Archipel

Études interdisciplinaires sur le monde insulindien

94 | 2017

Varia

Balthazar : Un prince de Timor en Chine, en Amérique et en Europe au XVIII^e siècle

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/archipel/466>

DOI: 10.4000/archipel.466

ISSN: 2104-3655

Publisher

Association Archipel

Printed version

Date of publication: 6 December 2017

Number of pages: 231-232

ISBN: 978-2-910513-78-8

ISSN: 0044-8613

Electronic reference

Hans Hägerdal, « Balthazar : Un prince de Timor en Chine, en Amérique et en Europe au XVIII^e siècle », *Archipel* [Online], 94 | 2017, Online since 06 December 2017, connection on 25 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/archipel/466> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/archipel.466>

Association Archipel

Frédéric Durand, *Balthazar : Un prince de Timor en Chine, en Amérique et en Europe au XVIII^e siècle*. Paris, Les Indes savantes, 2015, 370 pages, ill., cartes. ISBN 978-2-84654-408-5

“In the streets of Paris, everyone has met a small man with copper-coloured face, who furthermore wears a black *brandebourgs* costume, with his hat under the arm, sword at his side, red-heeled shoes... one is far from thinking that one jostles a sovereign, a Majesty as legitimate as the one sitting on the throne in Versailles: still, this is the truth.” The second-hand account of the French journalist G. Touchard-Lafosse testifies to the modest fame that Pascal-Jean-Balthazar Celse (c. 1737-1791), putative Prince of Timor and Solor, enjoyed in the waning days of l’Ancien régime. The picaresque story of the pretender to two distant Southeast Asian islands was virtually forgotten for the most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In modern times, however, a small body of studies on Balthazar has surfaced, notably by Anne Lombard-Jourdan. In the present work, the indefatigable scholar of East Timor, Frédéric Durand has taken up the pen with astonishing results. In fact there exists a substantial amount of sources related to Balthazar, including autobiographical manuscripts and even a lengthy (and since long forgotten) novel. Durand has combed fourteen archives in four countries in order to piece together the life of the prince over more than 300 pages of text.

According to his own accounts, Balthazar was born as the son of Gaspar, king and *tenente general* of Timor and Solor who resided in Animata, a place in the present-day Oecussi enclave in East Timor. A certain Dominican priest, Inácio de São José, persuaded the father to bring the young Balthazar, about twelve years old, to Europe for educational purpose. The prince and his tutor eventually arrived to Lorient in France in 1750; there, however, the Dominican treacherously left with the valuables brought on the journey, leaving Balthazar to his fate. Over the next years the young man survived by tending cattle and serving as a kitchen aid in François Thurot’s seaborne expedition during the Seven Years War, at one occasion being nearly sold as a slave. In the 1760s his royal background became known among French persons of standing, eventually including even the Dauphin. While submitting numerous requests and suggestions to the authorities, he was able to live a decent life for periods, and was supported by various aristocrats and celebrities. The outbreak of the Revolution nevertheless reduced him to begging in the streets, and he finally died an obscure death at Hôtel-Dieu in Paris in 1791. All this is described with great verve and detail by Durand, leaving the impression of a well-mannered and persistent, but not always truthful gentleman.

For the student of East Timor, the crucial issue is naturally whether the claims of Balthazar can be substantiated. There were in fact a number of obvious imposters in this period, claiming to be kings or princes of exotic lands such as Angola and Macau. As Durand points out, the accounts he gave

of his life include several contradictions and obvious errors, and towards the end of his life he invented romantic and fabulous stories about his life on Timor, an island little known in Western literature. A Timorese connection is nevertheless likely. There was indeed a “Black Portuguese” leader Gaspar da Costa who dominated politics on Timor until his violent demise in 1749, held the title *tenente general*, and resided in Animata – information unlikely to have been known in Europe. I may add that the name of Balthazar’s alleged love interest Inamaï contains the Dawan (West Timorese) word for “Mrs”, “mother” (*ina*). Moreover a few traveler’s accounts seemed to corroborate Balthazar’s claim. On the other hand, an inquiry to the Black Portuguese elite undertaken with the help of the Dutch VOC in 1779 implied that he was rather the son of a Chinese *peranakan* trader and a Timorese slave woman. After weighing the pieces of evidence against each other, Durand finds it more probable that Balthazar was actually the son of Gaspar da Costa.

While his origins remain somewhat enigmatic, his activities in France can be documented in some detail and were in fact not inconsequential. His letter to Voltaire with a bid to support his claim went unheeded since the philosopher doubted the prince’s story. However, Durand shows that Balthazar’s proposals to the royal government to equip vessels bound for Timor had their effect. Newspapers all around Europe wrote about the Prince of Timor. The French East India Company reacted angrily since it felt its monopoly threatened, not without reason. In fact, Louis XV lifted the monopoly in 1769 since the circumstances – including Balthazar’s memoirs – showed that it was detrimental to French trade in the east. Moreover, during the 1770s Balthazar was at the center of ultimately abortive plans by certain politicians to establish French authority on Timor and dispose with the weak Portuguese presence.

In sum, this is a highly captivating piece of historical detective work. It is empirical rather than analytical, and more could certainly have been done in terms of contextualization; postcolonial studies about Western images of race and the exotic Other have abounded in recent years, but have been little used. Nevertheless, while the modest prince remains a marginal figure in the colourful world of the late Ancien régime, the work has an interest in illustrating how a dark-skinned person of somewhat obscure origins was able to interact with a wide range of people in the highest echelons of society and win a great deal of confidence for his cause. Through the detailed account of Durand we get to know a series of political, military, commercial and cultural personalities at close range, whose common denominator was an individual who acted in a world where exoticism could very well be used by the exoticized objects to their advantage.

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