

*H-France Review* Vol. 18 (April 2018), No. 85

Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. xvi + 217 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-5017-0993-7.

Review by Gregory Mole, University of Memphis.

Empires, it seems, have become far less imposing of late. Long gone are the triumphalist narratives of Macaulay, and with them the assumption that hegemonic aspirations voiced in Europe matched on-the-ground colonial realities. This historiographical shift is perhaps most evident in scholarship on early modern empire-building, where the once unproblematic acceptance of metropolitan political claims has given way to a language of lumpy, shared, overlapping, and ultimately ad hoc sovereignty. It is this fractured imperial experience that concerns Danna Agmon. Revisiting an often forgotten scandal in an obscure corner of France's eighteenth-century empire—the Nayiniyappa Affair and Pondichéry, respectively—Agmon draws our attention to the shifting dynamic of conflict and collaboration that underlay the French imperial project in India. The result is a valuable reminder of the contested nature of early modern colonial power, all set against a compelling backdrop of personal tragedy and posthumous redemption.

First, the circumstances of the Nayiniyappa Affair: As the chief commercial broker for the French colony of Pondichéry from 1708 to 1716, Nayiniyappa oversaw a complex network of Tamil intermediaries who translated, traded, proselytized, and negotiated on behalf of the settlement's small European population. He thus occupied a position of considerable influence, a client of Pondichéry's administrators who, more often than not, acted as their patron. Yet, Nayiniyappa's office attracted enemies as well as opportunities. Foremost among these were Pondichéry's order of Jesuit missionaries, who hoped to replace the Hindu Nayiniyappa with a handpicked Christian convert. Supporting them was Guillaume André Hébert, who had appointed Nayiniyappa to his position before being recalled and then reinstated as governor-general of French India. The need to consolidate power in the aftermath of his dismissal seems to have driven Hébert into the Jesuit camp, where the two concocted a plan to arrest and replace Nayiniyappa in 1716.

Tragic events unfolded in quick succession. Jailed on vague charges of "treason" and "sedition," Nayiniyappa was publicly whipped before receiving a three-year prison sentence. Pondichéry's court confiscated his estate and banished his sons from the settlement, and the beleaguered broker died alone in his jail cell soon after. Yet, misfortune bred unexpected resilience, a reflection of both the fluid nature of authority in the French settlement and the importance of intermediary figures like Nayiniyappa to its commercial success. As Agmon shows, the outrage over

Nayiniyappa's death played out across a global stage, bringing together family members, rival missionary orders, and concerned St. Malo investors in an effort to restore his name. This transoceanic campaign bore unexpected fruit. By 1717, published appeals had appeared in Paris, garnering sympathy for Nayiniyappa and heaping vitriol onto both Hébert and the Jesuits. The affair culminated in a dramatic reversal of fortune, ending with Hébert's recall and the 1719 voyage of Nayiniyappa's son to France, where he met the regent, secured a royal decree guaranteeing the restitution of his father's estates, converted to Christianity, and earned a knighthood.

The facts of the case alone make for a gripping narrative. Yet, as Agmon argues, the significance of the Nayiniyappa Affair extends beyond its sensational storyline. From surprise imprisonment to his posthumous exoneration, the scandal provides a window into the mediated nature of French sovereignty in India. Questions of Nayiniyappa's guilt always reflected deeper questions about the proper distribution of delegated authority within the colony. Whereas French traders were content to leave existing power structures and cultural practices in place, thereby easing their way into established credit networks, missionary groups like the Jesuits favored a more disruptive campaign of conversion and assimilation. Both relied upon the expertise and authority of intermediaries, albeit for fundamentally different purposes. As Agmon reveals, these conflicting goals were cast into relief by Nayiniyappa's arrest. A study of the Nayiniyappa Affair shifts our attention away from the well-documented tensions between colonizer and colonized—a focal point of empire scholarship in nearly all geographical and temporal contexts—to the internal contradictions that beset the early modern colonial project more generally. In the process, it uncovers a complex web of affinities, intrigues, and antagonisms, transcending the local politics of Pondichéry to draw in actors across France's eighteenth-century empire.

The organization of the book underscores the fissiparous nature of French colonialism on the subcontinent. Beyond a brief overview of the Nayiniyappa Affair in the first chapter of the book, Agmon eschews straight chronology, adopting a "prismatic" approach that covers the same narrative from different analytical perspectives. The second chapter explores the dynastic rivalries at the heart of the scandal, showing how the struggle between competing kinship groups (Nayiniyappa's Pillai family and the Christian Mudalis) to secure the lucrative position of chief commercial broker factored into Nayiniyappa's demise. Agmon's analysis of the intersecting processes of family politics and state formation that manifested themselves throughout this affair offers a useful corrective to the historiography on South Asia. It highlights the importance of kinship as a marker of identity and power in a field still dominated by discussions of caste.

The following two chapters explore Nayiniyappa's trial, imprisonment, and eventual exoneration. The bizarre circumstances of his interrogation, conducted through a French interpreter despite the fact that Nayiniyappa and his accusers all spoke Portuguese, provides a fascinating glimpse at the power afforded and denied through language. Rendered mute by his lack of French, Nayiniyappa struggled to answer the charges levelled against him. For Agmon, this refusal to interact through a shared register underscores the tensions over mediation that inspired the Nayiniyappa Affair. In a polyglot city where merchants spoke Portuguese, missionaries studied Tamil and Telugu, and few insisted on learning French, the choice of language always carried significant practical as well as symbolic implications. Agmon follows this chapter with an examination of the evidentiary procedures employed in Nayiniyappa's trial. Irregularities littered the initial proceedings, with witnesses suborned and harsh punishments meted out without precedent. These procedural changes became a central point of contention in

the appellate petitions that followed Nayiniyappa's death. By focusing on these conflicts over judicial process, Agmon adds important new layers to scholarship on legal pluralism and imperial law, seeing debates over legal procedure as a central force in the articulation of power within colonial spaces such as Pondichéry.

Agmon then considers the multiple afterlives of the Nayiniyappa Affair. The voyage of Nayiniyappa's son, Guvuruppa, to Paris provides the narrative framing for a chapter analyzing the mobility of intermediaries. Remarkable as the campaign to exonerate his father may seem, Guvuruppa was not the only Tamil to visit Paris for an extended period of time. The catechist Manuel, who served as the chief interpreter in Nayiniyappa's trial, spent ten years in France with the Jesuits prior to the broker's arrest. The peripatetic careers of intermediaries such as these, Agmon insists, stood in stark contrast to the immobility of Pondichéry's French residents, who boasted global aspirations but struggled to extend their reach beyond the confines of a few coastal settlements. They also speak to the internal fault lines dividing the colony's institutions and administrators: Whereas French merchants sought to keep merchant networks intact, missionaries hoped eventually to supplant local catechists and assume the burden of proselytism themselves.

A final chapter investigates the construction and subsequent destruction of documentary records concerning the Nayiniyappa Affair. After imprisoning Nayiniyappa, Hébert made sure to seize the broker's accounts (especially those detailing the governor's debt obligations to him). He placed these records in storage within the damp chambers of Fort St. Louis, the French administrative center in Pondichéry, where they soon fell apart in the humidity. The destruction of these exculpatory records aided Hébert in his efforts to convict Nayiniyappa. Three years later, following the governor's recall, French officials proved more proactive in protecting the colony's records and account books from his tampering. Administrators set aside an entire ship to bring documentary evidence highlighting Hébert's culpability in the Nayiniyappa Affair back to France. The creation, dismantling, and dissemination of personal archives, Agmon asserts, reflects the competing visions of authority that divided eighteenth-century Pondichéry. In place of a grand Foucauldian narrative that sees the archiving of knowledge as the purview of large states and bureaucratic institutions, here we see the self-conscious efforts of individuals to construct their own competing historical records.

This book provides a panoramic view of the daily life, pressures, and ambitions in a settlement that has been mostly overlooked by scholars of France and colonial India. Yet some questions remain. How distinctive was the situation in early eighteenth-century Pondichéry? The struggle to determine the proper balance of sovereignty was a defining part of the imperial experience in general, both inside and outside of India. In Pondichéry itself, Tamil and other local actors continued to advance competing sovereign claims late into the eighteenth century. Even as the French shifted toward a more aggressive strategy of conquest under Governor Dupleix in the 1750s, they were as much clients of powerful regional claimants as they were conquerors pursuing a path toward imperial hegemony. Did the dependence on middlemen, brokers, and go-betweens decrease over time, as Agmon suggests, or did the practices of mediation change instead? Perhaps the focal point of mediation simply shifted away from the competing axes of commerce and conversion discussed in the book toward other areas of colonial life (bureaucracy, the military), with intermediaries still positioned to claim shares of local sovereignty. Are not empires always, to some extent, collaborative processes, no matter how coercive their methods or seemingly unified their institutions?

These comments are not meant to detract from the book, which is compellingly argued and beautifully written. Engaging scholarship always inspires new questions, and *A Colonial Affair* will make a valuable addition to the bookshelf of anyone interested in the histories of early modern France, colonial India, or the contradiction-laden dynamics of empires more generally.

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ISSN 1553-9172