Article

Hybridity in the Colonial Arts of South India, 16th–18th Centuries

Simona Cohen

Department of Art History, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel; simona_1@netvision.net.il

Abstract: This study examines the multiplicity of styles and heterogeneity of the arts created on the southern coasts of India during the period of colonial rule. Diverging from the trajectory of numerous studies that underline biased and distorted conceptions of India promoted in European and Indian literary sources, I examine ways in which Indian cultural traditions and religious beliefs found substantial expression in visual arts that were ostensibly geared to reinforce Christian worship and colonial ideology. This investigation is divided into two parts. Following a brief overview, my initial focus will be on Indo-Portuguese polychrome woodcarvings executed by local artisans for churches in the areas of Goa and Kerala on the Malabar coast. I will then relate to Portuguese religious strategies reflected in south Indian churches, involving the destruction of Hindu temples and images and their replacement with Catholic equivalents, inadvertently contributing to the survival of indigenous beliefs and recuperation of the Hindu monuments they replaced.

Keywords: colonial art; Indo-Portuguese art; South India; hybridity; Goan art

Citation: Cohen, Simona. 2021. Hybridity in the Colonial Arts of South India, 16th–18th Centuries. *Religions* 12: 684. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090684>

Academic Editor: Hilaire Kallendorf

Received: 25 May 2021

Accepted: 19 July 2021

Published: 26 August 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The multiplicity of styles and heterogeneity of the arts created on the southern coasts of India during the period of colonial rule is a complex issue. The intellectual foundations of the colonial construction of knowledge in the perception of intercultural encounters have been questioned by several leading authors. Partha Mitter, author of the pioneering work *Much Maligned Monsters* (Mitter 1992) has referred to those who “have tried to ‘correct’ Eurocentrism by writing, as it were, ‘value-free’ world art history, seeking to balance different traditions, while questioning Eurocentrism (Moxey 2013) Mitter further explains: “Colonial discourse represents cultural intersections as a linear process. It’s like a waterfall, ideas forever flowing downward from the West to the Rest, even though multidirectional flows of cultures have been a known fact of history” (Moxey 2013). Diverging from the trajectory of numerous studies that investigate negative conceptions of Indian culture and religions in European literary sources, I aim to examine ways in which Indian cultural traditions and religious beliefs found substantial expression in visual arts that were ostensibly geared to reinforce Christian worship and colonial ideology.

Theoretical interpretations of the term hybridity have been controversial. Laura Fernández-González and Marjorie Trusted, for example, have argued that “hybridity—which is the marking of particular kinds of difference—is generated out of intolerance, out of the need to distinguish and come to terms with unacceptable, conditionally acceptable, or uneasy mixes. That we need a term such as ‘hybrid’ for certain things and practices betrays the exercise of discrimination—the creation of what belongs and what doesn’t belong, usually with the implicit devaluation of the latter. Hybridity thus describes exceptions within a system that is at once exclusivistic and dependent upon the recognition of difference” (Dean and Leibsohn 2003). My reservation towards this judgmental approach stems from its assumption that certain standards are assumed to be correct or normative, while exceptions are the source of discrimination. In discussing colonial hybridity, this interpretation is appropriated for the discourse of Eurocentricity and implies the inferiority

of anything that threatens its cultural norms. As stated by these authors, “because hybridity entered into (post)colonial scholarship largely in the context of subaltern studies, the term and its associated concepts emphasize structures of power that center and marginalize”. This is not the conception I wish to adopt. These ideas are associated with highly charged political connotations, which are not the prime issue in the case of Portuguese strategies in South India, as will be illustrated below. Contrasting with these conceptions, hybridity is used in this study as a comprehensive umbrella term, for which I would adopt Wendy Doniger’s definition: “Hybridity defies binary oppositions and understands reality as a fluid rather than a series of solid, separate boxes” (Doniger 2009). The particular cases presented here represent different phenomena and diverse approaches to the complexities of intercultural encounters.

This investigation will be divided into two parts. Following a brief overview, my initial focus will be on Indo-Portuguese polychrome woodcarvings executed by local artisans for churches in the areas of Goa and Kerala on the Malabar coast (Figure 1). I will then relate to Portuguese religious strategies reflected in south Indian churches, involving the destruction of Hindu temples and images and their replacement with Catholic equivalents, inadvertently contributing to the survival of indigenous beliefs and recuperation of the Hindu monuments they replaced.

Figure 1. Map of south India.

Cultural diversity of the Goa region had preceded the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498. Following Islamic rule and monopoly of the spice trade on the Malabar coast¹ the Portuguese infiltration and the creation of their *Estado da India*, with Goa as capital in the first decade of the sixteenth century, enabled them to initiate trading activities, interacting with Asian markets and commissioning products for export to Europe. In his study of south India through European eyes, Joan-Pau Rubiés stated that “the ideology of crusade, common to all western Christianity, had a very special importance in the Iberian Peninsula, as a result of the process of *reconquista*...the whole of society could be directly implicated in a providential plan and conceive itself as having recovered a lost country from the infidel rather than having just taken it...” (Rubiés 2002). Grand churches were constructed as part of an attempt to create a global Christian empire. An Italian Jesuit reported in 1545 that there were no more Hindu temples on an island of Goa, and laws issued between 1549 and 1566 explicitly ordered the destruction of temples and prohibited the repair of existing ones. It has been estimated that several hundred Hindu temples were destroyed. In response to the Protestant Reformation and resulting Catholic theological reforms, the Catholic Church propagated the radical suppression of all aspects of so-called idolatry and issued restrictions on the use of images in Catholic churches and practice. One result of this renewal was the violent campaign, executed by the forces of the Portuguese crown and the Catholic orders, that led between 1540 and 1580 to the destruction of most temples, mosques, and religious iconography of the native population in the districts of the Island of Goa, Bardez, and Salcette (Henn 2014). The full-scale Portuguese inquisition began in 1560, promoted by concurrent proceedings of the Council of Trent. As Alexander Henn pointed out, “the campaign thus effected a war between images rather than a war against images” (Henn 2014). The destruction of Hindu temples and images and their replacement with Catholic equivalents “triggered paradoxical consequences that counteracted the iconoclastic thrust and, ironically, allowed the Catholic images to contribute to the memory, survival, and, in the long run, even recuperation of the Hindu monuments they replaced” (Henn 2014). As explained by Wendy Doniger, “building a shrine on the site where a shrine of another tradition used to stand is thus both a metaphor of appreciation and an act of appropriation in India, unhindered by any anxiety of influence” (Doniger 2009).

Between 1580 and 1640 the entire Iberian Peninsula, as well as Spanish and Portuguese overseas possessions, were under the Spanish Habsburgs, leaders of the Catholic Reformation. As Hindu worship and tradition were suppressed by the Portuguese, ecclesiastical arts were appropriated to convey the Christian message to the new converts. During the sixteenth century, Christian religious sculptures, carved in ivory from African elephant tusks, together with Indian spices, textiles, gemstones, and various precious objects, were transported by vessels to Portugal (Figure 2) (Malekandathil 2012, 2019).

These ivories were adapted by local artisans to the tastes of European consumers. By fusing art objects with their own technical methods and forms, Indian artisans created new hybridized styles for export that were highly successful in Europe. The iconography of the Good Shepherd statuettes, for example, for which there are no pre-existing examples in Europe, was produced by local carvers under the patronage of the missionary orders and the Portuguese colonial elite between the late sixteenth and the eighteenth century (Gusella 2019). It has been shown to share several common features with the doctrinal literature developed by the Jesuits in India. The doctrinal work *Orvalleancho Mallo* (Garden of Shepherds) by the Jesuit Miguel de Almeida, published in Goa in 1658, presented a detailed interpretation of pastoral images as seen in the statuette’s iconography. It is presumed to symbolize the eschatological role of the missionary clergy and the Catholic Church through the didactic use of a pastoral allegory (Gusella 2019). An engraving of Jerome Wierix (1553–1619), possibly created in the 1580s, provided the original model that was reproduced by other Flemish engravers and was the source of Flemish wood statuettes, popular items in Portugal between the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. By the seventeenth century, the iconography was appropriated by carvers in workshops

of the Portuguese settlements on the Western coast of India, who may have specialized in both wood and ivory techniques².

Figure 2. Indo-Portuguese Ivories from Goa; (a) Madonna and Baby Christ, 17th century, 300 mm., Antonio Costa Collection, Lisbon; (b) Christ Child as the Bom Pastor, 17th century, 230 mm., Heirs of Bernardo Ferrão, Oporto.

Concurrent with the production of ivories and other precious objects for export, Indian sculptors in Goa and coastal Kerala carved and painted wooden statues for local church furnishings, altarpieces and retables (Figure 3).

Although there is extensive scholarship dealing with the exportation of Indian artworks and various goods to Europe³, these polychrome wooden sculptures created for churches of the Malabar coast have been largely neglected. Unlike the carved ivories, they have not been accessible to scholars in western museums and art collections. Moreover, the unsophisticated simplicity of their rustic style and workmanship, as compared with the delicate ivories and other refined artworks designated for a European clientele, probably rendered them allegedly unworthy of scholarly attention.

Figure 3. Gilded Carved Altar in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi (1661), detail, Old Goa.

2. Polychrome Wooden Sculpture in Goan Churches

Although the iconography of these sculptures was dictated by Christian models, woodcarving and painting techniques, figurative norms, sculptural style and decorative elements generally reflected traditional aesthetics of Hindu, Buddhist and indigenous tribal sculpture (Figure 4).

An example of authentic stone temple sculpture can still be seen in the Śrī Mahadeva Temple of the twelfth or thirteenth century, one of the rare examples that survived the Portuguese ravages in the territory of Goa and remained intact due to its inland forest location on the border of Karnataka (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Wooden Hindu statues of Kerala: (a) Garuda, Kerala Folklore Museum, 17th/18th century; (b) Tribal Woman, Kerala Folklore Museum; (c) Durga, Polychrome relief, ca.18th century, Thrikkuratti Mahadeva Temple; (d) Shiva as Bhikshatana Murti (beggar), Kerala Folklore Museum.

Figure 5. Śrī Mahadev Temple, Tambdi Suria, Goa, Kadamba dynasty 12th/13th c.

The abundance and diversity of timber in the extensive forests of Kerala and Goa facilitated the traditional use of wood as the principal material for the construction of homes, temples and religious idols. The polychrome wooden sculptures presented are examples of unique ecclesiastical Goan art that unfortunately has been neglected by scholars (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Polychrome teak statues from Goa, h.1.57 cm., w. at base 54 cm. Late 16th or 17th century, author's collection.

They were carved out of solid teak logs, which later tended to split due to fluctuations of temperature and humidity. By hollowing out the interior core, the damage could be reduced⁴. Like most of the solid wood statues of Goa, these life-size candle bearers have a rugged and rigid simplicity, lacking the fine details of delicate ivories that were created for European taste. Their sculptural style was clearly derived from indigenous Goan tradition

and they have little in common with contemporary Portuguese art. The colors were periodically repainted, using the standard traditional pigments⁵. They were commissioned by the Church from local sculptors for altars and retables and often revealed extremely fine workmanship. Similar statues of candle bearers, ecclesiasts and saints, originating in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, can still be seen in Goan churches (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Indo-Portuguese statue, polychrome teak, h.1.57 cm., Church of St. Francis, 17th century, Goa.

Unfortunately, recent restoration undertaken under the auspices of the Museum of Christian Art in Goa has entirely obliterated the original character and beauty of the wooden statues by superimposing synthetic materials and plastic finishes (Figure 8)⁶.

Figure 8. Polychrome teak statue on altar, Church of Santa Monica, late 16th or 17th century, Goa. (a) Before Restoration; (b) After Restoration.

3. Human–Serpent Hybrids on Goan Pulpits

Another example of polychrome wood carving executed by local artisans are the pulpits of Goan churches that exemplify the unique synthesis of Christian ecclesiastical artforms imported from Europe with indigenous iconography. Among elements that were re-embodied in Christian objects are the human–serpent hybrids carved on the base of pulpits (Figures 9–11).

The basic structure of Goan pulpits derives from European precedents. Notable is the Portuguese pulpit of the Church of Santa Cruz in Coimbra, where figures of bizarre female hybrids with bared bosoms and bat ears, supposedly supporting a ledge, are superimposed above a hybrid dragon with huge bat wings on the lower section (Figure 12). Bats as nocturnal and liminal creatures appeared as attributes of demons and devils and were associated with sin, spiritual blindness and heresy in medieval and Renaissance art⁷. How is this Portuguese pulpit related to those in Goa? Hypothetically, we may assume that a design of the famous pulpit reached Goa with precious liturgical objects that were actually shipped there from this church in Coimbra.

In a study of the Goan pulpits by Ines Zupanov, the human–serpent hybrids were described as products of an intercultural encounter between Indian *nagas* (mythic serpents) and hybrid European creatures, such as mermaids or sirens that convey negative meanings (Zupanov 2015a). It is well known that Medieval sirens symbolized lust, avarice and deception, and survived into early modern western art as images of idolatry (Figure 13) (Dale 2001).

Figure 9. Polychrome wooden pulpit, Basilica of Bom Jesus, 17th century, Goa.

Figure 10. Pulpit in Igreja de Nossa Senhora (Church of Our Lady), 17th century, Goa.

Figure 11. *Cont.*

Figure 11. Teak pulpits from the Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Monte in Velha Goa, 1710 Casa-Museu Medeiros e Almeida, Lisbon and the Santana Church (Saint Anne), 17th century, Talaulim, Goa.

Figure 12. Renaissance stone pulpit, Church of Santa Cruz, Coimbra, Portugal. Probably carved by Nicolas Chantereuse (b. Normandy), ca.1485–1551.

Figure 13. Angels holding the *Summa contra Gentiles* by St. Thomas Aquinas, Vault Fresco Gallery of Maps, Vatican, 1580s.

Although the lower extremities of mermaids and sirens were usually represented as fish tails, they were sometimes depicted in the form of a serpent, as seen in a medieval manuscript illustration of the Greek *Physiologus* (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Winged sirens with snake-like tails, bestiary, England, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Barb. gr. 438, folio 26r.

The most notorious human–serpent hybrid in western art was the devil that tempted Eve and perpetrated Original Sin (*Genesis* 3: 1–19). There was no equivalent of the alluring fish-tailed mermaid or siren in Indian art. By contrast, the Indian *naga* hybrids were conceived as benevolent marine creatures, associated with the potency of water, producers and guardians of a multitude of auspicious creations and protectors of fertility. In view of these incompatible conceptions, I agree with Zupanov’s observation that the iconography of the Indo-Portuguese pulpits “meant different things to different audiences precisely because they organized a ‘complex field of visual reciprocity’ between the image/object and the beholder” (Zupanov 2015a). Noting the tradition of placing monsters in the interior of churches and on their facades, and subsequently on the bases of pulpits, she concluded that the monstrous Goan *nagas* represented “the celebration of colonial power over all chthonic creatures” (Zupanov 2015b). My reservations regarding this line of interpretation will be presented below.

An alternative explanation of this hegemonic theory was set forth by Alexander Henn, who stated: “Goa’s culture focuses on the postcolonial reappraisal of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and subalternity. This approach essentially draws from Antonio Gramsci’s argument that hegemony, due to its far-reaching cultural aspirations, can never be complete and uncontested, and thus—withstanding its totalitarian character and readiness for coercion—always faces opposition and is forced to make compromises with subaltern forces” (Henn 2014). A related theoretical approach has been set forth by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who criticized the Subaltern School for perceiving the Indian role as one of largely reacting and adapting to European initiatives (Subrahmanyam 2004). In the case of the pulpit hybrids, we have seen that scholars concentrated on the Eurocentric viewpoint, focusing on interpretations of colonial hegemony. In accordance with Henn’s theoretical assumptions, my aim is to identify these so-called “subaltern forces” covertly embedded in the colonial artistic products on the Malabar coast. Turning from the global discussions to the focused viewpoint of this case study, I suggest that art-historical studies, as exemplified here, suitably illustrate the validity of these perceptions. In other words, rather than interpret the pulpit hybrids from a Eurocentric viewpoint, as demonstrated by Zupanov, I am questioning the meaning of these composite creatures for the new converts and the Indian artisans who carved them, thereby reconsidering the broader implications underlying this cultural interaction. This line of investigation will suggest that there is no evidence to justify the claim that the pulpit hybrids were conceived as propagandist expressions of colonial power over chthonic creatures, as concluded by Zupanov.

It is my contention that the pulpit creatures, deriving from highly charged indigenous iconography, were not perceived by Indians as monsters. *Nagas* and *naginis* (their feminine counterparts) were divine or semidivine serpents, often shown as half human with multiheaded serpentine hoods (Figure 15).

As protectors of the element of water and guardians of treasures buried under the earth, they were associated from earliest times with myths of creation, as mediators of fertility and protectors from evils and illness. *Naga* worship was one of the most ancient religious nature cults in India (Figure 16)⁸.

They were evoked in legendary accounts of the origin of Malabar as its first inhabitants and guardians of underground treasures (Tarabout 2015). In the sacred groves of Kerala, equated with wild untouched forest, worshipers still present serpent deities with milk and other offerings to ensure protection and avert misfortunes. Most Kerala temples have a subshrine for *Naga* worship. The largest temple in Kerala specifically dedicated to the serpent cult is the Mannarassala Śrī Nagaraja temple, frequented by women suffering from infertility (Figure 17).

Figure 15. *Naga and nagini (detail), Descent of the Ganges*, stone relief, total length 25.5 m./height 12 m., Mahabalipuram, Pallava dynasty, Tamil Nadu, 7th century.

Figure 16. *Nagini on the Sun-Temple*, chlorite stone, Konark, Odisha, ca.1250 CE, Eastern Ganga dynasty.

Figure 17. *Naga Stones*, Mannarasala Śrī Nagaraja Temple, Kerala.

Nāga or *nagini* sculptures were salient as protectors of the entrance to the temple and its sanctum (*dvārapālakās*) (Figures 18–20).

Figure 18. *Naginis as dvārapalas*, protectors of the entrance, sandstone, Rajaraja Temple, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, ca. 950–1000 CE.

Figure 19. Śrī Mahadev Temple, Goa, entrance to sanctum with protecting *nagas*, Kadamba architecture in basalt stone, 12th–13th Century CE.

Figure 20. Pambummekkatu Mana, entrance gate to *kavu* (sacred grove), Thrissur, Kerala and detail of anthropomorphic serpent goddess Manasā.

Nagas were also represented on wooden brackets but were rarely depicted as supporting figures as they seem to appear in the pulpits⁹. This function was appointed to the rearing *yālis* or *vyālas* (Sanskrit), theriomorphic hybridizations of the crocodile, lion, horse, antelope and other animals, which were described in the *Purāṇas* and South Indian *Vastu-Śilpa* texts on Hindu iconography, and were ubiquitous in southern Hindu temples (Figure 21).

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 21. (a,b) Wooden Vyali corbels from Hindu temples in Kerala and c. detail of Vyali corbels of Napier Museum, Travancore, Kerala designed by Robert F. Chisholm, 1873.

Like the *nagas*, *vyālas* were perceived as apotropaic guardians and protectors of the temple (Dhaky 2013). The Portuguese, who were horrified by what they saw as Indian idol worship, had no hint of their meanings and regarded these hybrid creatures as monsters. Only in the eighteenth century would the *vyāla* motif be adopted in south-Indian British architecture, together with other indigenous formal elements.

4. Colonial Architecture and Indigenous Traditions

We have noted several examples that illustrate the survival of Indian material traditions and preservation of their iconic associations. Another facet of this phenomenon relates to the destruction of Hindu temples and images and their replacement with Catholic equivalents, inadvertently contributing to the survival of Hindu traditions, practices and imagery they intended to replace. To quote Henn: “The newly established Catholic churches were also meant to replace the Hindu temples in all possible respects: physically, economically, socially, and, to some extent, even liturgically. A result of this radical replacement strategy is that Goan churches, on the one hand, operate very much like Hindu temples in

a historically grounded Indian village organization and, on the other hand, represent a distinct Catholic culture that reflects Portuguese social traditions” (Henn 2018). In some cases, as illustrated below, the primordial sanctity of demolished temples, and the ground upon which they were constructed, was still preserved by indigenous sacred imagery in the churches.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese were constructing Neo-Renaissance, Neo-Classical and Baroque churches designed by European architects in Goa and other trading ports. Goa was the first Jesuit province outside Europe and some of the oldest Jesuit structures were erected there, some preceding the Gesù in Rome (1568–1575) (Osswald 2011). Italian influences were pre-eminent in ecclesiastical art of the sixteenth century, and many Goan churches reflected Italian architectural concepts in the design of their facades and the proportional systems of their interiors. These were largely based upon architectural treatises by Leon Battista Alberti, Giacomo da Vignola, Sebastian Serlio and Andrea Palladio, disseminated throughout the Portuguese overseas missions from the second half of the sixteenth century¹⁰.

The Jesuit Basilica of the Bom Jesus (1594–1605) (Figure 22), for example, has the typical Jesuit facade, with a three-part pediment, voluted sides and a curved center.

Figure 22. Basilica of Bom Jesus, Goa, 1594–1605, and Mauro Codussi, San Michele in Isola, Venetian Lagoon, 1469–78.

The Lombard–Venetian motif of conch shells framing the gable were a Lombard–Venetian motif introduced by Mauro Codussi in Michele in Isola (1469–1478). Designs by Alberti are reflected in the arched doorway flanked by paired columns and *oculi*. Although interior woodcarving in the Basilica of the Bom Jesus, as noted above, was largely executed by local artists, some major works were executed by Italians¹¹. Most famous is the mausoleum of Francisco Xavier (d. 1552), co-founder of the Jesuit Order and instigator of the Inquisition. When the body arrived in Goa in the seventeenth century, it was placed in a casket made by Goan silversmiths who combined classical architectural motifs and Indian filigreed decoration (1636–1637). The marble mausoleum, designed and created in Florence by the sculptor Giovanni Battista Foggini, was subsequently shipped in pieces to the Goan basilica by the Grand Duke Cosimo III de’ Medici and reconstructed *in situ* by the Italian architect Placido Francesco Ramponi (1697). As in the case of the pulpit (Figure 9), nevertheless, the basilica’s polychrome woodcarvings represent Indian workmanship. Na-

tive artisans and labor were involved in its construction, and much of the material with which the Bom Jesus was built, such as the laterite stones and timber, came from local sources. The façade, originally plastered in white, was built with the granite stones of Hindu temples that had been razed in Bassein (Maharashtra) for the construction of a Portuguese fort. As previously noted, the Portuguese practice of constructing churches and public buildings on rubble of destroyed temples is a testimony of their iconoclastic strategy (von Mitterwallner 1983). The recollection that the façade of Bom Jesus was constructed with stones of destroyed temples probably contributed to the fact that it became a pilgrimage site not only for Christians, but also for those of native religions (Xavier 1961).

Italian influence is again exemplified by the Theatine façade of Nossa Senhora da Divina Providencia (São Cajetan, 1656–1672), constructed under the supervision of the Italian architects, Carlo Ferrarini and Francesco Maria Milazzo. Although the plan is thought to derive from that of the sanctuary of the Madonna della Ghiara, in Reggio Emilia, it is famous for the façade that derives from Carlo Maderno's façade for St. Peter's Basilica (Figure 23)¹².

Figure 23. Church of Nossa Senhora da Divina Providencia, Goa, 1656–1672; Carlo Maderno, design for façade of St. Peter's Basilica, with towers (right above) and executed façade (below), Vatican, 1608–1614.

The architects worked from a design that included bell-towers on the extended façade, as seen in projects submitted by Carlo Maderno, Carlo Rainaldi and Gian Lorenzo Bernini. They were unaware that one of St. Peter's towers had been partially constructed and then demolished due to the marshy foundations of the façade. Less obvious is the adoption of minor decorative elements derived from Hindu temple architecture. The church of Nossa Senhora da Divina Providencia has several large, rectangular windows with balustrades on the second floor of the façade, which are formed by Hindu amalaka-shaped projections¹³. Another unusual feature of the church is a deep well located directly beneath the dome and marked by a raised square platform. This has led to the belief that the site was once occupied by a holy temple tank traditionally built as part of a Hindu temple complex.

We have seen that indigenous traditions and sacred imagery were not forgotten. The ground upon which temples had been constructed was considered sacred by Indian worshipers, and they encouraged the conservation of their traditional beliefs and rituals *in situ*. The primordial sanctity of demolished temples was therefore preserved by the survival or revival of indigenous imagery in the churches.

5. The St. Thomas Christians: Cultural Inheritance and Artistic Hybridity

In the Mylapore district of Chennai, a monument was constructed over demolished temples in the sixteenth century to commemorate the martyrdom and supposed interment of St. Thomas the Apostle (d.72 CE)¹⁴. Mylapore, site of the sacred shrine of St. Thomas, became an inter-religious site revered by Hindus, Muslims and Christians. When it was first documented between the third and sixth century CE, its original name was Mayilapuram (city of the peacock) derived from *Mayil*, the Tamil word for peacock. Although it was a Christian apostolic shrine, it was also the object of devotion for Muslims, as documented by the Venetian merchant Marco Polo (1296) and other medieval writers¹⁵. By the early fourteenth century, the St. Thomas shrine had become a popular destination of Muslim pilgrimage. The Portuguese captured the sacred shrine from the Thomas Christians of the East Syrian Church and built the original edifice of San Thome in 1547. It was rebuilt in 1893 in a Neo-Gothic style by the British. As a pilgrimage site for Christians and Hindus, San Thome adopted Hindu rites and incorporated traditional Buddhist and Hindu symbolism in the art of its interior (Figure 24).

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 24. (a,b) Nineteenth-century altar of the Church of San Thome, Mylapore (1893), Chennai, and (c) Bishop Theodore's sarcophagus (5th century), Sant'Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna.

Despite transformations of the original shrine, it also preserved iconographic elements that originated with the St. Thomas Christians, preceding the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Their churches amazingly resembled temples, both in architecture and sculpture. The pedestal of the St. Thomas cross is similar to the sacrificial stone found inside brahminical temples. It is placed in front of the *garbhagriha* (*sanctum sanctorum*) of the temple. These structures have a moulding similar to that of the temple. Some of the central niches have the *ghanadvara* (false door) which is topped by the typical Hindu *makara torana*, an arch formed by mythical zoomorphic hybrids that is ubiquitous in Indian temple architecture (Varghese 2018). Although this fascinating theme goes beyond the scope of this paper, some brief references will exemplify its relevance to the present discourse on intercultural hybridity. On the main altar of the church of San Thome, the crucified Christ is shown rising above a lotus and flanked by peacocks. This iconography does not appear in Latin churches but has precedents in Indo-Syriac art of the Thomas Christians. On the granite pedestals of monumental free-standing crosses, such as that of the Kaduthurthy Mahadeva Temple (Kottayam, Kerala), for example, peacocks and peahens are prominently depicted and lotus flowers are carved below the empty cross¹⁶. Scholars have suggested that the pre-Portuguese Churches of St. Thomas Christians had wooden crosses in front of them, but most of the existing Indo-Syrian stone crosses were constructed after the 16th century.

The lotus (*padma*), as Indian symbol of fecundity, purity, creation and rebirth, was ubiquitous in Indian art. It was held by the Bodhisattava Padmapani (“lotus in hand”), who embodied Buddhist compassion, and it was ubiquitous as an attribute of major Hindu deities, particularly the fertility goddess Lakshmi—often identified with the personification of Padma herself. Another notable piece in this context is the traditional image of Brahma seated on the lotus pedestal, as deity of creation and cyclical rebirth following endless repetitive cosmic dissolutions.

The sacred peacock was often conceived as a symbol of purity in Indian myths. In his enlightening study of ostrich eggs and peacock feathers in Mediterranean cultures, Nile Green explored the nature of cultural inheritance and exchange between Christianity and Islam (Green 2006). He noted that “the peacock feather fan serves as an important ritual object among the long-established Indian Christian community in Kerala on the Indian Ocean littoral, where it is known as an *aala vattam*”. He likewise mentioned that the peacock played a central role in the South Indian cult of St. Thomas the Apostle, who was said to have been killed mistakenly in the form of a peacock (Green 2006). In another local legend that was diffused in medieval Islamic texts and survives in popular oral tradition, the peahen was said to conceive from the tears of the peacock in his ecstatic mating dance, thus representing its purity in a myth of immaculate conception (Green 2006). Green also mentioned that “the feathers of the peacock were well-known for their medicinal uses and featured in numerous popular beliefs and customs, including their use as bookmarks for the Qur’an” (Green 2006). The latter custom is still practiced by Muslims in India. Peacocks, as an early Christian symbol of eternal life, were associated with the ancient belief that the flesh of the peacock does not decay¹⁷. In Latin paleo-Christian art, they were figured in pairs flanking the cross, the Chi-Rho (XP) symbol, or a symbol of paradise, such as a *kantharos*, tree of life or fountain. Although the image of the Crucified Christ was not portrayed together with the Indian bird, even on the traditional St. Thomas cross, the concept of the peacock’s sanctity would not be strange to a Christian worshiper, for whom it represented immortality and Christ’s resurrection. This conflated iconography beautifully demonstrates how Muslim, Hindu and pre-colonial Indo-Syriac Christian imagery could be metaphorically interrelated, while still preserving their original meanings.

6. Conclusions

As explained in my introduction, hybridity is used in this study as a comprehensive umbrella term. The particular cases included represent different phenomena and diverse approaches to the complexities of intercultural encounters. It should be underlined, how-

ever, that most of the artistic encounters discussed here were not a product of intentional reciprocity and did not involve deliberate multidirectional flows of cultures. The wooden sculptures of Goa exemplified the fusion of local materials, native styles and traditional artistic techniques with Christian themes. The human–serpent hybrids on Goan pulpits, on the other hand, reflect a coalescence or conjunction of unrelated and even conflicting iconographic perceptions. The Portuguese, motivated primarily by religious fanaticism, rather than political aspirations, rejected all forms of indigenous vernacular art and constructed churches that were European in style, but embodied local materials and rubble of destroyed churches. Only in the eighteenth century, with the flowering of Victorian architecture and orientalist fashions, did British architects adopt indigenous architectural elements in the so-called Indo-Saracenic architecture. This “iconic turn” typically demonstrated that any aesthetic appreciation of Indian art and architecture depended on a purely formalistic approach, entailing a modernistic separation of form and content that is divorced from political, religious and cultural experience (Moxey 2008).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Goa was ruled by Muslim invaders of the Deccan from 1312 to 1367. The city was then annexed by the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagar and was later conquered by the Bahmanī sultanate, which founded Old Goa on the island in 1440. Arabs had the monopoly of trade in the Malabar Coast until the arrival of the Portuguese. The Southwestern Coast of India was known as “Malabar” (a mixture of Tamil Malai and Arabic or Persian Barr, most probably) to the West Asians. Persian scholar al-Biruni (973–1052 AD) appears to have been the first to call the region by this name.
- ² Ivory was commonly used in the local production of inlaid furniture, see: Pedro Dias, *Mobiliário indo-português* (Coimbra: Moreira de Cónegos, 2013).
- ³ See note 13 and John Irwin, “Indian Textile Trade of the Seventeenth Century,” Part 4, Foreign Influences,” *Journal of Indian Textile History* 4 (1959); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean*, Cambridge, 1985; James Boyajian, *Portuguese Trade in Asia under the Habsburgs, 1580–1640* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Hugo Miguel Crespo, *Jewels from the India Run*, Lisbon, Fundação Oriente, Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Museu do Oriente Lisbon 2015.
- ⁴ Early Indian texts on architecture such as the Vishnudharmottara Purana (6th c. CE) and the Brihat-samhita of Varahmihiri (7th c. CE) laid down details regarding the choice of suitable wood and the ceremony of procuring timber from the forest.
- ⁵ The standard pigments were malachite, terra verte, red ochre, red lead, deep red lac dye, yellow ochre, ultramarine and kaolin or chalk. See O.P. Agrawal, “A Study of Indian Polychrome Wooden Sculpture Agrawal, *Studies in Conservation*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (May, 1971), pp. 56–68.
- ⁶ This has been discussed, for example, in the 15th Triennial Conference, New Delhi: 22–26 (September 2008): Preprints, by ICOM Committee for Conservation. Meeting, Vol. II, p. 933.
- ⁷ Simona Cohen, “Animal Heads and Hybrid Creatures: The Case of the San Lorenzo Lavabo”, in *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2008, pp. 195–239.
- ⁸ Jean Philippe Vogel, *Indian Serpent-lore: Or, The Nāgas in Hindu Legend and Art*, Probsthain, 1926; Indological Book House Edition, 1972. Esteban García Brosseau’s, “Nagas, Naginis y Grutescos: La iconografía fantástica de los púlpitos indoportugueses de Goa, Daman y Diu en los siglos XVII y XVIII” (PhD. Diss., UNAM, Mexico City, 2012). See Zupanov, “The Pulpit Trap”, pp. 298–315. and Midhun C. Sekhar, “Naga cult in Kerala”, in *Kerala Naga Worship*, Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute Thesis, chp. 4, 2015: <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/nagacultinkerala> (accessed on 20 July 2021).
- ⁹ Naga representation is seen also in the wooden brackets of balikkal- maṇḍapa of the Thiruvanchikkulam Śiva Temple in Kerala (9th & 12th centuries).
- ¹⁰ See Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art in the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America*, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2001; regarding the ‘Jesuit Style’, pp. 43–51; De Azevedo, “Churches of Goa”, pp. 3–6; António Nunes Pereira, “Re-naissance in Goa: Proportional Systems in Two Churches of the Sixteenth Century,” Presented at Nexus 2010: Relationships Between Architecture and Mathematics, Porto, 13–15 June 2010, *Nexus Network Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (2011), pp. 373–96; Osswald, “Jesuit Art in Goa,” 263, pp. 274–76; L.B. Alberti (*De re edificatoria*, written between 1443 and 1452, published 1485);

- Sebastiano Serlio (*Tutte l'opera d'architettura et prospettiva*, Venezia, 1537), and Andrea Palladio (*Le Antichità di Roma*, Roma, 1554 and *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, Venezia, 1570).
- 11 e.g., The original ceiling was painted by the Florentine Bartolomeo Fontebuoni between 1613 and 1617.
- 12 Seventeenth century travelers Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri (*Viaggi per Europa*, 1693) and Pietro Della Valle (*Viaggi*, 1650–63) also likened the church to Sant'Andrea della Valle, which is the seat of the Theatine order. Regarding their writings on India, see Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters, A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, (1977) 1992, 28–30, 40 and Nathalie Hester, *Literature and Identity in Italian Baroque Travel Writing*, Routledge, (2016): chp. 2.
- 13 An amalaka (Sanskrit) is a segmented or notched stone disk, usually with ridges on the rim, located on the top of a Hindu temple's shikhara or main tower.
- 14 Portuguese records mention the demolishing of pagodas (temples) of Meliahpor. A shiva temple had been constructed there in the 7th century.
- 15 The Franco-Venetian *Livre des Merveilles du Monde* or *Devisement du Monde*, written in 1298–1299, was a collaboration between Marco Polo and a professional writer of romances, Rustichello of Pisa; Among the early translations was the Latin *Iter Marci Pauli Veneti*, made by the Dominican brother Francesco Pipino in 1302. See Louis Hambis (ed.), *Marco Polo, La Description du Monde*, Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1955, 256; E. R. Hambye, "Saint Thomas the Apostle, India and Mylapore: Two Little Known Documents," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 23, Part I (1960), pp. 104–10, esp. 108 for English translation of the quotation. See also Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1939), pp. 364–65. See Nile Green, "Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers: Sacred Objects as Cultural Exchange between Christianity and Islam," *Al-Masaq*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (March 2006), esp. 42–47, 56–57.
- 16 See Varghese, "Plaza Crosses of St. Thomas Christians," 4 and Carlo G. Cereti, Luca M. Olivieri and f. Joseph Vazhuthanapally, "The Problem of the Saint Thomas Crosses and Related Questions: Epigraphical Survey and Preliminary Research," *East and West*, Vol. 52, No. 1/4 (December 2002), pp. 285–310.
- 17 See e.g., St. Augustine, *Civitate Dei*, Book 21 Chapter 4. trans. H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 968. It is also associated with the resurrection of Christ because it sheds its old feathers and grows new ones each year.

References

- Dale, Thomas E. A. 2001. Monsters, Corporeal Deformities, and Phantasms in the Cloister of St-Michel-de-Cuxa. *The Art Bulletin* 83: 402–36. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Dean, Carolyn, and Dana Leibsohn. 2003. Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America. *Colonial Latin American Review* 12: 5–35. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Dhaky, Madhusudan A. 2013. The Vyala Figures on the Medieval Temples of India. *Religions of South Asia* 7: 27–43.
- Doniger, Wendy. 2009. *The Hindus, an Alternative History*. New York: Penguin Press, p. 43.
- Gusella, Francesco. 2019. New Jesuit Sources on the Iconography of the Good Shepherd Rockery from Portuguese India: The Garden of Shepherds of Miguel de Almeida (1658). *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 6: 577–97. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Green, Nile. 2006. Ostrich eggs and peacock feathers: Sacred objects as cultural exchange between Christianity and Islam. *Al-Masaq* 18: 27–78. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Henn, Alexander. 2014. *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Henn, Alexander. 2018. Shrines of Goa: Iconographic Formation and Popular Appeal. *South Asian Interdisciplinary Journal* 18: 21–22. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Mitter. 1992. *Much Maligned Monsters, a History of European Reactions to Indian Art*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- von Mitterwallner, Gritli. 1983. Testimonials of Heroism: Memorial Stones and Structures. *Goa: Cultural Patterns* 35: 41–52.
- Moxey, Keith. 2008. Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn. *Journal of Visual Culture* 7: 131–46. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Moxey, Keith. 2013. A "virtual cosmopolis": Partha Mitter in conversation with Keith Moxey. *The Art Bulletin* 95: 381–92. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Osswald, Cristina. 2011. Jesuit Art in Goa between 1542 and 1655: From Modo Nostro to Modo Goano. In *Reinterpreting Indian Ocean Worlds: Essays in Honour of Kirti N. Chaudhur*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, chp. 10. pp. 255–86.
- Malekandathil, Pius. 2012. Merchants, Markets and Commodities: Some Aspects of Portuguese Commerce with Malabar. In *The Portuguese, Indian Ocean and European Bridgeheads, 1500–1800: Festschrift in Honour of Prof. K.S. Mathew*. Edited by Pius Malekandathil T. and Jamal Mohammed. Muvattupuzha: Mar Mathews Press.
- Malekandathil, Pius. 2019. *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean*, Revised ed. Delhi: Primus Books.
- Rubiés, Joan-Pau. 2002. *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. 2004. *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tarabou, Gilles. 2015. *Spots of Wilderness. 'Nature' in the Hindu Temples of Kerala*. Edited by Fabrizio Serra. Available online: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01306640/document> (accessed on 5 August 2021).
- Varghese, Barnett. 2018. Plaza Crosses of St. Thomas Christians. Overview, July 2018. Available online: <https://www.sahapedia.org/plaza-crosses-of-st-thomas-christians> (accessed on 20 July 2021).

- Xavier, Felipe Neri. 1961. *Resumo Historico Da Maravilhosa Vida, Conversões, e Milagres de S. Francisco Xavier, Apostolo, Defensor, e Patrono Das Índias: Segunda Edição*, [Historical Resume of the Marvelous Life, Conversions, and Miracles of Francis Xavier, Apostle, Defender, and Patron of the Indies, 2nd Ed.]. Novo Goa: Impresa Nacional, p. 406.
- Zupanov, Ines G. 2015a. The Pulpit Trap: Possession and Personhood in Colonial Goa. *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 65: 298–315. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Zupanov, Ines G. 2015b. The pulpit trap. In *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Peabody Museum Press, p. 299.