

JAN KIENIEWICZ
(OBTA, University of Warsaw)

Contact, Conquest and Colonialism on the Malabar Coast

Abstract

The conquest of the Malabar Coast has been depicted as a new form of European activity, of a distinctly different nature to the forms of contact present from the 16th until the 18th century. Due to the lack of space of Dialogue and to the limited opportunities for Encounter, the defensive processes of the Malabar societies might have led to a conservative approach, rendering difficult the possibility of finding “New Transformations”, which were necessary as a response to the new stimuli from outside. A hypothesis about the presence of internal factors contributing to the tensions, which eventually led to the loss of ecological equilibrium, has been put forward.

The Malabar Coast (the location where Vasco da Gama landed) had focused the attention of all those who were interested in trade in Asia or with Asia until the 18th century. Therefore, it can be considered a research laboratory for all sorts of European activity. From the 15th century the expansionist drive towards the Indian Ocean had attracted people from different European countries. However, I will use the term “European expansion” as a whole, taking into account the involvement of all European countries in the efforts to build overseas empires (Kieniewicz 1976; Kamen 2003). It should be investigated to what extent the chronological continuity of the expansion, so obvious from the European perspective, corresponds to the reality of the Malabar social system (Kieniewicz 1975: 97-108). Finding the answer to this question will help me assess to what extent subordination to the colonial system in the 19th century was the result of the processes symbolically initiated by the arrival of Vasco da Gama. And secondly, I would like to state once again the problem of reaction (Wesseling 1978). The subject of my contemplation is therefore the process of continuity and all the modifications that occurred in the social system of the Malabar Coast in its confrontation with European expansion.

For a long time I have been convinced that the traditional divisions of the expansion into different stages determined by the dominant political entity (Portuguese, Dutch or

British) do not reflect the reality (Kieniewicz 1986a). Nor is the division in accordance to the dominant form of activity (factories, companies, states) capable of providing an explanation of the process in question. The latter division does not include all those forms of expansion which were not directly related to either war or trade. I am alluding to the missionary activities, which in the Malabar Coast played a particularly significant part. I have suggested making a distinction between the pre-colonial and the colonial expansion. The turning point would depend upon the extent and the nature of the subjugation of the local social systems. This differentiation has been acknowledged by scholars, however it should be admitted that it does not exhaust the whole complexity of the problem (Pearson 1988: 55). It still remains unclear to what extent we are talking about different expansions and to what extent merely about different stages of the same process.

By the term “pre-colonial expansion” I understand all activities which were not aimed at establishing political rule. At the same time, they reflected a low potential to subjugate the structure of another system. Between 1505 and 1663 the Portuguese *Estado da India* on the Malabar Coast included the fortified city of Kochi and a few other fortified factories, the most significant of which were Kollam and Kodungallur, obtained through deals with local sovereigns. The *Estado da India* could therefore be considered both an external force and an internal partner. As the former, it endeavoured to gain control over the oceanic navigation, which did not always prove effective but at least it could guarantee a participation in the Asian trade. As the latter, it took part in internal struggles to achieve a dominant position between two branches of the descendants of the mythic *Cheruman Perumal*. This constant rivalry did not offer the Europeans an opportunity to impose their domination. This was only made possible when the colonial expansion began.

Kochi was initially a fortress and then the city developed around it. By the end of the 16th century it contained probably around 20 thousand inhabitants. One quarter of them were Europeans and there were twice as many half-breed Christians people named the *Topass*. Kochi consisted of an European part of the city, inhabited by all sorts of people of different origins and religions, who nevertheless did not submit to the rules of the caste system, then of the port, which was directly under the control of the Rajah, where everybody could meet, of the Indian city of Mattancherry, whose spatial structure reflected the caste system observed by its inhabitants of the palace of the Rajah, and of mixed settlements outside the city walls (Malekandathil 2001).

Therefore it encompassed various social bodies, whose separate delimitations did not disappear when the expansion began. In *Cidade de Santa Cruz de Cochim* there was an attempt to introduce the foundations of the European legal system and the structure of the Portuguese administration, however the rules governing the relations between different communities remained unshaken. It led to the emergence of a new segment of the society adjusted to the local reality, for the reality was beyond the reach of direct European influence. The areas of prospective expansion included the territories placed directly under the Rajah's rule, those of his allies and states that maintained some kind of relations with the Portuguese. The heads of these states benefited from different kinds of allowances,

which were supposed to assure their favourable attitude towards the Portuguese interests. And in particular, towards the continuity of the export of pepper. However, the rule of *Estado da India* over all the Malabar Coast remained within the realm of imagination.

After a struggle that lasted a few years, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) managed to take over the fortresses of Kodungallur, Kochi and Kollam from the Portuguese. The range of its influence did not exceed the Portuguese, however its capabilities to exert direct pressure were more significant, due to the greater efficiency of the activities of the Dutch fleet. In the meantime the removal of the Catholic population (*casados*, *topass*) had reduced the number of inhabitants by half. There is no ground to assume that the impact of the pressures exerted by the VOC was more profound than the previous influence of the Portuguese. From the Malabar point of view the volumes of export directly supervised by the Dutch decreased to a significant degree (Subrahmanyam 2004; Das Gupta 1967). It does not, however, imply that the producers had suffered any marked losses (Kieniewicz 1986b). The simultaneous activities of other trade companies offered other options to the local heads of states and merchants.

The possibility of a struggle for domination in India emerged in the mid-18th century. Throughout the era from the treaty in Mavelikkara in 1743 until the Mysore invasion is characterised by a balance of power on the European side (de Lannoy 1997). The British gradually replaced the Dutch as the beneficiaries of the pepper trade and as protectors. It was only the Mysore invasion that broke the defences of the Malabar states and the conquest was finally completed at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, when the British had already gained an unquestionable military advantage. They occupied the Malabar Coast in 1792 and in 1805 imposed a subsidiary treaty on the state of Travancore. The rebellion led by Palassi Rajah was defeated in 1805 and in 1809 Velu Thampi suffered the same fate. Was it exclusively due to the British military advantage? To what extent had the relations meant to protect the social system been already weakened by 300 years of resistance? When exactly did the breakage of the defences occur and was it really caused by the long lasting Contact?

What does this issue look like from the local perspective? The conquerors brought about the transformation of the British dominion of the East India Company into a British colony. However, when did the turning point take place and on what grounds can we consider that colonialism implemented itself on the Malabar Coast?

Let us approach this historic sequence from the perspective of the social system of the Malabar Coast. It is necessary to simplify, given the variety of Malabar states, however the uniformity of their population justifies this approach. To be exact one should take into account, one after another, the societies of all the *Nadu* states. However, at this stage, I assume that we can consider the social system of the Malabar Coast as a whole. The structure of the Malabar social system was shaped by a segmented structure of property and rule, joint property of land, the segmented character of the caste order, a balance of power between the different states, and a permanent export surplus. This system has been considered as an equilibrated one (Kieniewicz 1975: 162). It remains disputable whether the segmented character also embraced the political structures (Stein 1980). However,

there is no doubt that, on different levels of relations and with all its diversified states of consciousness, the Malabar Coast social system can be considered as a whole.

Similarly, I consider the impetus coming from the European expansion as uniform. As we know, it consisted of financial investment and the recourse to force. I named this form of expansionist actions a Contact, because of the attempt to break the defences of another system and to penetrate its structure. As we can see, this term also reflects the reality from the Malabar perspective. All elements forming part of the organisation of the Malabar system were involved in its defence. And they successfully impeded the Portuguese, their conceptions and values, to penetrate the structure of their system. At this stage it is important to make a difference between the behaviour and actions constantly present as a result of external pressures and those patterns of behaviour which can be considered new.

Commercial exchanges linked the Malabar Coast with practically all the Indian Ocean world. Its privileged position in comparison with other markets is confirmed by the surplus in the balance of trade. In regard to the European markets it held a similar position. The emergence of new commercial partners did not bring about any problems, despite their efforts to gain a privileged position. Before the development of the system of plantations and the reduction of pepper to the rank of an everyday seasoning, sale remained a function of demand. We also know that until the 19th century the use of force or blackmail in order to achieve the status of a partner in business was a structural element of the expansion. I named this form of Contact Overwhelming (Kieniewicz 1989: 42). The other element of the expansion, which consisted of the gaining of resources to finance the purchase, followed a similar pattern. The resources were found within the Indian Ocean world, where, owing basically to military pressure, the subsequent groups of new-comers found ways to carry out their business activities. The Country Trade guaranteed the Europeans the capacity to go on with their expansion on the Malabar Coast (Watson 1980). The situation only changed when the structure of property ownership and the relations between different agents involved in the production process were shaken.

The Malabar system reacted to expansion in accordance with a well established pattern, that is by taking advantage of its capacity for Constant Transformations. This meant above all a consistent disregard to everything that the strangers considered to be their unique specificity. The impact of the European expansionist drive, measured by the amount of funds invested in the purchase, the numbers of armed forces, their military performance and their capacity to intervene in internal conflicts remained unchanged for over two centuries. This meant that an increase in numbers did not translate into greater effects. The wars in Malabar were carried out according to the local scenarios. At the end of the 15th century the Samudri Rajah of the state of Kozhikode hired Italian bombardiers and in the 18th century the Rajah of Travancore entrusted the drill of his soldiers to a Dutch specialist.

Looking from the Malabar perspective, the problem in question can be defined as a necessity of and a capacity to undergo structural modifications in an autonomous way and as a consistency in opposing rejection of the given system of values. In the first

case we underline the cultural aspect and in the second the civilisational dimension. The point is that the Transformations were gradually taking the form of regulations, i.e. autonomous adjustments and any adaptations (New Transformations) had to be made using the resources of the local culture. And therefore, the phenomenon of adopting the pattern of behaviour (and not only the religion) of the new-comers, who attempted to impose their domination, remained of marginal importance. It leads to the key question: for how long? And to another equally important question: why is it that the system finally lost its capacity to maintain control over its adjustments?

In accordance with a matrix that shows the process of crossing civilisational borders, Malabar corresponds to the variant of Contact called "Accommodation/Rejection" (Kieniewicz 2005: 41), with the reservation that until the 18th century we can talk neither about the domination of the European social system nor about the subjection of the Malabar society. However, the scheme is applicable, because the people who formed the Malabar system stuck to their values. Therefore, the question should rather be asked about how long they showed a capacity to remain faithful to their culture and a readiness to live their lives in accordance with traditional values.

In these circumstances, Contact took the form of violent actions or the threat of the use of violence, taking recourse to supra-economic means, meant to support the constantly insufficient funds dedicated to the purchase of local goods. However, the efficiency of these methods depended on the willingness of the local heads of states to collaborate with the Europeans. By the 16th-18th century no structural modification had yet taken place. For it is difficult to ascertain as a fact that it was European demand, which led to an increase in the acreage of the cultivations meant for export. During the Portuguese phase the expansion of the new-comers translated into the construction of fortresses, the imposed payments for passports overseas and all sorts of alliances with the local sovereigns. The strangers did not succeed in striking a permanent alliance with the local Christians against the Muslims, nor did they impose a monopoly on the purchase of pepper. Therefore it can be said that Contact was reduced to those components, which can be described as the organisation of the system. The removal of the Portuguese and the takeover of the fortified places by the Dutch East India Company did not substantially modify the existing balance of power. During the following 100 years the Company remained one of many elements forming part of the local system.

What was the secret of the resistance to European expansion? And where can we trace the origin of the change which led to the conquest of the Malabar Coast?

The inefficiency of the Portuguese efforts is self-evident. It is, by the way, an interesting question as to why European control in the Indian Ocean meant so little for the society which was so much "turned towards the coast" (Kieniewicz 1984a: 8). However, the diverse defence activities of the system, those which allowed and indeed forced the system to accommodate, proved to be of more importance. We can indicate those which directly impeded any aggressive action:

- merchants found other supply ports, producers chose other routes;
- ways of corrupting the Portuguese were found;

- the system of common land property held off the process of the creation of plantations;
- local armies used elements of European weaponry, however they stuck to the traditional ways of waging wars;
- in response to aggression Malabar piracy emerged;
- the Malabar Christians agreed to maintain relations with the Catholics only on spiritual grounds, and refused to reject their own culture and did not agree to form a community with the converts from the lower *jatis*;
- the caste system remained unshakeable and the Portuguese had to adapt to it, although they did not form part of it.

In these circumstances it can be said that the space of Contact was formed as a part of the organisation of the Malabar Coast social system, in accordance with its principles, and the European activities had to adjust to this situation. Contact was always a two-way reality. On the one hand, it expressed the character of the expansion, as the Portuguese were unable to accomplish their objectives without Overwhelming, i.e. oppressing the local population (Kieniewicz 1984b). On the other hand, it indicated the state of inter-system communication, determined by the strength of the defence barriers. On the Malabar Coast Contact accomplished its goals outside the structure of the local system. The pressure decreased as the distance from the fortresses grew, however the rejection of European values played a crucial role here. And obliged the Portuguese to accommodate. Therefore I consider purposeful the correction of the proposition presented under the form of the *contact zone* (Frenz 2003: 47, 152). For I do not see any Dialogue in Malabar. The elements of Dialogue belong to another reality, which I have named the space of Encounter.

This form of human relations between people of different civilisations took place only when the reciprocal influences were balanced. In Malabar, we can see the rejection of the new-comers or their forced accommodation, and also moments, albeit short, of balanced coexistence. It can be exemplified by the 16th century coexistence of the Malabar Christians with the European Catholics. The former group played an extremely important part in Malabar life, due to their involvement in cultivation and the trade in pepper, and also due to their military potential. For these reasons, from the very beginning they became the target of the Portuguese endeavours. The Portuguese wanted to see them as partners and allies in their fight with the Muslims. The Christians allowed the Catholics into their churches and showed an inclination to look for a *rapprochement* on doctrinal issues (Thomaz 2001). Still they rejected any interference in the cultural sphere. They never agreed to form a community with the local converts, which almost exclusively originated from the population of outcasts. Therefore, at the Udayamperur synod in 1599 they accepted a union with Rome. They rejected it in dramatic circumstances in 1653, precisely due to the interference of the Catholics in the social sphere (Kollaparambil 1981; Kieniewicz 1999).

The space which delimited the Contact could clearly change and depended on the level of acceptance of the presence of Aliens. The new-comers were restricted to some enclosed

areas, in accordance with the centuries-long practice. The space of the Encounter proved to be limited to one of the castes, and not to the borderland of two different civilisations.

The era of Contact and Encounter extended up to the following centuries, during which the Dutch replaced the Portuguese in their position. However, the ownership of the fortresses and factories, the establishment of relations with the local heads of states, did not imply the establishment of sovereign rule or the subjugation of any part of the local society. The world of the Christians, both white and non-white, existed within the same physical and communicational space in parallel to the Indian world. This presence never expanded beyond activities aimed at the organisation of the system, even in the 18th century, when other rivals, and particularly the British made their appearance.

When and in what respect can we therefore talk about the conquest of the Malabar Coast? The conquest implied not only the establishment of political rule, but also the subjugation of the structures of another system. It was made possible for two reasons. The first was a decreased capability of resistance, due to repetitive invasions by the increasingly powerful Indian states. The Dutch made an attempt to interfere in the political life of the Malabar Coast, when they opposed the Rajah of Travancore, but they were unable to stop him in his ambitions. These actions belong to the sphere of Contact. The Mysore invasion brought devastation, and as a result the British army took control over the Northern part of the country. Then it suppressed the resistance of the Rajah of Kottayam and imposed protectionist treaties upon the Rajahs of Kochi and Travancore. The conquest in Malabar followed the same pattern as in other parts of India.

It is worth considering whether it is possible that in some way the Contact led to the Conquest? The British won as one of the powers present in the organisation of the system and upheld by a new kind of external factor. Therefore, the point was not about the takeover of power, and not even about the establishment of new forms of power, because it had always been present. The conquest should be seen as a European interference in the structure of the local system: in property ownership, social relations, production and marketing of goods, taxes and administration. The reality of the conquest is well illustrated by the British descriptions of the Malabar (Buchanan 1801: v. III), so completely different from the Portuguese (Barbosa), the Dutch (Van Rheede) or those written almost simultaneously by the missionaries (Paolino da San Bartolommeo).

In what circumstances and why did the subjugation of the Malabar social system and the implantation of the colonial system take place?

The forms of relations, formed inside the social system of the Malabar Coast by Contact and Encounter indicate that the establishment of the colonial reality was conditioned by a set of many circumstances. Along with the stronger form of aggression the external situation and the state of the local system have to be taken into account. The high efficiency of the defences and resistance to the challenges of the expansion had their price. In my opinion this price included the corruption of the political relations and the charges imposed on the local community. The conquest proved possible because the social system lost its balance. This set of circumstances caused the subjugation, which led to the colonialism.

What conclusions can we draw to determine the character of the relations which the Indian societies built in their confrontation with European aggression?

Most importantly, it should be noted that beyond all other factors, the capacity of facing up to the challenges was determined by the values. They allowed people to maintain their faith in the character and in the specificity of their own way of life. Given the lack of platforms of Dialogue and the limited sphere of Encounter, the system reacted to the aggression by rejection. The tensions due to the defence of the structure might have caused a certain sort of conservatism, and even the ossification of the rules of life. I have drawn the conclusion that it was a result of passing into a state of chronic ecological disequilibrium. A glance over the social system in the process of transition from Contact to Conquest makes me think that internal factors played a decisive role. Deficient defence capabilities could no longer confront the relentless external pressures and gave place to colonialism. It had neither been ascribed to the logics of the Malabar system, nor resulted in an obvious way from the landing of Vasco da Gama on the sandy beach next to Kozhikode.

Bibliography

Barbosa D., 1867. *Livro de Duarte Barbosa. Collecção de noticias para a historia e geografia das nações ultramarinas que vivem nos dominios portugueses*, v. II. Lisboa, Real Academia das Sciencias.

Buchanan F., 1807. *Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, vol. I-III, London, T. Cadell and W. Davies.

Das Gupta A., 1967. *Malabar in Asian Trade, 1740-1800*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Ferguson N., 2006. *El imperio británico. Cómo Gran Bretaña forjó el orden mundial*. Barcelona, Random House Mondadori.

Frenz M., 2003. *From Contact to Conquest. Transition to British Rule in Malabar, 1790-1805*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.

s'Jacob H.K., 2000. *The Rajas of Kochi 1663-1720. Kings, Chiefs and the Dutch East India Company*. New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

Kamen H., 2003. *Imperio. La forja de España como potencia mundial*. Madrid, Aguilar.

Kieniewicz J., 1975. *Kerala od równowagi do zacofania*. Warszawa, Wydawnictwa UW.

Kieniewicz J., 1976. *Portugalczyki w Azji XV-XX wiek*. Wrocław, Ossolineum.

Kieniewicz J., 1984a. "Overwhelming and Exchange: Forms of Contact in the Portuguese Expansion in the Indian Ocean World-System during the Sixteenth Century", in: *International Conference on Indian Ocean Studies*, vol. G, *The Portuguese in the Indian Ocean Region*: 1-12. Perth.

Kieniewicz J., 1984b. "Contact and Transformation. The European Precolonial Expansion in the Indian Ocean World-System in the 16th-17th Centuries", *Itinerario* 8/2: 45-58.

Kieniewicz J., 1986a. *Od ekspansji do dominacji. Próba teorii kolonializmu*. Warszawa, Czytelnik.

Kieniewicz J., 1986b. "Pepper Gardens and Market in Pre-colonial Malabar", *Moyen Orient et Ocean Indien XVIe-XIXe siècle* 3: 1-36.

Kieniewicz J., 1989. "The New European World Overseas: The Space of Contact and Limits of Cognition", *Acta Poloniae Historica* 60: 33-50.

Kieniewicz J., 1991. "Asian Merchants and European Expansion: Malabar Pepper Trade Routes in the Indian Ocean World-System in the Sixteenth Century", in: K.R. Haellquist, *Asian Trade Routes. Continental and Maritime*: 78-86. London, Curzon Press.

- Kieniewicz J., 1999. "W Malabarze: chrześcijanie z chrześcijanami", in: J. Kieniewicz, *Spotkania Wschodu*: 66-89. Gdańsk, Novus Orbis.
- Kieniewicz J., 2001. "Cristãos e Especiaria: The Portuguese Impact on the Malabar Christian Community", in: P. Malekandathil, J. Mohammed, *The Portuguese, Indian Ocean and European Bridgeheads 1500-1800. Festschrift in Honour of Prof. K. S. Mathew*: 119-132. Tellicherry, Fundação Oriente.
- Kieniewicz J., 2005. "Borderlands and Civilizational Encounter", *Memoria y Civilización* 8: 21-49.
- Kollaparambil J., 1981. *The St. Thomas Christians' Revolution in 1653*. Kottayam, The Catholic Bishop's House.
- Lannoy M. de, 1997. *The Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore. History and State Formation in Travancore from 1671 to 1758*. Leiden, Research School CNWS.
- Malekandathil P., 2001. *Portuguese Kochi and the Maritime Trade of India 1500-1663*. New Delhi, Manohar.
- More L., 2003. *English East India Company and the Local Rulers in Kerala: a Case Study of Attingal and Travancore*. Tellicherry, IRISH.
- Pearson M.N., 1988. *Before Colonialism. Theories on Asian-European relations 1500-1750*. Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Rheede H.A. van, 1911. *Memoir written in the year 1677 A.D. by Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede, Commandeur of the Malabar, Canara and Wingurla Coast, for his successor*. Madras.
- San Bartolommeo P. da, 1796. *Viaggio alle Indie Orientali*. Roma.
- Stein B., 1980. *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*. Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Subrahmanyam S., 2004. *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500-1650*. New Delhi, Cambridge University Press.
- Thomaz L.F.F.R., 2001. "Were Saint Thomas Christians looked upon as heretics?", in: K.S. Mathew, T.R. de Souza, P. Malekandathil, *The Portuguese and the Socio-cultural changes in India, 1500-1800*: 27-92. Tellicherry, Fundação Oriente.
- Watson I.B., 1980. *Foundation for Empire. English Private Trade in India 1659-1760*. New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House.
- Wesseling H.L., 1978. "Expansion and Reaction: Some Reflections on a Symposium and a Theme", in: H.L. Wesseling, *Expansion and Reaction*: 3-14. Leiden, Leiden University Press.