Gastronomic Aesthetics of a French Catholic Missionary during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya

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Abstract

Much has been written about British accounts of colonial Malaya from the perspective of travellers, explorers, novelists, historians and many more. Much also exists on the Malaysian responses to life under the Japanese Occupation. Yet there is a lacuna on scholarship on other European communities that existed alongside the British in Malaya. This paper traces the French oeuvre of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, especially within the context of food and religiosity. Focusing on a diary written by a French Catholic missionary in Malaya during the Japanese Occupation, it interrogates the aspect of Catholic gastronomic aesthetics through the concepts of the imaginary of incorporation as well as biblical metaphors of commensality. In so doing, the paper presents a different and novel angle to existing conversations on European networks of knowledge production on colonial Malaya, especially within the context of food and colonialism, revealing that not all frameworks of the operations of European colonialism are the same. It also significantly intervenes into and alters the vestiges of a colonial palate that has heretofore remained predominantly British through the foregrounding of a French Catholic cultural perspective that perceptibly adds its own distinct flavour.

Keywords: Japanese Occupation; British Malaya; French missionaries; Food colonialism; Catholicism; Gastronomic aesthetics

Introduction

Much has been written about the role of food and its place within the dialectics of imperialism and identity constructions and reconstructions. Michael Dietler (2007: 218) has pointed out that “intimate links between food practices and the embodiment of identity and between commensality and politics make the domain of food an important arena for the working out of colonial struggles over the colonization of consciousness and strategies of appropriation and resistance”. He further adds that “food has been a consistently prominent material medium”

both for the operation and the enactment of colonialism (219). Notably, commensality within colonialism operated on the mechanism of the politics of Othering, and the operations of the politics of exclusion, in terms of who was excluded from the table. On the other hand, the appropriation of raw material including spices available at various European colonies in the East food ironically led to the incorporation of ingredients used by those who were otherwise discounted at the table. One of the most visible operations of this, especially in the context of British colonialism, can be seen in the item that is called curry and the position that it gained in the British colonial imaginary (as well as its far-reaching influences in the present). Uma Narayan (1996: 65) has elucidated the way in which the term curry powder became a “'fabricated' entity, the logic of colonial commerce imposing a term that signified a particular type of dish onto a specific mixture of spices, that then became a fixed and familiar product”. The term masala, she argues, which was the mixture of spices, was pushed to the background and overpowered by the homogenizing curry powder. In the context of British governed Nigeria of the 1900s, Jonathan Robins (2010: 458) argues that “colonial rule was constructed and contested in the kitchen as much as it was on the battlefield” specially as British women took it upon themselves to contribute to the colonial mission through a “colonial pedagogy” to train Nigerian domestic aids to reshape their food “to suit British ideas about taste, nutrition, and civilization”. The latter enunciates the extensive infiltration of Western palates into the local gastronomic environment of most countries with a history of colonisation. Jean Duruz writes that the “'British' style of cooking and eating” was easily facilitated in 1930s Singapore and Malaya through “advances in western mass-production, refrigeration technologies and international distribution” compellingly “selling tastes of 'home' and meanings of western cosmopolitanism to expatriate communities of 'European' origin” (Duruz 2006 : 103). These worked to fortify earlier operations of colonialism that were already put into place by the employment and training of local domestic cooks (often of Chinese Hainanese descent) to

prepare the host of European dishes that they were accustomed to, becoming as much “colonial agents through whom colonizers readily stamped their authority and constructed instruments of colonial rule" (Leong-Salobir 2015 : 60), reiterating Robins’ point above. Yet, alongside such dominant footfalls, were also the enactments of everyday strategies of resisting overt colonial processes through nativized adoptions and appropriations of colonial food. In the context of Malaya for instance, one needs to think only of the kaya toast, a modified take on the British bread and butter toast. The catalyst for this has been traced to the onset of the Japanese invasion of Malaya that led to the fleeing of the British, and the subsequent abandonment of their domestic helpers who would go on to establish local coffeeshops or kopitiams (Lai 2016: 109) in the post-war years, innovatively appropriating western dishes with localised or nativized flavour. This last point is crucial to this paper as it reflects on Europeans and the changing attitudes towards food during the Japanese invasion of Malaya.

The trajectory of Japanese invasion of Malaya is notably traced to the infiltration of their military forces overland via the northern most states of the Peninsula. However, the catalyst for this was an agreement between Japan and the Vichy government of France that enabled Japanese forces to be placed in Indochina, led to Japanese-Thai alliances, and eventually paved the way for the advancement of the Japanese army into various parts of Southeast Asia, including Malaya (Kratoska 2018 [1998], p.2). The years of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, ranging from 1941 to1945 are quintessentially seen as a period of strife, infused in the dark memories of atrocious crimes against humanity that run deep for many. Coupled with this were attendant socio-economic struggles, most significantly that of a profound food crisis, exacerbated in most part by Japanese appropriation of staple food such as rice for military use. While life under Japanese rule in Malaya was in most parts truly debilitating, there were threads of subsistence and survival that existed alongside, pointing to

the tenacity of human endurance. Among these is the sub-plot of communal strategies for survival amidst severe food shortage, steeped in the dialectics of both hardship on one level and self-sufficiency on the other.

Pausing on these two points of departure, that of the role of France in the road to Japanese Occupation and the major trope of food shortage in the repository of the nation's collective unconscious of this very historical period, this paper weaves these two threads together as it focuses on the French perspective of life under Japanese Occupation in Malaya.

The *longue durée* of food and the Japanese Occupation of Malaya

The period of the Japanese Occupation in Malaya can most perceptibly be seen within the context of Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*, of the "multiplicity of temporalities and of the exceptional importance of the long term" that result in not one strand of history but "a history of a hundred faces" (Braudel and Wallerstein 2009: 173). Of these faces, the most common visage carried the weight of the trauma of Japanese militancy. Paul Kratoska speaks of the initial moments of Japanese invasion where the people of Malaya were caught in the crossfires of "Britain's scorched earth policy" standing at the threshold of what would be a long episode of gruesome death and destruction, as they "groped in piles of broken masonry and smashed timbers for the bodies of lost relatives" (Kratoska 2018: p.48). Cheah Boon Kheng (2012) notes, within two weeks of their occupation of Malaya, the Japanese army had already "began to enforce order by means of summary executions: offenders were shot and beheaded on the spot, their heads displayed on pikes at prominent points in the city, particularly at marketplaces" (21). The Chinese community was especially vulnerable due to the events of the Sino-Japanese war, resulting in indiscriminate "large scale massacres of Chinese villages and settlements" across the Malay Peninsula and "anyone found hoarding goods for which he could not give a satisfactory explanation was hauled away to be shot" (Cheah 2012: 23). The spectres of these

have given rise to many renditions of life lived and extinguished under Japanese rule from historians like Cheah and Kratoska as well as a host of memoirists, each painstakingly drawing out the devastating experiences of the local community, some from first-hand accounts, others from a legacy of inherited memories.

Yet, as much as terror reigned supreme for many, seeds of resistance were also sown among many who saw the fallibility of the British as they fell at the hands of the Japanese and turned to embrace the many emerging ideologies of Asian nationalist uprising. Nestled in the middle of this dialectical continuum between trauma and resistance was the micronarrative of food and its own *longue durée*. The catalyst for this was the abrupt removal of what had been an effortless access to rice, a staple in the lives of the Malayan people, coupled with the fact that "areas which before the war had relied on trade for many basic foodstuff were now subject to serious and growing food shortages", effectively removing a "safety valve" that had dire consequences on regional food security (Huff 2020: 247). The centrality of food security in the Japanese chapter of Malayan history is foregrounded in Cheah's reference earlier to the punishments towards civil disobedience in the early days of Japanese invasion, most prominently for hoarding goods, as well as the role of the marketplace as a central setting for making a public example of the consequences of such dissent.

European communities present in Malaya at that time were equally vulnerable, with a fall from grace that was perceptibly from a higher altitude, given that many would have grown accustomed to the Orientalist paradigm of "high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European colonialism" (Said 2003 [1978] :2), which included all areas of social life, including that of food as shown at the outset. Most discussions on food and the colonial context in Malaya have notably privileged the British perspective and influence, based on their overt dominance of governance both politically and socially. Yet, to

return to the aspect of the longue durée and the trope of a "history of a hundred faces", we should be cognisant of the many other European communities who had ventured across the globe in the age of imperial expansion. As noted above, the French community is of particular interest to this paper, whose presence ran parallel to the British in Malaya.

French Catholic culinary encounters in Colonial Malaya

French presence in Malaya was mainly due to two main factors, mission and development and the plantation sector. Of the two, mission development had a more sustainable impact on Malaysian society especially via the Société des Missions Étrangères (henceforth M.E.P). While the focus of the MEP was primarily on Siam and Indochina, conflict with the Buddhist rulers of Siam led to persecution and eventual refuge in the more accommodating shores of the Malay Peninsula. A key factor in this was "the realignment of the colonial map in the Malay Peninsula under British leadership in the early nineteenth century" and their skilful navigation of colonial conditions as well as local sultanates (Pillai and Brown 2018: 47). Perhaps a large part of the ease with which they engaged with local rulers could be due to the fact that early French missionaries had to circumnavigate the Portuguese Padroado who were jealously guarding their firm lock on evangelism in South East Asia, by "travelling with Muslims, for the most part, through India and across the Bay of Bengal to Siamese Tenasserim" (Reid : 63). A seminal event in the trajectory of the MEP in Malaya was the relocation of their flagship seminary, the Collège Général, from Ayuthia due to Siamese aggressions against the French. After a period of rather erratic movements, first within Siam itself, followed by a brief period in Cambodia and finally in Pondicherry, the seminary had to close its doors in 1782 (Reid: 69). Almost two decades later, in 1809, the newfound shores of Penang would become the site for the restoration of the Collège Général, as the French missionaries who had made their way to the island found it extremely conducive for communications with other mission posts across

Asia, both via land and sea routes (Reid 2020, 169). The seminary became a significant transregional institution with the congregation of seminarians from China, Vietnam, Burma and Malaya, administered by French missionaries. Were the nuances of everyday life, especially with reference to food as bound by the executive highhandedness of European attitudes central to the times or did French Catholic influences reveal a different flavour to life in the seminary?

Most of the material pertaining to missionary life in Malaya has remained primarily in French, with several translations in English emerging from time to time. Among these was what can be regarded as a seminal text on one of the earliest Tamil Catholic parishes in Malaya by MEP missionary René-Marie-Michel Fée, first published in French in 1892 and subsequently translated by the Malaya Catholic leader in 1935, offering crucial insights into early cross-cultural engagements in what was an embryonic multi-ethnic environment (Pillai 2020: 226). *The Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Societ*y (JMBRAS) has also played a role in publishing translated versions of French writings on Malaya. However, it is in the recent translation of a diary written during the Japanese occupation of Malaya by one of the French MEP Directors of the seminary that we witness full-bodied French impressions, engagements, and adventures of the culinary kind.

The discussion that follows traces in particular the ways in which selected entries reveal various trajectories of French encounters of the culinary kind ranging from the purely linguistic to more nuanced socio-cultural aspects, including particular Catholic overtones. The last is of particular significance as the diary emerges from the narrative imaginary of a French Catholic missionary. In view of this, the discussion will draw on Jean-Pierre Poulain's (2017 : 191) conceptualisation of the "gastronomic aesthetic" in the Catholic context and the dual elements of what he terms as the "imaginary of incorporation" that he sees as central to Catholic

relationship to food. This imaginary of incorporation is tied to the sacrament of the Eucharist that rests at the heart of Catholic religiosity. As he writes,

> In the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is based on the physical act of eating, the Christian religion as a whole has created the perfect model of man's relationship to the divine. In doing so, it uses the imaginary of incorporation, with its dual elements: I become what I eat, therefore, what I eat transforms the substance of my own body, and in consuming an item valued by a social group, and sharing this act of consumption, I become integrated into this community (Poulain 2017: 192)

The key aspects of transformation, consummation, sharing, and community foregrounded by Poulain are intrinsically revealed in the gastronomic aesthetics of the narrative imaginary of the French Catholic Collège Général Director. Coupled with these are also specific Catholic tropes of food, including that pertaining to sowing, reaping, gathering into barns, the miracle of the five loaves of bread and two fish as well as Catholic commensality in the metaphor of "dining at the table of the Lord". The combination of these discernibly intervene into and alter the vestiges of a colonial palate of Malaya that has heretofore remained predominantly British, especially with reference to the operation and the enactment of colonial power through food. Yet as much as it reveals the pliant borders of the French Catholic missionary as he presents various culinary activities in the seminary and by his student seminarians, there are limits to the Catholic gastronomic aesthetical transformation within the realm of religiosity.

French Catholic Gastronomic Aesthetics in the narrative imaginary of a missionary during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya

> Contrary to common belief, not all the 'White Men' disappeared during the war. Not all escaped before the arrival of the Japanese troops, or died fighting, or spent the war in the Changi prison in Singapore or some other prisoners 'camps. Some stayed put. Some were the Catholic missionaries. (Rouhan and Jardin 2020 : 12)

The above is from the preface by the translator of the Diary that is the focal point of this discussion, and it encapsulates the thrust of the argument that follows, that of other European perspectives and in particular the Catholic point of view. The very first entry that we encounter

reveals the atmosphere at the cusp of war as we read of negotiations between the seminary and the colonial British government on the matter of the latter's commandeering of seminary land for the installation of defence mechanisms of the island and arrangements for possible bomb shelters within the compound of the seminary. The next few entries alternate between preparations for war and internal administrative matters pertaining to the young seminarians enrolled at the college. We simultaneously learn of ordination of priests as well as their conscription for war, coupled with a pattern of entries on the departure of various seminarians under his charge, some having completed their studies, others leaving midway. As war descends on the island, the entries on food begin to gain momentum and with it the Catholic imaginary of incorporation. One of the very first points that the diarist raises is the administration of the kitchen, the nucleus of gastronomic activity. He speaks of the departure of the former cook, referring to him by name and proceeds to describe the new system that they have in place through an imaginary of incorporation that foregrounds a sense of a communal network:

> Following the retirement of Ah Kong, old cook and factotum who gave some 40 years of service to the College, a new system is introduced. A servant (Hin Voon) is the chief, responsible for all the servants; he has another servant as number two; one or the other must always be there. They are the only ones qualified to make purchases, place and receive orders. (56)

The reference to the role of each household aide or servant in the administrative structure of the kitchen and the details that he provides reveal the scenes in the wing that are often omitted in British colonial memoirs on life in Malaya. In the latter, we usually witness the act of serving, and rarely the process of acquiring groceries, much less the names of those involved, as the operation and subsequent enactment of colonialism was built on the structures of reification and alienation of the role of the local community in the colonialist imaginary. Countless diaries and memoirs of British colonial officials and travellers often "omitted to mention the times

when there was no shortage of supplies or when it was the servants who procured jungle fowl or sweet potatoes for the whole contingent" (Leong-Salobir 2015: 62). However, the French perspective that we read in the entry above integrates an awareness of the network of consumption and value as a community, revealing the subtleties of the Catholic imaginary of incorporation of the missionary scribe[1]. This aspect of incorporation is further extended when he continues thus :

> We do not go anymore to town every morning, like Ah Kong used to do, but from time to time one of the two Kapalas goes to town in the morning to see the prices and make special purchases. The College's car does not go anymore to town in the morning - when a servant goes there, he uses the trolley bus and he comes back with a rickshaw. (56)

The excerpt foregrounds the Catholic gastronomic aesthetics of communal incorporation on several levels. Firstly, the use of the collective pronoun "we" in the description of the entire process of procuring provisions by the seminary kitchen staff acknowledges their role in the sustenance of the seminary. Secondly, in filling in the lacuna of references to the intricacies of the everyday tasks of domestic staff in European households (or in this case an institution), the diarist effectively relocates them from the periphery to the centre of the colonial stage. In doing so he also expands the angle of the diverse operations and enactments of colonial actors from both sides of the divide. Thirdly, and perhaps most significant to the Catholic gastronomic aesthetic of the text, there is also the subtleties of that "special relationship between food and the sacred in Catholic thinking" (Poulain 2017: 191) that sits at the heart of this narrative of inclusion, that of the biblical trope of dining and inclusion, or more specifically, dining at the table of the Lord. The incorporation of the intricate details of the role of the domestic servants in the entire process of activities that contribute to the daily sustenance of the seminary, from marketplace to seminary dining table, effectively demonstrates the cognisance of the shared act of consumption.

The intertwined thread of biblical tropes and the gastronomic aesthetic lengthen further in a collective pattern of references to fishing, bread and barns that appear in the diary. Each reference accentuates the dual element of man's relationship to the divine as well as the dynamics of the social group he participates in. Twenty-five of these are dedicated to fishing alone, foregrounding the avid anglers amidst the community of seminarians as well as reeling in the parable of the multiplication of the two fish to feed the multitudes in a time of need. The students are often described as returning from their fishing expeditions with a bountiful catch, true benedictions in a time of war and the scarcity of food. This aspect is duly amplified throughout the diary as it accentuates the self-sufficiency of the seminary while frequently drawing in the biblical aspect of the divine promise of sowing and reaping. In a host of entries between December 19 and December 27 of 1941, the students go fishing almost every day, while the missionaries "work in the vegetable garden under the direction of Father Denarie" (64) eventually "start a henhouse" and rear goats as well. The accumulation of these as well as the abundant "good fishing" trips of their students ensures a food supply that he reiterates is always adequate and sufficient that enable them to share their meals sometimes with a Danish couple who are caretakers of an orphanage.

Collectively, these references significantly add another facet to the *longue durée* of food and the Japanese Occupation, which often emphasises the scarcity of rice and the rein of tapioca. While these are present too in the narrative, the foregrounding of the biblical metaphor of self-sufficiency and the rewards of reaping what you sow accentuate the Catholic gastronomic aesthetics of his narrative. Moreover, the generosity of meals that they extend to the Danes in turn brings in a harvest of its own as they bring them bread when they have had to do without it for a while. The latter point is significant, for, as much as Catholic gastronomic

aesthetics abound in the narrative imaginary, it remains keenly aware of the realities of the overall effects of war on the European staple, bread.

There are thirteen entries focused on bread, its scarcity and its replacement and eventual innovations, and an equal number dedicated to its central ingredient, flour. The entries reveal the dialectics of the liberty to innovate within the consuming of food in its social context and the constraints faced through some measure of inflexibility within the border lines of religiosity. When first faced with the scarcity of bread, the diarist tells us that they use the flour that they have within their provisions to "make *matefains* to replace the bread" (65). Matefains were essentially traditional French pancakes, usually filled with apples. As Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2016: 4) writes, of food during wartime, "one innovative strategy of coping with scarcity was effectively a return to former or traditional foodways. Another important strategy was barter and sharing within networks such as extended families, neighbourhoods, or particular communities." (4) Both of these aspects are revealed in the latter two entries presented above, of the sharing of bread by the Danes and the turn to the traditional French breakfast item of *matefains*. These episodes duly accentuate the *longue durée* of food in Malaya, served from the French *tureen* instead of the more dominant Wedgwood bowl. Yet there are some notable similarities in terms of the divisions between Europeans and its Others, reminding us that the narrative imaginary does emerge from a lens tinted by nineteenth century Eurocentrism. This seems more pronounced when the subject of the scarcity of bread is raised:

> In town, retail bread goes up (8 cents for ordinary bread). We still enjoy the old price (4½ cents) and consume 31 loaves a day - 25½ for the students and 5½ for the Fathers. It is said that flour will be unavailable soon. (70)

The entry above is significant on three levels. The first is the obvious distinction between bread consumed by the missionaries and that by the seminarians. While the reasons for this distinction are not clear, one might surmise that the seminarians consume less as a community than the

missionaries do, as part of their staple. The entry also draws attention to adaptation and the mechanics of Eurocentric cultural hegemony central to colonial Asian life of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as it was in the multitude of European colonies across the globe. The reference to the impending scarcity of flour in the last sentence of the entry is significant not only because of its impact on the supply of bread, which they will later show signs of innovation and adaptation but more so for its impact on Catholic religiosity, as the next entry demonstrates :

> We stop buying bread. The baker has no more flour, but the Sisters get more and provide enough for the Fathers. The students who until now had half a loaf every day for breakfast, stop having it and instead eat either some porridge or nasi krinh, or some tapioca. We still have three bags of flour for making *matefains* and bottled flour for making hosts. (74)

The passage reveals intricate dialogical intersections in the narrative imaginary of the diarist. There is the matter of Eurocentric divisions as well as the retreat to traditional cultural boundaries that dismantle some of the structures of Catholic commensality evident earlier. The seminarians settle back on their Asian fare, while the French missionaries continue to partake of the accustomed bread at the table. The reliance on the French nuns for the supply of flour foregrounds, yet again, the communal European cooperation in the time of war. Most significant however is the reference to the necessity of flour for the preparation of the hosts that are central in the sacrament of the Eucharist. It is within this context that we are reminded of the sacrosanct in the incorporation of food in the Catholic consciousness, and the constraints of adaptation and innovation. Yet, it remains the only exception, for as the entries proceed to unfold, we witness how the impact of war leads to various shifts from a solely French palate towards a more hybrid plate. Also significant is the increasing evidence of Catholic gastronomic aesthetics of commensality that dismantles the divisions between the French missionaries and their Asian seminarians as well as staff, as much as the occasional servings

of bread, *matefains*, "Sumatran potatoes", as well as "whiskey" and "claret" fade away from the daily menu.

Initially, the transformations remain rather close to the Eurocentric borders, as bread is replaced "with tapioca cakes or pancakes, then with ragi (millet) flour cakes" (77). However, as the war stretches on, the entries reveal the missionary sharing in several intriguing and adventurous culinary experiments, often spearheaded by the students, with increasing references to curry. He speaks of the bounty from "squirrel hunts" that are "enough to cook some excellent curries" (80), a "great feast of monkey curry" (82); the capture of two *musangs* (civet cats) that "make excellent curry" (142). Even one of the goats from their own husbandry, ends up "making a good curry dish", though the missionary is careful to clarify that the reason for the culling was because the animal "suddenly convulsed and we sacrificed her for fear of seeing her die" (155). In the last incident, Catholic gastronomic aesthetics emerge in terms of the biblical trope of the sacrifice of goats or rams, fortified by the ideology of as well as the effects of French Humanism on Catholic preachers, with its central focus on "charity, pity and clemency" as well as compassion and human companionship with Christ (Taylor 1997 : 130 -131).

The biblical trope of reaping and sowing traced earlier also remerges in the narrative imaginary, interlaced with the attendant nuances of Catholic charity and fellowship in the engagement between the missionary and his domestic servants. This is especially evident in the flow of events following the offering of missionary owned land for the servants to plant and sell tapioca as compensation for the lack of salary increments. These servants end up "earning thousands of dollars selling their tapioca" and show their gratitude, not only by treating the seminary community to a banquet or "Makan Besar" (118) as noted in nativized terms in the pages, but more importantly offer a donation of "$400 to the Community to buy

meat" and deposit "more money" with the seminary than the missionaries have in their own reserves (121).

As things get increasingly more challenging with every passing day of the war, the Catholic gastronomic aesthetics move to the background as echoes of the more general aspects of everyday life grow louder, with records of the increasing price of goods and the strategic manoeuvring to gain access to supplies. There are increasing references to rice, its scarcity, the continuous increase in price, as well as government rations. Cooking oil too takes precedence. In similar vein as other memoirs on the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, the diarist dedicates many entries to the various ramifications of military rule, especially with reference to the imprisonment of several missionaries as well as the tragic fate of some of the family members of the Malayan seminarians enrolled at the College, victims of bombings around the peninsular.

However, as the war draws to an end, we witness a return to the European smorgasbord that had been all but abandoned. There is the jubilant response to the reappearance of wheat flour in the markets : "Important arrival of wheat flour" (171), the frustration that they were "promised distribution of corned beef but nothing came (176) and the relief that "bakers are again selling wheat bread at twenty cents a pound of bread" and the contentment that they have "abundant distribution of Australian sausages, rather good quality, at low prices" (178). As Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska writes, "Wars are agents for change, but it is important to distinguish between short-term adaptation and longer-term transformations with regard to government policy, food production and individual habits" (4). The adoption of Asian culinary practices by the French missionaries seems certainly more of the short term, as revealed in the set of concluding entries presented above. As much as the narrative imaginary revealed the embracing of localised dishes and even unfamiliar and exotic curries, there seems to be almost a sigh of relief in the return to familiar European platters. However, bearing in mind that the

discursive imaginary is Catholic at its core, one of the very last entries discernibly interweaves the aspect of incorporation and the sacred relationship to food, this time with in the context of wine that is used for mass :

> For the first time since before the war, some Mass wine reaches us. This is Australian wine, made under the guidance of the Jesuits, very good and sweet, having only one disadvantage, that is, the cost of $3.15 a bottle (including $2 of duty!). (185)

As with the flour for the making of the host, wine too was crucial in the "food-related dimension of Eucharistic sacrifice" (Poulain 2017 :192) and the attention paid to this aspect towards the end of the diary foregrounds the Catholic gastronomic aesthetic once again, as much as it also points to the return of the Eurocentric predisposition. With this, the narrative persona returns to his heavily brocaded European vestments and turns to the pulpit of bread and wine, with curries and rice left once again to the seminarians at the further end of the banquet table.

Conclusion

The discussion has primarily sought to trace the aspect of the *longue durée* of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, especially in terms of what alternative patterns exist within the context of both food and religiosity. By choosing a diary written by a French Catholic missionary in Malaya during the Japanese Occupation, it sought a visage that has hovered in the background of the hundred faces of history that exist of this pivotal era. In so doing, it has filled in the lacuna of scholarship on other European communities that existed alongside the British in Malaya. Much has been written about British accounts of colonial Malaya from the perspective of travellers, explorers, novelists, historians and many more. Much also exists on the Malaysian responses to life under the Japanese Occupation. It also chose to focus on the aspect of food, which was a primary concern of all who experienced the effects of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya.

Yet, this paper was not merely about locating the French *oeuvre* on food during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya. Paying heed to the fact that the authorial persona of the diary in question was a French missionary, it proceeded to trace the aspect of Catholic gastronomic aesthetics as conceptualised by Jean-Pierre Poulain in terms of the relationship between food and the sacred. It especially drew on his argument on the imaginary of incorporation that sits at the heart of the sacrament of the Eucharist that is central to Catholic religiosity. This framework was consequently paired with Michael Dietler's framework on commensality and colonial politics within the domain of food practices and the dialectics of domination, resistance, adaptation and appropriation. Yet, mindful of the fact that French presence in Malaya was not within the context of colonial governance but rather primarily that of mission and development as well as capitalist agricultural ventures, and that author of the diary was a French Catholic missionary, the discussion consequently adapted the concept of commensality in the Catholic context. It attempted this by integrating the biblical trope of dining at the table of the Lord as well as a host of other tropes that emphasise the centrality of food and the sacred in Catholic consciousness. In so doing, the paper presents a different trajectory to existing conversations on both European networks of knowledge production on colonial Malaya, especially within the context of food and colonialism, revealing that not all frameworks of the operations of European colonialism are the same. Most significantly, the interrogation of the dialectics of Catholic gastronomic aesthetics revealed that as much as the Japanese Occupation led to the transformation of the French palate, there were spaces within the inner sanctum that remained sacrosanct. Having thus delved into the various arcs of the French and the close encounters of the culinary kind in Japanese occupied Malaya, this paper intervenes into and alters the vestiges of a colonial palate that has heretofore remained predominantly British. The foregrounding of French Catholic cultural nuances perceptibly adds its own distinct flavour. However, I wish to end with some modicum of caution, for the diary that has been the focal

point of the discussion is a translated version of original entries penned in French. As such, further exploration of the original text would be crucial in determining the dialogics and dialectics of food in translation.

Notes

1. Even French explorers in Malaya revealed a tendency to include the role of the indigenous guides in assisting with the procurement of food. For instance, in the recent translation of French explorer in Malaya, Jacques de Morgan, there is mention of native Sakai guides who " go to great lengths to be helpful. Some go fishing, other hunting and others go into the forests in search of medicinal plants to treat our illnesses" (de Morgan 2020: 44)

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