both the Deccan and the Mughal court. In turn, the Mughals in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries drew upon elements that were furnished to them by their ostensible adversaries, the Habsburgs, to produce surprising works of art. By the middle years of the seventeenth century, as Ebba Koch has reminded us, this had been overlaid with the influence of Dutch naturalism which she discerns in some of the

masterworks of the *Pādshāh Nāma* produced in Shahjahan's reign. In turn, Mughal paintings went back to Amsterdam, to influence not merely Rembrandt but other minor painters. This return flow from Asia to Europe would repay closer study, and take us well into the eighteenth century.

We know who some of the agents, the go-betweens, the *passeurs*, in the matter were. They include such men as the Venetian Niccolò Manuzzi, whose portrait in Mughal dress can be seen in his own album. Manuzzi lived in the Mughal domains and further south for nearly sixty years until his death in about 1720, and never returned to Europe; he ardently projected a European identity, but did not always manage to carry it off convincingly.<sup>40</sup> Men like him, and the artists they patronized, did not live between empires, in the interstices so beloved of post-colonial theorists. Rather they lived across them, appearing sometimes as subjects of one political power or empire, and sometimes of another. But it may be rash to conclude that such characters represent the norm. It is probable that they were at least statistical outliers, and one may even pose them as 'anomalies' in the sense than Carlo Ginzburg and other micro-historians have taken to using the term.<sup>41</sup> One may draw upon Ginzburg's ideas that such anomalies are not simply curiosities, but enable us to draw some general conclusions as well, in this case on the very possibility of commensurability, as also its limits.

The work of Gruzinski to which I have referred to above is useful in this context. In his most recent monograph, *Les quatre parties du monde*, he attempts to look at how visual art forms in such diverse places as Mexico, Brazil, India, the Philippines, China and Japan changed over the period from about 1550 to 1650 in response to the peculiar conjuncture created by the existence of an Iberian world empire.<sup>42</sup> He demonstrates clearly that radically new content entered into certain sorts of paintings, woodcuts, et cetera, but also that formal innovations took place. In other words, when the art of the Mughal empire encountered the art of the Portuguese empire, they did not turn their backs on each other. Each was affected by the other, even if the effects in question were neither symmetric nor continuous. In some instance, as with the Mughal painting from the *Pādshāh Nāma* of the capture of Hughli in 1632, a European element (here the representation of a town) is lifted bodily and transported into a Mughal representation.<sup>43</sup> In other instances, the move is far more smooth, as with the incorporation of the halo into

representations of the Mughal emperor from the early seventeenth century, or the comfortable incorporation of other Christian themes taken from woodcuts into a Mughal framework.<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, we can see shifts, improvisations, or in Gruzinski's language traces of *métissage* in paintings produced in Mexico, or colonial Brazil. Some of these are clearly produced in imperial contexts that were those of what he terms 'the colonization of the imaginary', rather than inter-imperial contexts of a certain equilibrium and balance, as we see for example when Ottoman painters draw upon a palette that is made possible by their encounter with the Habsburgs. Time and again, then, we are forced to come to terms with a situation that is not one of mutual indifference, or of a turning of backs, or of a deep-rooted incomprehension, but of shifting vocabularies, and changes that are wrought over time by improvisations that eventually come to be part of a received tradition.

My conclusions therefore bring me rather close to the views expressed by Ian Hacking in an essay entitled 'Was there ever a radical mistranslation?'.<sup>45</sup> Like him, I too am certain that I have convinced neither my readers nor even myself that 'radical incommensurability' (or in his case 'radical mistranslation', which he terms 'malostension') did not ever occur when empires encountered one another in the early modern period. Like him I am also convinced that the 'amusing fables' on the basis of which most claims concerning incommensurability are made turn out to be false on closer investigation. Empires were very rarely ships that passed in the night sea of incommensurability, and every new set of monographic research on Mexico in the 1520s makes Todorov's hypothesis on semiosis and conquest appear less likely. Rather, what usually happened was approximation, improvisation, and eventually a shift in the relative positions of all concerned. The British, once they had conquered India, did not remain – even a single generation afterwards -- the British who had conquered it. A Portuguese writer on Vijayanagara in the 1550s can simply not be confounded with one in 1505.

So there is something to be learnt perhaps from our parable of Antonio Inoki if we carry it through to its end. After the fight with Akram, so I am informed by a wrestling website, "Inoki barely made it out of the country alive, because Akrum was a legend in his country, so there were people ready to shoot him". But the website adds, "Inoki had a post-match ritual of waving to the crowd, and when he did so, this time, it was believed

that he was praising Allah, so the unruly crowd instantly became more accepting of their hero's defeat".<sup>46</sup> I am quite disinclined to believe this story, which seems to be another flagrant case of what Hacking terms "alleged malostensions [that] are frauds, founded upon rumour". An Italian website also informs us that Akram, "più tardi in seguito a quella sconfitta si suicidò", a suggestion I have been unable to confirm.<sup>47</sup> However, there is, for my purposes at least, an edifying postscript. Some three years after the defeat of Akram Pehalwan in 1976, Inoki was challenged once more to come to Karachi in June 1979, on this occasion to fight against Akram's cousin Zubair Jhara. This fight not only ended in an 'honourable draw', but was regarded by all who watched it as fairly entertaining. Here, as when empires met, there was always learning-by-doing, if not a perfect "reciprocity of understanding" *à la* Diderot. Only an utter devotion to structuralist forms of history would force us to regard this as an unnatural or unusual outcome, when in fact there are so many bridges that led from one empire to another.

"Wenn ich Kultur höre (...) entsichere ich meinen Browning", wrote the playwright Hanns Johst in his play *Schlageter*, a line that has often been translated (and variously misattributed to Göring, Goebbels and Zinoviev) as, "Whenever I hear the word culture, I reach for my revolver". I hope my argument here on the possibilities of inter-imperial communication will not be paradoxically interpreted by my readers as a similar expression of intolerance. Let me simply conclude simply then by saying that however well the concept of 'cultural incommensurability' may have served us in the past – indeed in creative arguments from the late eighteenth century to as late as the 1980s – in order to understand the problem of cultural interface, it has today pretty much outlived its utility.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> . Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit. Mit einem Vorwort von Gerhart Schmidt*, Darmstadt, Melzer, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> . Details may be found on the websites <http://www.twc-wrestle.com/inokienglish.html> and on <http://www.puroresu.com/wrestlers/inoki/>.

<sup>3</sup> . I owe this valuable addition to Aamir Mufti.

<sup>4</sup> . Tsvetan Todorov, 'Cortés et Moctezuma: De la communication', *L'Ethnographie*, vol. LXXVI, Nos. 1-2, 1980, pp. 69-83, further developed in Tsvetan Todorov, *The conquest of America: Perceiving the other*, trans. Richard Howard, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., New York, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> . See Howard Sankey, 'Kuhn's Changing Concept of Incommensurability', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vo. 44, No. 4, 1993, pp. 759-74.

<sup>6</sup> . Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, p. 180.

<sup>7</sup> . Shahnawaz Khan, *Ma'asir-ul-Umara, being biographies of the Muhammadan and Hindu officers of the Timurid sovereigns of India from 1500 to about 1780 A.D.*, trans. H. Beveridge and Bains Prashad, 3 Vols., Calcutta, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1911-52, Vol. I, pp. 698-701, for the Persian text of which see Nawwab Samsam al-Daula Shahnawaz Khan, *Ma'asir al-Umara*, eds. Maulavi 'Abdur Rahim and Maulavi Mirza Ashraf 'Ali, Vols. I and II, Calcutta, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1888-90, Vol. I, pp. 241-47.

<sup>8</sup> . By way of example, see Jamsheed K. Choksy and M. Usman Hasan, 'An Emissary from Akbar to 'Abbās I: inscriptions, texts and the Career of Amīr Muhammad Ma'sūm al-Bhakkārī', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, ser. 3, 1/1 (1991), pp. 19-29; and Z.A. Desai, 'A Foreign Dignitary's Ceremonial Visit to Akbar's Tomb: A First-Hand Account', in Iqtidar Alam Khan, ed., *Akbar and His Age*, New Delhi, Northern Book Centre, 1999, pp. 188-97.

<sup>9</sup> . Lucette Valensi, *The birth of the despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte*, tr. Arthur Denner, Ithaca, N.Y., 1993.

<sup>10</sup> . K.W. Goonewardena, *The foundation of Dutch power in Ceylon, 1638-1658*, Amsterdam, Djambatan, 1958.

<sup>11</sup> . A classic account is C.H. Alexandrowicz, *An introduction to the history of the law of nations in the East Indies: (16th, 17th and 18th centuries)*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967. The most recent, and rather disastrous, attempt at such an analysis without regard to the issue of 'conventions' is Jean-Michel Sallmann, *Géopolitique du XVIIe siècle, 1490-1618*, Paris, Seuil, 2003.

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<sup>12</sup> . António Pinto Pereira, *História da Índia no tempo em que a governou o visorey D. Luís de Ataíde*, introd. Manuel Marques Duarte, Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional, 1987, pp. 333-34.

<sup>13</sup> . The mention of another ambassador, ‘a Persian captain called Coração Cão’ (Pereira, *História*, p. 347), is confusing; manifestly, the name could not have been Khorasan Khan.

<sup>14</sup> . Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Letters from a Sinking Sultan’, in Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz, ed., *Aquém e Além da Taprobana: Estudos Luso-Orientais à Memória de Jean Aubin e Denys Lombard*, Lisbon, Centro de História de Além-Mar, 2002, pp. 239-69.

<sup>15</sup> . ‘O estilo com o seu colorido oriental prova que o autor não era português’, writes Schurhammer, in Georg Schurhammer, ‘O Tesouro do Asad Khan: Relação inédita do intérprete António Fernandes (1545)’, in Schurhammer, *Gesammelte Studien: Varia, Vol. I*, ed. László Szilas, Rome, IHSI, 1965, pp. 31-45.

<sup>16</sup> . Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz, ‘As cartas malaias de Abu Hayat, Sultão de Ternate, a El-Rei de Portugal, e os primórdios da presença portuguesa em Maluco’, *Anais de História de Além-Mar*, Vol. IV, 2003, pp. 381-446.

<sup>17</sup> . I do not know of any archival version of this document. But it appears in Leonardo Nunes, *Crónica de Dom João de Castro*, ed. J.D.M. Ford, Cambridge [Mass.], Harvard University Press, 1936, pp. 63-65, as ‘Resposta d’el Rey do Patane ao governador’.

<sup>18</sup> . Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais/Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, Corpo Cronológico, III-14-44, letter from Hadim Süleyman Pasha to the *wazīr* Ulugh Khan, or ‘Olução Gozil’ (the lost original is dated 10.12.1538, and the Portuguese translation 7.5.1539).

<sup>19</sup> . Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Sobre uma carta de Vira Narasimha Raya, rei de Vijayanagara (1505-1509), a Dom Manuel I de Portugal (1495-1521)’, in Isabel de Riquer, Elena Losada and Helena González, eds., *Professor Basilio Losada: Ensinar a pensar con liberdade e risco*, Barcelona, Universitat de Barcelona, 2000, pp. 677-683.

<sup>20</sup> . Felicia J. Hecker, ‘A Fifteenth-Century Chinese Diplomat in Herat,’ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, ser. 3, 3/1 (1993), 86-98.

<sup>21</sup> . The narrative of this set of events may be found in C.R. Boxer, *O Grande Navio de Amacau*, trans. Manuel Vilarinho, Macao, Fundação Oriente, 1989, pp. 142-46.

<sup>22</sup> . Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 18-19 (from an essay first published in 1985).

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<sup>23</sup> . William R. Pinch, 'Same Difference in India and Europe', *History and Theory*, vol. 38, No. 3, 1999, pp. 389-407.

<sup>24</sup> . Vijay [William] Pinch, 'Bhakti and the British Empire', *Past and Present*, No. 179, 2003, pp. 157-196, quotation on p. 194.

<sup>25</sup> . For an earlier discussion, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Frank Submissions: The Company and the Mughals between Sir Thomas Roe and Sir William Norris', in H.V. Bowen, Margarete Lincoln and Nigel Rigby, eds., *The Worlds of the East India Company*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2002, pp. 69-96.

<sup>26</sup> . Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The Career of Colonel Polier and Late Eighteenth-Century Orientalism', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, vol. X, no. 1, 2000, pp. 43-60. For a more general reflection, see Louise Bénat Tachot and Serge Gruzinski, eds., *Passeurs culturels: Mécanismes de métissage*, Paris, MSH, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> . David Ayalon, *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom: A challenge to a medieval society*, London, 1956. This view was generalized by Jean-Claude Garcin, 'The Mamlūk Military System and the Blocking of Medieval Moslem Society', in Jean Baechler, John A. Hall and Michael Mann, eds., *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988, pp. 113-30.

<sup>28</sup> . Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military innovation and the rise of the West, 1500-1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 115-45. Most critiques of this important work have focused on its European component. Another version of the argument appears as Parker, 'Europe and the Wider World, 1500-1700: The Military Balance', in James D. Tracy, ed., *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350-1750*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 161-95.

<sup>29</sup> . Rhoads Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500-1700*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> . See the extensive discussion in Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600-1800*, New York, Other Books, 2003, pp. 73-75.

<sup>31</sup> . Robert Orme, *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan from the Year MDCCXLV*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., London, 1780, Vol. II, pp. 259-60.

<sup>32</sup> . Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700*, London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 205-6.

<sup>33</sup> . Gerald M. Berg, 'The Sacred Musket: Tactics, Technology and Power in Eighteenth-Century Madagascar', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1985, pp. 261-79.

<sup>34</sup> . But also see Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton and Melville J. Herskovits, 'Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation', *American Anthropologist* 38(1), 1936, pp. 149-152.

<sup>35</sup> . Nathan Wachtel, 'L'acculturation', in Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, eds., *Faire de l'histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, Vol. I, pp. 126-33.

<sup>36</sup> . Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 118.

<sup>37</sup> . Luís Fróis, *Tratado das Contradições e Diferenças de Costumes entre a Europe e o Japão*, ed. Rui Manuel Loureiro, Macao, Instituto Português do Oriente, 2001. Compare this to the curious work of ventriloquism : Duarte de Sande, *Diálogo sobre a missão dos embaixadores japoneses à Cúria Romana*, trans. Américo da Costa Ramalho, Macao, Fundação Oriente, 1997.

<sup>38</sup> . See Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: The intellectual dynamics of colonization and globalization*, trans. Deke Dusinberre, London, Routledge, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> . George Elison, 'Introduction: Japan in the Sixteenth Century', in George Elison and Bardwell L. Smith, eds., *Warlords, Artists and Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century* (Honolulu: University Of Hawaii Press, 1981), pp. 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> . Niccolao Manucci [Niccolò Manuzzi], *Mogul India, or Storia do Mogor*, tr. William Irvine, 4 Vols., London, 1907-8; reprint Delhi, 1990. Though the full original text of Manuzzi has never been published, see the partial edition (with valuable illustrations) by Piero Falchetta, ed., *Storia del Mogol di Nicolò Manuzzi veneziano*, 2 Vols., Milan, Franco Maria Ricci, 1986.

<sup>41</sup> . Carlo Ginzburg, 'Geografische breedte, slaven en de Bijbel: Een experiment in Microgeschiedenis', *Nexus*, No. 35, 2003, pp. 167-84.

<sup>42</sup> . Serge Gruzinski, *Les quatre parties du monde: Histoire d'une mondialisation*, Paris, La Martinière, 2004.

<sup>43</sup> . Milo Cleveland Beach and Ebba Koch, *King of the World: The Padshahnama, an Imperial Mughal Manuscript from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1997, p. 180.

<sup>44</sup> . For a persuasive set of arguments on such materials, see Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology: Collected Essays*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2001.

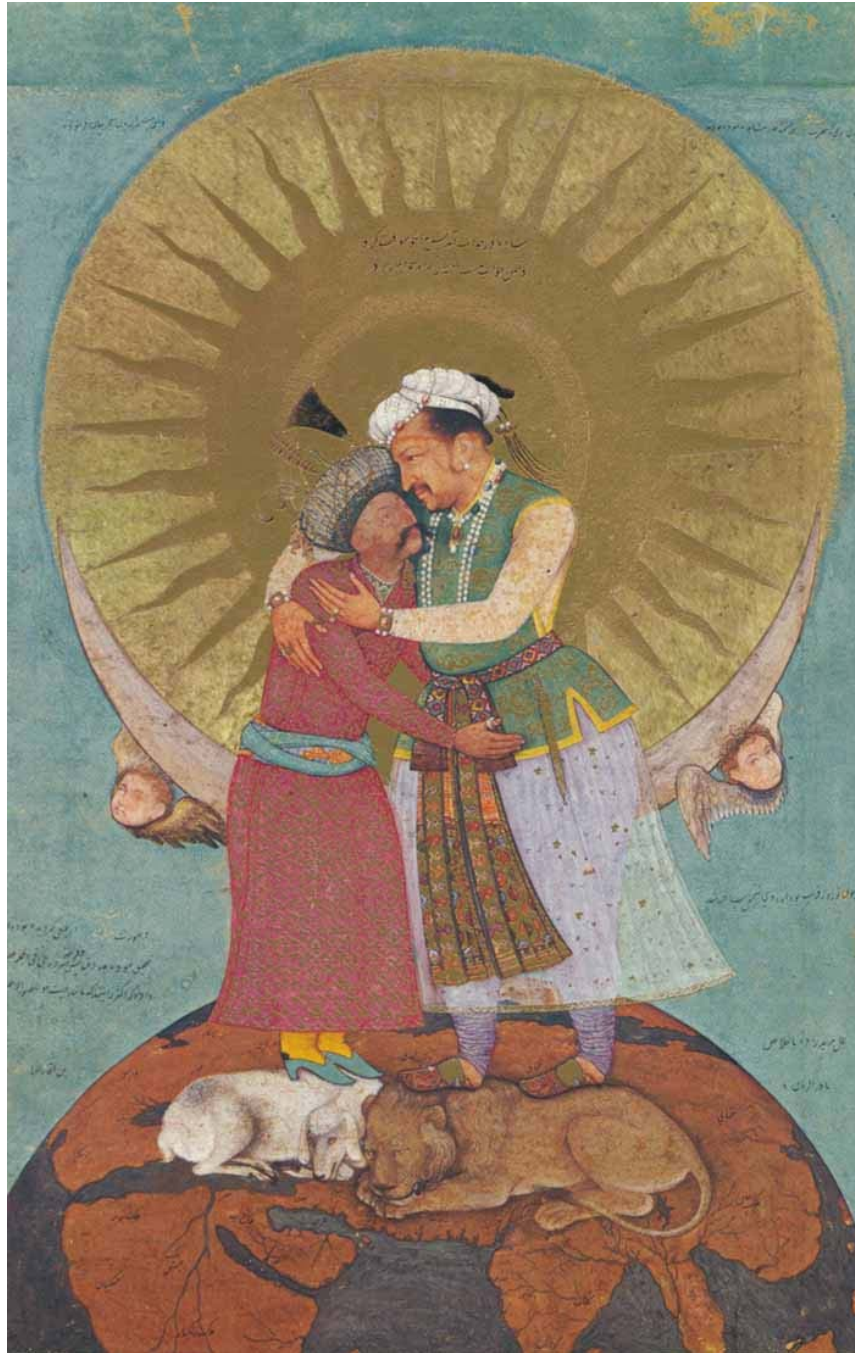
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<sup>45</sup> . Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, Cambridge [Mass.], Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 152-58.

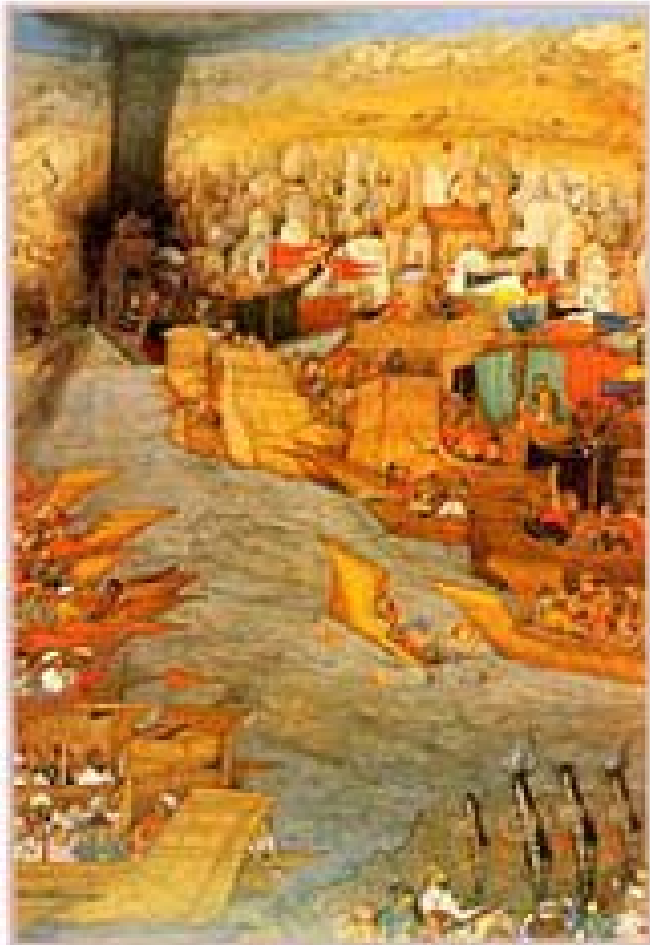
<sup>46</sup> . See the website: <http://groups.msn.com/PakistanPopularCultureHistory/1970s.msnw>

<sup>47</sup> . See <http://digilander.libero.it/tuttopuroresu/inoki.html>. Still another recent posting claims that Akram “did not kill himself -- he was killed by an accidental kick to the head while he was training a younger relative of his [Zubair] to prepare the relative to take revenge on Inoki in a shoot (real) match”, a typical example of the proliferation of such legends.

**Subrahmanyam: Complementary illustrations**



**Illustration 1: Mughal emperor Jahangir's dream of embracing Shah 'Abbas**



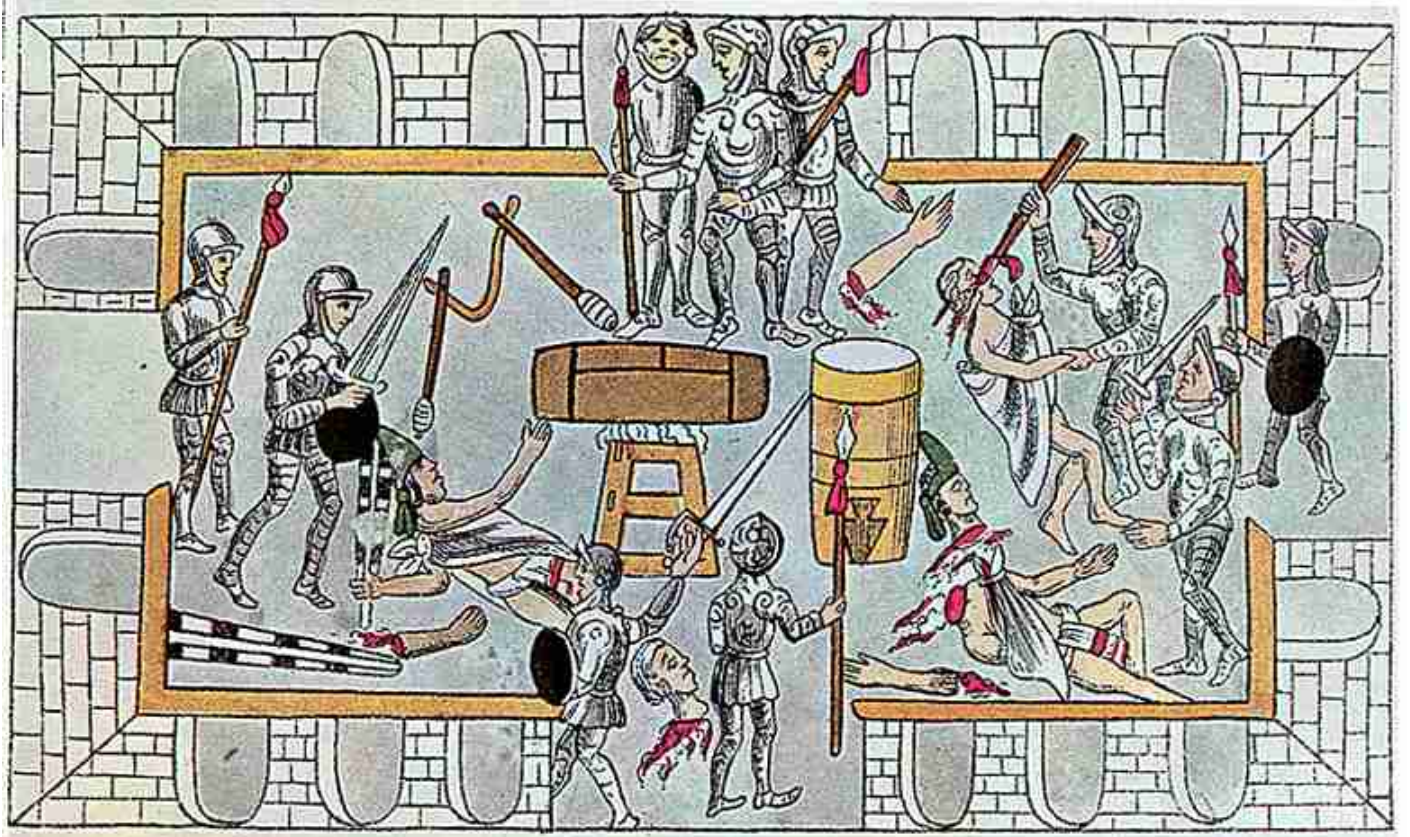
**Illustration 2: The capture of Hughli (1632)**



**Illustration 3: “Indian Miniature” from Niccolò Manucci’s 18th century volume *Storia del Mogol* in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice**



**Illustration 4: The Portuguese as depicted on a seventeenth-century Japanese screen**



**Illustration 5: Spanish conquistadores as viewed in a 16<sup>th</sup> century Mexican Codex.**



**Illustration 6: Codex Kingsborough, Nahuatl depiction of an abusive *encomendero*.**

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

فرمان عالیخان و قنوقز و ارتانچ بیگ خرم شهر از امر پادشاه

درین وقت فرمان عالیخان و الا این صاحب که موزی یکصد و سی و یک نفر از

زر استخراجه جمع از یکصد و بیست و پنج کارخانه آباد و قنوقز مضافه

بزرگ آباد و در وجه مدد و نفع شش متقابل بی بی و غیره همان روز و در وقت که حضرت

حسین علی قریب باشد که حاصلات از آن وقت پیش خود ما مودود

تنبای دولت و اولاد از آن روز و نفع نماید که حکام و عاقل و جاهل و داران و کاروان

حالی و تحقیق از آن روز و مودود را مودود و چیکر است به معرفت آنها مودود

عبارت  
الذین  
حزب است

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Illustration 7: A Mughal royal order (farman) from Aurangzeb's time, 1673/4