

The focus of this essay is an event that took place in sixteenth-century Ceylon and Goa. This event is but one chapter in the long history of the *dalada*, the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha<sup>1</sup> still venerated in Sri Lanka. It is a story of violence and vulnerability. It is also a story of virtuality, of the collective corporeal fantasies of rival religious groups projected onto a symbolic object.

In 1560, Portuguese Goan forces, led by the Viceroy, D. Constantino de Bragança, attacked Jaffna in northeastern Ceylon. There they discovered a reliquary, declared by some to contain the *dalada*, which they then carried back to Goa. The phenomenal market value of the relic soon became apparent, as rumours of the plundering spread across Buddhist Southeast Asia.

### A Vast Ransom

Bayinnaung, the King of Pegu (now Myanmar), sought to ransom the tooth from its captors, offering an immense sum for its recovery. Bayinnaung dispatched his ambassadors to Goa, who were authorised to negotiate a trade: in exchange for the sacred relic, he offered the equivalent of at least 300,000 *cruzados*, plus his perpetual friendship and an unlimited supply of rice for the Portuguese settlement at Malacca.

Extensive deliberations over the fate of the *dalada* took place in Goa in the spring of 1561. Secular and religious authorities in Goa squared off against one another, offering various reasons to either sell the tooth or destroy it. Since the amount of money promised was astronomical, the Viceroy considered the King of Pegu's offer carefully. However, the religious authorities of Goa prevailed in the matter, and the tooth was destroyed in a flamboyant public ritual. It was first ground up in a mortar in the presence of the ambassadors from

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Pegu and the Goan towns people. Then the pieces were dumped into a brazier and reduced to ashes. Finally those ashes were thrown into the nearby Mandovi River.<sup>2</sup> However, in 1566, the tooth relic reappeared in Kotte, Ceylon, with the claim that the Portuguese had only captured a replica. This tooth was presented to the King of Pegu as part of the dowry of a princess. Then a second *dalada* appeared in Kandy.<sup>3</sup> It is believed that the relic that surfaced in Kandy in 1566 is the same one that is currently enshrined at the Maligava temple in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

### The Enemy Body

This is the short version of the story. The basic plotline of these events does not, however, explain two very important questions: why did the Buddhists of Ceylon and Pegu place supreme value on the relic; and why did the Portuguese choose to destroy what they thought was the tooth, rather than accept an immense sum of money for its ransom? What did they gain by such a decision? I shall argue

that it was not simply a matter of their terror and loathing of the religions of Asia. The tooth, we must remember, is a body part; hence, to value or devalue the tooth is also to assume a certain relation to an imagined body and, more importantly, an imagined mouth. Whose mouth? What kind of mouth? What did that imaginary mouth do to or for others?

Both groups – the Buddhists of Ceylon and Pegu, and the Portuguese Catholics – had very different perceptions of this virtual mouth and body; in fact, one could argue that one was the opposite of the other. The lore of the Buddha's body is an exceedingly complex aspect of Buddhist tradition; hence, it would be difficult to summarise the corporeal fantasies linking the relic to esoteric beliefs concerning the Buddha's body. I shall cite but one suggestive fragment from a fifteenth-century Ceylonese poem: the tooth relic was said to enjoy "the touch of the body of doctrine which originated in the Sage's mind."<sup>4</sup> This stunning image suggests the point of contact between the physical (the touch of the tooth) and the spiritual, the "body" of doctrine coming from the Buddha's mind – presumably through the mouth. Hence it is an oral fantasy, as well, of the touch of nourishing words or ideas.

In contrast, for some of the Portuguese Christians, the tooth represented a frightening range of somatic fantasies, including that of a mouth that aimed to rip them apart and devour them.

**The story of the *dalada*, the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha is a story of violence and vulnerability. It is also a story of virtuality, of the collective corporeal fantasies of rival religious groups projected onto a symbolic object.**

## A Fabled Event

The story of the tooth became the stuff of legend, chronicled by numerous European travelers and historians, who perceived the incident as a highly dramatic and significant moment in Portuguese Indian history. The earliest published accounts of these incidents appear in Portuguese and other European histories of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In these accounts, the Christian authors report the relic to be one of several things: the tooth of a demon, the tooth of a holy man, or, in most discussions I have found, an ape's or monkey's tooth. The fabulous tooth, either superhuman or subhuman in various tellings, embodies for the Portuguese and for other European visitors the beliefs and practices of their rivals in South India. The tooth tale appears in these colonial writings as an image of extreme alterity: a recurring dream – or nightmare – of the alien body in Portuguese colonial fantasy life.

In 1602 Diogo do Couto offered one of the first authorised accounts of the tooth story, and also one of the most detailed. Couto continued the monumental historiographic project of his precursor João do Barros, a work known as the *Decadas Da Asia*, or The Decades of Asia, the composition of which he took over upon Barros' death. This text proved to be an important and detailed official history of the Portuguese colonial enterprise in India.

In Decade VII, Couto refers to the artifact as the “*dente do Bugio*,” the monkey's tooth, as well as the tooth of “*Budão*,” the Buddha. He writes of the conquest of Jaffna:

And out of their main pagoda they brought to the Viceroy a tooth mounted in gold, which was commonly called that of a monkey, but which these Gentiles held as the most sacred of all objects. The Viceroy was advised

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of its phenomenal value, and that they would offer a fortune to recover it. The Gentiles believed it to be the tooth of their great saint Budão [Buddha]. . . . This Budão, according to their legend, went to Pegu after he left Ceylon, converting the people and performing miracles. And when he got ready to die, he took the said tooth out of his mouth and sent it to Ceylon as a great relic. And so it was venerated by them, and by the people of Pegu, so much so that they valued it above all other things.

Illustrations Vishwajyoti Ghosh



## Intriguing Error

Why does Couto, who knows something about Buddha, a famous “saint” of the Ceylonese, call the relic a monkey's tooth in the same paragraph? Was this simply Portuguese slander, as one nineteenth-century historian suggests,<sup>5</sup> a humiliating insult? Or was the substitution based on some phonetic slippage – that whatever word or pronunciation used by the Peguans to designate the Buddha sounded to the Portuguese like *bugio*? Or perhaps the Portuguese had confused contiguous worship systems in South India: since “*Budão*” sounds something like “*bugio*,” the word for monkey, perhaps the slippage between Buddhism and the worship of the Hindu god Hanuman makes more sense.<sup>6</sup> There may be another reason for such confusion: the Hindu Tamils of Jaffna, who emigrated from South India, held Hanuman in great devotion. It may be that a certain syncretism between Buddhism and Hinduism, particularly in Jaffna, is indicated by this confusion. Lastly, it may also be that to the Portuguese who captured the relic, the tooth appeared to be non-human, that is, of animal origin. These multiple possibilities have given rise to a great deal of controversy among later historians.

Couto also provides several interesting details of the debate that took place between the various authorities of Goa. The Archbishop of Goa, Don Gaspar, let it be known that the Viceroy “should not allow the tooth to be ransomed for any amount of money, because it was against the honour of our Lord God.” The Archbishop announced his views from the pulpits, and since Dom Constantino was “*muito Catolico*” – very Catholic – he convened an assembly of the secular and religious authorities of Goa. Perhaps the

Viceroy was afraid of excommunication or some other reprisal, yet he attempted to convince his council to accept the ransom. He presented to the assembly the state's financial need, and explained how the ransom could solve a large number of financial problems. Church officials, however, insisted that to allow the tooth to be ransomed would be a serious sin.

### **The Execution of the Tooth**

Couto then describes the execution of the tooth. The Archbishop reduced the relic to powder, burning the remains in a brazier, and throwing the ashes into the river before the Peguan ambassadors and a large assembly of bystanders. Couto also describes the smoldering resentment of those who realised that destroying the relic would not destroy the religion of their adversaries. Afterwards, some people insinuated, more privately than publicly, that the Gentiles would simply fashion another tooth relic out of “*qualquer pedaço de osso*” (any old piece of bone).

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succeeded in destroying a relic, they not only failed to destroy the relic cult, but fortified it instead. In a later book of *Da Asia*, Couto describes the resurrection of the tooth cult in Ceylon and in Pegu just a few years later. While Couto himself makes it clear that he did not believe in the authenticity of either of the two relics that surfaced in 1566 in Ceylon, he praises the King of Pegu for his devotion to the relic. Subversively he points out that the Christians were not willing to ransom relics of equivalent value from the Turk, suggesting that Christian piety does not stand up to that of the Buddhists of Pegu. About the loss of 300,000 *cruzados* he says nothing, nor could he. As a New Christian, he had every

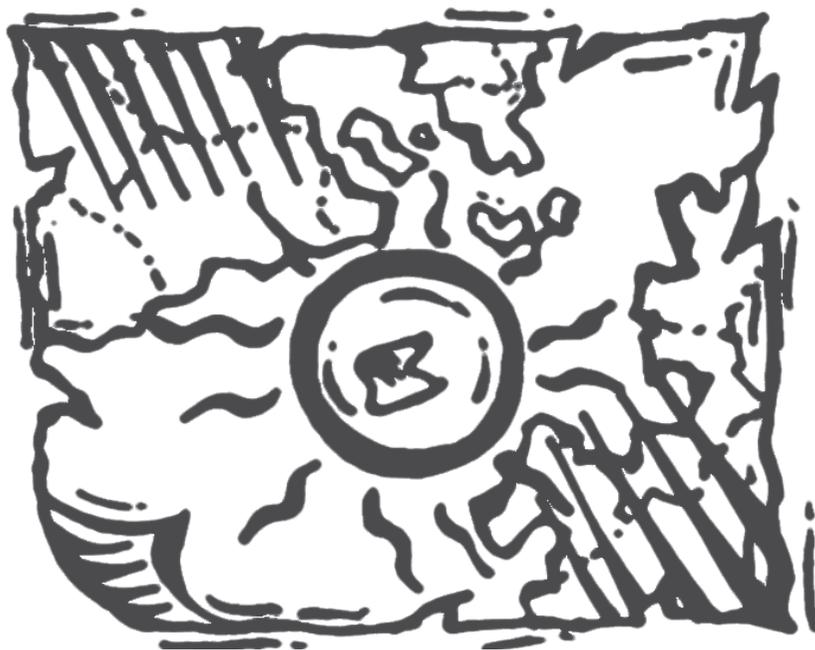
reason to watch what he said about the Portuguese state, and especially about the Inquisition.

The story of the tooth, its capture and destruction, would be told again and again by seventeenth century Portuguese chroniclers and by European visitors to Portuguese Goa. Jan van Linschoten, Pedro Teixeira, François Pyrard de Laval, Nicholas Pimenta and many others tell the tale of the tooth, which became a recurring topos in the history of the colonial Indies.<sup>7</sup> This story could be spun in various directions, depending on the political affinities of the writer.

One particularly interesting and developed version of the story appeared in the first volume of Manuel de Faria y Sousa's *Asia Portuguesa*, published posthumously in Lisbon in 1666. Faria y Sousa was Portuguese but wrote his compendious history in Spanish. Compiling several sources, including Couto, as well as religious documents, Faria y Sousa lets the story unfold over fifteen folio pages, beginning with his explanation of the provenance of the tooth. According to his sources, the tooth came from a white monkey (*mono blanco*), which, like white elephants in Siam, was worshipped for its unusual colour, as well as for its exceptional deeds. Faria y Sousa writes, “There was a king among the ancients of India, whose wife, whom he loved very much, ran away from him.” No one could find the wife, so the king dispatched the said monkey to track her down, which the monkey did. In gratitude, the king rewarded the monkey while alive, and after its death he idolised it.”

### **A Garbled Account**

The story that Faria y Sousa recounts, at the expense of both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, is a garbled version of the *Ramayana*. Queen Sita, wife of Rama, is captured by his evil adversary Ravana, and is rescued through the intervention of



□ Hanuman. Predictably, the historian confuses Hindus and Buddhists, and also distorts the essential points of this tale from the Ramayana in a way that reflects badly on Gentile marriages and masculinity. But then Faria y Sousa reverses himself: “Other sources indicate that it was a man’s tooth, rather than a monkey’s.” Still other sources assert that it was the tooth of “*un Hombre santo*,” a holy man, “and if that were the case, then the Gentiles did not err too much in worshipping the tooth, except in the way that they did it.” Here Faria y Sousa injects something rather new into the story – a whiff of cultural relativism – even though he ultimately writes a very nationalistic account of the event.

Faria y Sousa includes a number of tooth jokes of a religious sort. During the deliberations, one vocal captain declared that even though “the devil can devour many souls with this tooth,” the Portuguese could build enough Catholic altars to offset the damage caused by its release. Others who supported the sale of the tooth contended that “the mouth of Idolatry will not stop chewing up the souls of barbarians just because it finds itself short of a tooth.”

Ultimately, the chronicler gives the last word – actually, pages and pages of them – to the theologian who denounces any depraved person who would dare to sell the artifact. After listing various Old Testament proof texts justifying the destruction of pagan idols, the theologian closes with more striking mouth imagery: “A mighty torment we will deal [the infernal dragon] if today we crush this tooth in his own mouth.”

### **The “Lozenge from Hell”**

When the tooth particles were finally consigned to the flames, there resulted “a smoke so exceedingly foul that it greatly exceeded that which would normally come from a mere burning bone.” It was, says the author, “a lozenge from Hell”

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(*pastilla del Infierno*). Despite his earlier humour and irony, Faria y Sousa chooses to end on this patriotic and devotional note. He mentions that two replacement teeth appear on the scene shortly after the destruction of this one – a fact that very much upset those who argued for the sale of the tooth in the first place. The detail of the foulness of the smoke from the burning tooth suggests that Faria y Sousa chooses to frame the relic as a “live” artifact. The tooth is, in his heavily embroidered retelling, a genuine source of (satanic) evil that needs to be destroyed, unlike the replacement relics that appeared later.

There is a moral in the story for Faria y Sousa. It is certain that even

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Thus the armchair historian closes his story with a joke that evokes pain and fear even today, and even more so in pre-anaesthesia days: that of a sadistic dentist – in this case, the dentist of Christianity torturing the devil.

In comparing these two versions of the story by Couto and Faria y Sousa, I hope to have shown how the Portuguese defined themselves against the foreign body represented metonymically by the tooth. It was a memorable story, destined for legend, because it crystallised so perfectly the relations of the Portuguese with those whom they could only construe as their adversaries. While the *dalada* embodied for the Buddhist populations of South Asia not only their beliefs, but their collective identity, for the Portuguese the tooth relic enabled, at least temporarily, the fantasy of destroying the entire “body” of those who threatened their own body politic through a symbolic act of violence, a ritual killing of their enemies in a highly compressed form – the lozenge of Hell.

### **The Role of the Inquisition**

It is not a coincidence that the tooth burning took place in 1561, for the Inquisition had arrived in Goa during the previous winter. Two lay inquisitors had sailed to India from Portugal, along with Dom Gaspar de Leão, the new archbishop.<sup>8</sup> The arrival of the Inquisition in Goa was a major event – one terrifying to a number of people. In order to understand the significance of the tooth-burning episode, it is important to place it in the wider

context of surveillance and persecution that was gearing up in Goa, Cochin, and other Portuguese bases in Asia. Indeed, the burning of the tooth might be considered a precursor to the thousands of *autos da fé* that would be conducted in Goa over the next two and a half centuries.

In the first decades of Portuguese colonial rule, the boundary between Christian and non-Christian was rather porous. In Goa itself there was unprecedented contact and exchange between Christians and Hindus, as well as Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and members of other religious groups. Official policies concerning the status of non-Christians in the Portuguese colonies were benign only in comparison to the increasingly repressive measures imposed by the State from the 1540s onward.

### **A Reign of Terror**

D. Constantino de Bragança, who served as Viceroy from 1558-1561, in many ways reversed certain more tolerant policies of his immediate predecessor. In March of 1559, the Portuguese crown decreed that on the islands of Goa, all pagodas and idols, public or secret, should be burned and destroyed, a policy implemented by Bragança. The making of idols was to be punished with slavery in the galleys. No “gentile” festivals were to be celebrated in any households on the islands, and Brahmins were exiled.<sup>9</sup> In November of that year, the Viceroy also condemned to death several sodomites, while branding others and exiling them to Brazil.<sup>10</sup> Then, in 1560 a royal decree formally established an Inquisition in Goa, and specified as its primary goal the suppression and punishment of Portuguese New Christians accused of Judaising.<sup>11</sup> Enraged by the fraternising between the Portuguese New Christian émigrés and the ancient Jewish community of Cochin,

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the Catholic clergy of Cochin and Goa had conducted a trial against twenty New Christians in 1557-1559. The accused were sent back to Portugal in 1560 to be tried by the Inquisition. These trials resulted in the establishment of the Goan Inquisition in that same year. They also indicate a sea change in the nature and degree of ecclesiastical repression in the Portuguese Indies.

So began the roughly 250-year reign of terror of the Goan Inquisition, during which time as many as 16,000 cases were tried.<sup>12</sup> What I would like

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to suggest is that the destruction of the tooth relic in 1561 must be viewed in relation to the arrival of the Inquisition in Goa, as well as to the events immediately preceding it. In this context, we might wonder whether the Viceroy capitulated not so much to the superior arguments of the Archbishop and his camp, as to the superior force of the Inquisition that was then establishing its rule by intimidation. Or perhaps the Viceroy stood to profit in other ways by collaborating with the Inquisition. In any case, the images of the torture of the tooth, which occur in all versions of the story, but most pronouncedly in Faria y Sousa’s telling, must be read against the subtext of the Inquisition’s actual practice of torture and intimidation, which in the first twenty years of its existence were primarily, though not exclusively, directed at so-called lapsed Christians.

Both Couto and Faria y Sousa provide clues to the particular sense of embattlement and vulnerability of the colonial Portuguese, and especially of the clergy. Both chroniclers focus on the semiotics of the tooth; and Faria y Sousa is particularly creative in his exploration of the devouring mouth of pagan Asia. Clearly the fantasy of bodily fragmentation is not just his alone, but is a collective one of being destroyed in a very particular way – chewed up, masticated, and, implicitly, digested by the alien culture around them. There were many factors that contributed to this anxiety, not least of which was the internal fragmentation of Goan society, arranged in rigid castes, divided between New and Old Christians, and subject to constant and extreme internal violence. This fragmentation anxiety was also provoked by the violence of their military conflicts with numerous groups across Africa, Asia, and the South Seas. Yet in fantasy, the violence was provoked by attacks *on them*.

## The Collective Body

The French psychoanalysts René Kaës and Didier Anzieu have argued that human collectives tend to express their experience of the group somatically. They imagine, consciously or unconsciously, that their group *has* a body – like a physical body. A group does not exist as such, says Anzieu, until it has acquired an *esprit de corps*.<sup>13</sup> The body imago of a group, its imagined skin envelope, helps hold the group together. That is, by imagining a shared body, individuals constitute themselves as a group. The theory of the group body offers us a tool for understanding more about the past, as well as the present – together with the group bodies we create and inhabit today.

There are several possible defences against a group fear of fragmentation, which is at root a primal fear of corporeal dismemberment. Perhaps the most common is that a group defends against its fear of somatic fragmentation with real or fantasised violence. Burning the tooth was, in effect, a metaphoric strike against a virtual mouth, as well as a very real act of cultural violence against the Buddhists of Ceylon and Pegu – the effect of which on one level may have been to reduce the fragmentation anxiety of certain elements of Portuguese Goan society – the Christian group body, as it were. On another level, however, the destruction of the tooth also heralded the fragmentation of that same body by the very organisation designed to defend it against impurities of belief or practice – that is, the Inquisition.

A group that acts out its fear of fragmentation through violence is likely to manifest what Anzieu and others identify as a paranoid-schizoid personality. Anzieu explains:

If the group is in a paranoid-schizoid position, if it projects its

bad conscience on to the outside world, if it is in overt or latent conflict with the portion of society in which it finds itself, if it finds its cohesion in the struggle against an enemy, this is because it is diffusely overwhelmed by the ‘spy’ image. . . . This intrusion is greeted with suspicion and fear of persecution; it immobilises group aggressivity and crystallises it around the foreign body, encysts it and expels it violently.<sup>14</sup>

The fantasy of expulsion as a means of restoring health and wholeness can be imagined in any number of ways. In the case of the tooth-relic, the crushing, burning, and



drowning of the foreign body was not enough, particularly because the tooth resurrected from the dead, so to speak. Images of torture, comically offered by Faria y Sousa, betray a profound anxiety, a desire to transfer the threat of dismemberment onto the object itself. Thus the tooth had to be fragmented, consumed, engulfed – first in a real life ritual, then in commemorative retellings.

Anzieu’s account of the paranoid group, wracked with fragmentation anxiety, helps us to understand how perpetrators of violence may in fact

believe that they are its victims. The study of collective fantasies about the body, and about the body politic, explains a great deal about the psychology of violence and vulnerability – in colonial times, certainly, no less than in our own. □

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Buddhist scripture *Dathuvamsa*, or *Chronicle of the Tooth*, written in Elu ca. 310 A.D., and translated into Pali in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. A.D., conveys the early history of the relic, from the time of the Buddha’s death in 543 B.C. till its transport from Dantapura (literally “the tooth-city” and possibly modern Rajamahendri) to Ceylon. Quoted in J. Gerson da Cunha, *Memoir on the History of the Tooth-Relic of Ceylon* (1875; New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2001), 27-28.

<sup>2</sup> M. N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1987), 121; Diogo do Couto, *Da Asia de João de Barros e Diogo de Couto: Dos feitos, que os Portuguezes fizeram na conquista, e descubrimento das terras, e mares do Oriente*, 24 vols., Vol. 17 (Lisbon: Edição da Libraria Sam Carlos, 1974), 315-318, 428-434.

<sup>3</sup> See Couto, *Da Asia*, Dec. VIII, Cap. xii-xiii. Vol. 18, 74-88.

<sup>4</sup> From the *Sälalihini Sandesa*, poems about the tooth from the reign of Parakramabahu VI, verses 42-43, quoted in Dharmaratna Herath, *The Tooth Relic and the Crown* (Colombo: 1994): 20.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Gray, the editor and translator of Pyrard de Laval’s narrative of his travels to India, wrote: “That the *daladá* was a monkey’s tooth is of course only a Portuguese slander, in which Buddhism is confused with the Hindu worship of Hanuman.” *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, 3 vols., Vol. 2 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1887, 1890), 45.

<sup>6</sup> This confusion of Hanuman and Buddha was suggested by the nineteenth-century south-Asianist James E. Tennant in *Ceylon: An Account of the Island: Physical, Historical, and Topographical*, 2 vols., Vol. 2 (1859; London: 1860), 201.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Pimenta, S. J., *Indian Observations . . . .* In *Purchase His Pilgrims*, Vol. 9 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1906), 208-209; Pedro Texeira, *The History of Persia . . . .* trans. John Stevens (London: 1715), 251-252; François Pyrard de Laval, *Voyage to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, ed. and trans. Albert Gray, 3 vols., Vol. 2 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1887), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, 3 vols., Vol. 1, Part 1: The Century of Discovery (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965), 241. Anant Kakba Priolkar, *The Goa Inquisition* (Bombay: Bombay U P, 1961), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Ana Cannas da Cunha, *A Inquisição no Estado da Índia: Origens (1539-1560)* (Lisbon: Estudos & Documentos, Arquivos Nacionais/Torre do Tombo, 1995), 112.

<sup>10</sup> Cannas da Cunha, *op. cit.*, 93, 113.

<sup>11</sup> António Baião, *A Inquisição de Goa: Tentativa de história da sua origem, estabelecimento, evolução e extinção*, 2 vols., Vol. 1 (Lisbon: Academia das Ciências, 1945), 30-35; Ana Cannas da Cunha, *op. cit.*; António José Saraiva, *The Marrano Factory: The Portuguese Inquisition and its New Christians, 1536-1765*, trans., revised, and augmented by H. P. Salomon and I. S. D. Sassoon (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 350.

<sup>12</sup> Pearson states that between 1560 and 1774 no less than 16,172 cases were tried by the Goan inquisition (120). See also Saraiva's estimates in *The Marrano Factory*, 345-347. All the complete and incomplete trial records were burned in the early 1800s, at the behest of the Portuguese Viceroy of India Count of Sarzedas, who found the history of the Inquisition entirely too incriminating for his comfort. 2000 other documents from the Goan Inquisition were culled for preservation by Friar Tomás de Noronha and sent to Rio de Janeiro. These were identified and classified only in 1987. Saraiva 345-346.

<sup>13</sup> Despite the destruction of these records, the infamy of the Inquisition was publicised by certain of its victims, especially the Frenchman Gabriel Dellon, who wrote a horrifying exposé based on his prison experiences. See *History of the*

*Inquisition As it is Exercised at Goa* (London: 1688; Early English Books Online), <http://www.lib.umi.com>. 14 May 2002.

<sup>14</sup> René Kaës, *L'appareil psychique groupal: constructions du groupe* (Paris: Dunod, 1976); Didier Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious*, trans. Benjamin Kilborne (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 241.

<sup>15</sup> *The Group and the Unconscious*, p. 114.

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