

**“From Tension to Cooperation: Complex Interactions  
Between British Orientalists and Indian Scholars in  
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► **To cite this version:**

Claire Gallien. “From Tension to Cooperation: Complex Interactions Between British Orientalists and Indian Scholars in Calcutta, 1784-1794”. Friendship, Conviviality, Hospitality. International Seminar for Junior Eighteenth-Century Scholars, Sep 2008, Pardubice, Czech Republic. pp.1-14. hal-00334448

**HAL Id: hal-00334448**

**<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00334448>**

Submitted on 26 Oct 2008

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“From Tension to Cooperation: The Interactions of British Orientalists with Indian Scholars in Calcutta, 1784-1794”

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In the prefaces to their Persian or Sanskrit dictionaries, in their official reports, in the footnotes of their dissertations, as well as in their personal correspondence and notebooks, British orientalist of the generation of Sir William Jones would make frequent reference to the Indian scholars with whom they interacted in the city of Calcutta or in other places in the provinces of Bengal and Bihar where, by the end of the eighteenth-century, they had settled.

Probably because Indian scholars represented a section of Indian society with which British orientalist frequently – if not most frequently – interacted, the orientalist’s writings evince an understanding of the differences, divisions and hierarchical relationships that existed at the time among an heterogeneous group of Indian scholars. In the glossary appended to his translation of *A Code of Gentoo Laws*, Nathaniel Halhed defines the term *moonshi*, also spelled *munshi*, as “a Writer or Secretary”, whereas he refers to the *bramin* as “The First original Tribe of Gentoos”, thus focusing on their cosmological rather than their contemporaneous function in society. The orthography of the term, like that of *moonshi*, is not yet fixed and is alternatively written as *brahman* or *brahmen*. Elizabeth Hamilton, whose pseudo-oriental epistolary fiction is based on the works of contemporary orientalist, mentions in her appended glossary the word *pundit*, which she describes as “A learned Bramin”.<sup>1</sup> The word, *pundit*, also written *pundeet* or *pandit*, is often described as a “Bramin lawyer” and indeed this definition dovetails with today’s use of the term. The Oxford English Dictionary reminds us that the word *pundit* refers to: “In India: a learned or wise person; a person with knowledge of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy, religion, and law; (also) a Hindu priest or teacher”. A *brahman* is, according to the same dictionary, “A member of the highest or priestly caste among the Hindus”, and a *munshi* is “In South Asia: a secretary; a language teacher”. Although the distinction between Persian and Hindu cultures is not noticeable here, British orientalist would normally refer to *moonshee* when talking about their Persian language teachers and to *brahman* or *pundit*, when referring to their Hindu interlocutors.

Indian scholars were a key figure in the construction of British knowledge of the Orient, although their participation was not systematically acknowledged. Proper names are scarcely mentioned in orientalist’s scholarly works. Most of the time, they refer to the generic class of “*brahman*” in order to validate their arguments. Indian priests or teachers function as signs of authenticity skillfully and sparsely sprinkled throughout the discourse of orientalist researchers.

Indeed, Indian scholars were not legally admitted into the circle of British orientalism until mid-nineteenth century. The procedures of the Asiatic Society founded in Calcutta in 1784 clearly states that Indians cannot be taken in as full members of the Society although their contributions to the annual publication of the *Asiatic Researches* are welcomed:

Much may, I am confident, be expected from the communications of learned natives, whether lawyers, physicians, or private scholars, who would eagerly, on the first invitation, send us their *Mekámát* and *Risálahs* on a variety of subjects; some for the sake of advancing general knowledge, but most of them from a desire, neither uncommon, nor unreasonable, of attracting notice, and recommending themselves to favour. With a view to avail ourselves of this disposition, and to bring their latent science under our inspection, it might be advisable to print and circulate a short memorial, in

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Hamilton, “Glossary” *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, 2 vols. (London, 1796) I: n. p.

*Persian* and *Hindi*, setting forth, in a style accommodated to their own habits and prejudices, the design of our institution; nor would it be impossible hereafter, to give a medal annually, with inscriptions, in *Persian* on one side and on the reverse in *Sanscrit*, as the prize merit, to the writer of the best essay or dissertation. To instruct others is the prescribed duty of learned *Brahmans*, and, if they be men of substance, without reward; but they would all be flattered with an honorary mark of distinction; and the *Mahomedans* have not only the permission, but the positive command, of their law-giver, *to search for learning even in the remotest parts of the globe.*<sup>2</sup>

As the president of the Society outlines by using the paradigm of the latent as opposed to the manifest, the role of British orientalist is to bring to light documents and information that, were it not for their unremitting dedication, would have been kept secret and lost in the dark cells of Indian priests. This official and impersonal discourse demonstrates the intellectual superiority and effective domination of British scholars over Indian scholars. Their talents were used in researching, compiling and translating materials, but their labour as well as intellectual abilities were not considered worth noticing. It was the British approach and treatment of this new source of knowledge, their curiosity and wisdom, which were ultimately praised.

This representation of their interactions tallies with Edward Said's argument, developed in *Orientalism* and later in *Culture and Empire*, according to which orientalism as a science was bound to collude with colonialism or to take in the history of European domination over the East. There is indeed clear evidence that, until the 1830s, the British believed that the colonization of India could not be sustained without a deep understanding of Indian society. In a letter of introduction to Charles Wilkins's translation of *The Bhagvat-Geeta*, Warren Hastings, governor general of India from 1773 to 1785, confirms that this collusion between native informants and native scholars is the best option the British have to maintain a firm grip on the newly conquered provinces:

Every accumulation of knowledge and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state [...] it attracts and conciliates distant affections; it lessens the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection; and it imprints on the hearts of our countrymen the sense of obligation and benevolence [...] Every instance which brings their real character home to observation will impress us with a more generous sense of feeling for their natural rights, and teach us to estimate them by the measure of our own. But such instances can only be obtained in their writings: and these will survive when the British dominion in India shall have long ceased to exist.<sup>3</sup>

This interpretation of orientalism as a discourse essentially written in a pattern of master and subject relationship has been analyzed by Sisir Kumar Das in *Sahibs and Munshis*, Kate Teltscher in *India Inscribed* and Bernard S. Cohn in *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*. Sisir Kumar Das writes that:

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<sup>2</sup> Sir William Jones, "The Second Anniversary Discourse, Delivered 24 February 1785, by the President" *The Works of Sir William Jones*, 6 vols. (London, 1799) I: 17.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Hastings, "Letter by Warren Hastings to Nathaniel Smith" *The Bhagvat-Geeta*, trans. Charles Wilkins (London, 1785) 13.

The Indian scholar knew he was superior to his European Master in respect of Indian Languages, [but] he was primarily an informant, a mere tool in the exercise of language teaching to be handled by others.<sup>4</sup>

Bernard S. Cohn concurs with Das's arguments and describes the approach of British orientalist in terms of "conquest of an epistemological space". He writes:

The Indians were sources or 'native informants' who supplied information, *viva voce*, in English or Indian languages; who collected, translated, and discussed texts and documents; and who wrote exegeses of various kinds that were classified, processed, and analyzed into knowledge *of* or *about* India.<sup>5</sup>

There is no question that some Indian scholars decided – or were forced – to work for the new colonial administration and that their work was used to further British domination over India. Nonetheless, by looking at other sources, unofficial accounts, private letters, personal notebooks, one realizes that the relationship between British orientalist and their Indian counterparts is more complex. The former are keen to show that they have developed strong ties with "their" Brahmins. Their accounts are not condescending but serve to corroborate the wisdom of intellectual partnerships between cultures. On the other side, the attitude of Indian scholars is not only or not always a passive one – as Das, Teltscher or Cohn indicate – but is also dictated by resistance to European demands as well as by willful collaboration, revealing the tensions between European and Indian intellectuals, as well as tensions within the elite of Indian society and between its different Hindu and Muslim communities. In the light of these complexities, the framework of master and slave within which the three critics work appears highly reductive and even deceptive.

This paper, then, aims at enhancing our understanding of the relationships between British and Indian scholars and ultimately our understanding of the production of orientalism itself by shifting the focus of our attention from official reports to unofficial writings. We will work with one piece of an extensive corpus,<sup>6</sup> namely the letters that Sir William Jones wrote to his British friends, who share an interest and are competent in matters related to the Oriental world, from the time he settled in India in 1784 to his death in 1794. By identifying and analyzing the discursive features Jones uses to describe native partners, our goal is to acknowledge and accommodate an ambivalent discourse, to account for scenes of confrontations, while at the same time reveal moments of hospitality and conviviality. Such professional encounters were based on trust,<sup>7</sup> and could even lead to friendship. Such relations will remain unaccounted for if the critic restricts his or her understanding of orientalism to a hegemonic discourse.

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<sup>4</sup> Sisir Kumar Das, *Sahibs and Munshis: An Account of the College of Fort William* (New Delhi: Orion Publication, 1973) 107.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996) 51-53.

<sup>6</sup> A larger analysis would bring in all private correspondence, diaries, memoirs, notebooks and the fiction written by British orientalist or British authors to a European audience about this topic. As Persian was the language British and Indian scholars chose to communicate with one another, one also needs to include all materials written in this tongue.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Schapin, *A Social History of Truth. Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

## A Thirst for Knowledge.

William Jones came to Bengal in 1784 to serve in the colonial administration as a judge for the Supreme Court of Calcutta. In England, he had by then already been distinguished for his knowledge of Arabic and Persian. His stay in India fostered a new career as an orientalist as he decided to “master” the Sanskrit language, both for personal accomplishment and for business. As a matter of course, British judges like Jones depended on *pundits* and *munshis* for the interpretation of Hindu and Muslim law. The purported reason why Jones embarked on Persian and Sanskrit studies was to bypass the authority of the Indian scholars who worked for the Supreme Court. Indeed, Jones repeatedly complains about their unreliability and their corruption and wants to be able to read original texts in order to seek the truth by himself. When his suspicions grow too strong, he asks Indian lawyers to produce written evidence of what they assert so as to compare the word of the native with the authority of the original document.

In his letter to John Shore, dated 16 August 1787, he writes:

I am assisting the court by studying Arabic and Sanscrit, and have now rendered it an impossibility for the Mohammedan or Hindu lawyers to impose upon us with erroneous opinion.<sup>8</sup>

But this he would only be able to do three years after his arrival in Calcutta, which means that in the meantime he had to rely on the competence of native speakers. Sanskrit was very little known in Europe at the time. A friend of Jones named Charles Wilkins, who lived in India as well, started learning Sanskrit in 1778 and was the first European to publish books on the language and its literature. He undertook the production of a Sanskrit grammar, a Sanskrit dictionary and a translation of the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata*. In the end, he managed to translate two parts of it, *The Bhagvat Geeta*, which was published in London in 1785, and *The Story of Dooshwanta and Sakuntala*, as well as three lexicons. Jones was right when he called Sanskrit literature a “new world” to discover, chart and master.

This association between the discovery of the New World and the discovery of Sanskrit culture appears quite frequently under his pen and the trope indicates both curiosity and awe. The greatness of this new field of research could only be appealing to a man of such an inquisitive nature. He sensed in it an opportunity to open further the doors of universal knowledge. By mastering a new cognitive field, he hoped to extend his domination not only over the world of words but also over the world of things.<sup>9</sup>

Jones uses the analogy between Sanskrit literature and the New World in another letter to the second Earl Spencer, dated from 11 August 1787:

*Sanscrit* literature is, indeed, a new world: the language (which I begin to speak with ease), is the *Latin of India*, and a sister of *Latin & Greek*. In

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<sup>8</sup> Sir William Jones, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, ed. Garland Cannon, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) II: 762.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, he writes in a letter to the second Earl of Spencer on 17 August 1787 : “I have employed a Brahman and a Bengal boy, who understands English, to translate the Sanscrit vocabulary; and they have already brought me ten thousand *words*; but *things* are my great object; since it is my ambition to know *India* better than any other European ever knew it”; in *Ibid.*, II: 751. This distinction between “words” and “things” is actually a nod in the direction of his reader, who is supposed to pick up on the reference of a previous glossary delivered to him by Indian scholars and which was ordered according to categories of things and not in an alphabetical order. What we now understand of this passage is that the Indian colonial context, the intellectual challenge posed by Sanskrit culture, its eventual mastery, and the competition and rivalry among scholars, worked as strong intellectual stimuli to the orientalist.

*Sanscrit* are written half a million of Stanzas on sacred history & literature, Epick and Lyrick poems innumerable, and (what is wonderful) Tragedies & Comedies not to be counted, above 2000 years old, besides works on Law (my great object), on Medicine, on Theology, on Arithmetick, on Ethics, and so on to infinity.<sup>10</sup>

The series of enumerations connote the luxuriance of those new cultural territories. Jones insists on figures and quantifiers – half a million, innumerable, not be counted, infinity – and demonstrates both the richness and grandeur of Sanskrit literature thanks to the accumulation of coordinates and affixed propositions. Works in Sanskrit are compared to treasures, and the analogy between the poetical and the material world indicates a comparable attitude of conquest, domination and ownership. Jones's discourse is ambiguous because it provokes a feeling of awe and respect towards Indian culture and simultaneously triggers a desire of domination, or at least possession.

Before gaining access to this new cultural world, Jones needed to master its language. Every year, he would take the opportunity of a three-month leave from office to travel to Khrishnagar in order to receive the tenets of Hindu culture from the pundits who worked at the university. He recalls his first meeting with one of them named Ramlochan in 1785 in a letter to Charles Wilkins:

The Brahmens are dispersed; for they too, have a long vacation; some are gone to the Rāny Bhawāny, others to other votaries of Durgā, from whom they receive presents at this season: but I have found a pleasant old man of the medical cast, who teaches me all he knows of the Grammar; and I hope to read the *Hit Upadès*, or some other story-book, with him.<sup>11</sup>

Ramlochan taught him Sanskrit, and selected the best works of Sanskrit literature for reading and translation.

In a letter to the second Earl of Spencer, Jones rewrites his integration into Indian circles of erudition in Khrishnagar as a scene of initiation:

I had made a *Sanscrit* stanza, signifying that 'as the thirsty antelope runs to a pool of sweet water, so I *thirsted* for all kinds of knowledge, which was sweet as nectar.' This verse has given me a place among the Hindu poets: the Rājā copied it; his son got it by heart, & his Brahmans entered it among their records; but one of the Brahmans objected to the word *thirsty* in the 2d line, and said it was applicable to *water literally*, but *not literally* to *learning*. My *Pandit*, who has just told me the story, urged that I, as a poet & consequently inspired, could not err, & he produced an authority to prove, that my word *trishnà* means not only *thirst*, but any *ardent desire*. The Raja & his Brahmans acquiesced, and they call me a Hindu of the *Military* tribe, which is next in rank to the Brahmanical. Farewell!<sup>12</sup>

The coining of a simile in Sankrit opened the door of Indian scholarship to a British orientalist. Jones describes a scene of “brahmanisation” in which his former identity is altered, even erased, in order to fit into a group of Indian scholars.<sup>13</sup> His integration is complete when he is

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 747.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 682.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 747.

<sup>13</sup> This process is described by Srinivas Aravamudan in *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (1999).

allocated a space within the Indian pantheon of great authors. While this passage can and indeed has been read as a narcissistic fantasy,<sup>14</sup> one should neither undermine the irony imbued in these lines, nor overlook the important fact that Jones is here actually reversing a common pattern of interaction whereby the master, who possesses both knowledge and power, teaches and dominates the native. Here, the orientalist seeks knowledge from the natives.

Kate Teltscher's interpretation of this scene, based on an analysis of Jones's ideological position, is valid albeit partial. By focusing only on signs of domination in discourse, she tends to forget the meaning that can be adduced from the intervention of the *pundit*. The writer stages the intervention of malevolent forces and the way the *pundit* counteracted them. This fantasized account does bring evidence of the value of friendship between colonial scholars and their native counterparts.

Jones's thirst for India indicates both a desire for domination and a capacity to move beyond cultural prejudices and boundaries in order to enter foreign circles of erudition and interact with them.

### **Public versus private relations?**

To understand the variations in the representations of native scholars, one has to take into account the distinction made by British orientalists between public and private "contact zones".<sup>15</sup> Indeed, whereas in public spaces Indian lawyers tend to be considered as dubious informants, they become trustworthy friends and allies in the private space of home or among the tight circles of learning. Sir William Jones stresses this dichotomy in one of his letters, dated late September 1785:

The villainy of the Brahmen lawyers makes it necessary for me to learn Sanscrit, which is as difficult as Greek, and my schoolmaster is now with me or I would write more.<sup>16</sup>

The sentence hinges on an opposition between two categories of Indian scholars, namely "the brahmen" and "my schoolmaster". The article <the> indicates a general reference to a category of people, here <brahmen>, whereas the possessive pronoun <my> emphasizes the intimate or intersubjective nature of the relationship between the orientalist and his school teacher.

The syntax itself reveals the ambivalent position of Sir William Jones towards Indian learned men. The coordination <and> marks the junction between the two parts of the sentence, while at the same time introducing a disjunction in the narration. Our contention is that it is the Indian schoolmaster who performs this act of disruption: his presence disrupts the development of the narrative as Jones has to stop writing to his English friend; his presence reverses the relation of power as the native occupies a superior position; and eventually, his presence splits the discourse of the orientalist, as it forces him to consider Indian scholars both as villains and as teachers, both as purveyors of mendacious reports and as teachers of reliable knowledge.

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<sup>14</sup> Kate Teltscher, for instance, analyzes this passage as the ultimate show of colonial narcissism, when the orientalist occupies the foreground in a process of cultural exchange, and performs an imaginary shift from a position of inferiority to one of superiority.

<sup>15</sup> I refer here to Mary Pratt's conceptualization of the term "contact zone": "'contact zone' is an attempt to invoke the special and temporal correspondence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctions, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term contact, I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination"; in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, ed. Garland Cannon, II: 686.

This ambivalence in the relationship between both communities can only be understood by taking into account the distinction we referred to earlier between public and private space. Such distinction can be clearly seen when Jones goes on a private journey to visit the *pundits* at Nabadwip. He explains the circumstances of his journey in a letter he wrote to Samuel Parr, his former schoolmaster at Harrow, dated 28 September 1787:

The duties of my station occupy me nine months in twelve; but I generally have three months to myself, and pass them in a charming cottage near an ancient university of Brahmans, with whom I begin to converse fluently in Sanscrit.<sup>17</sup>

He opposes his nine-month duty in Calcutta to a three-month break in Khrishnagar. Indeed, Jones is relieved from his official duties during the monsoon season and takes this opportunity to travel up-country to the university of Nabadwip (called “Nadia” or “Nedaya” in his letters), next to Krishnagar, where, according to Garland Cannon, the Joneses bought a cottage in 1788. This migration from Calcutta to Krishnagar corresponds to a move from the British colonial center to an Indian cultural center. It also involves a reconsideration of the relationships between Jones and his Indian partners. In this famous center of Sanskrit studies, he associates with Brahmans in what he describes to Parr as polite circles of conversation. This symbolical participation of the *brahmans* into European forms of sociability opens a cultural space of shared values where British and Indian scholars can meet.

Jones finds teachers in Krishnagar and strikes up personal and intimate relations with a small number of them. He explains one month later, in a letter written from Calcutta and addressed to Sir John Macpherson, a friend and servant of the East India Company, that he decided to take Ramlochan back with him to Calcutta.<sup>18</sup> Considering what Jones also says about Ramlochan's strong character, we may assume that the Hindu *pundit* was ready to follow Jones and that they had, by that time, developed an personal relationship.

Thus, in order to render more faithful an image of Jones's relationships with Indian teachers and lawyers, one should pay heed to the different levels of interaction from forced and unsuccessful relations, to a partnership based on trust, and eventually to an intimate and friendly relation. Those levels overlap with the distinction we made earlier on between private and public spheres.

Jones develops no personal ties with the “unreliable” natives he works with at the Supreme Court. As a matter of fact, any scientific community, as Steven Schapin rightly outlines in his book *A Social History of Truth*, is based on trust, or on the mutual reliability of each member. If the trustworthiness of one member is questioned, the community instantly collapses. There is indeed no chance that Jones could have maintained strong links with people he distrusts.

Nonetheless, Jones, at least during the first years of his stay in India, depended on them for his judicial duties. Their relationships are formal – he never gives their names and always refers to them as a category of people. Jones complains about them to those who are also familiar with East India Company administration, to Sir Charles William Rouse Boughton, for instance, who worked during ten years as supervisor of Nator, the then richest district under colonial rule:

Pure Integrity is hardly to be found among the Pandits and Maulavis, few of whom give opinions without a culpable bias, if the parties can have access

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 779-780.

<sup>18</sup> “I have brought with me the father of the university of Nadya, who, though not a Brahmin, has taught grammar and ethics to the most learned Brahmans, and has priestly pride, with which his pupils in general abound”; in *Ibid.*, II: 687.



to them. I therefore always make them produce original texts, and see them in their own Books [...] but as it cannot be expected that future Judges will take the trouble to learn too difficult languages, I wish much to see compiled and printed a complete Digest of Hindu and Musliman Laws, on the great subjects of *Contracts* and *Inheritances*.<sup>19</sup>

He reproaches them with their lack of integrity and responds to their unreliability by demanding they produce material evidence of what they assert. This response is ideologically connoted as it strictly opposes Indian attitudes towards knowledge to a modern stance, embodied here by the orientalist, and which relies on experience and the capacity to offer proofs of one's statements.

His opinion about Indian court lawyers does not change with time. In a letter to the first Marquis of Cornwallis dated 19 March 1788, he asserts:

if we give judgment only from the opinions of the native lawyers and scholars, we can never be sure, that we have not been deceived by them. It would be absurd and unjust to pass an indiscriminate censure on a considerable body of men but my experience justifies me in declaring, that I could not with an easy conscience concur in a decision, merely on the written opinion of native lawyers, in any case in which they could have the remotest interest in misleading the court.<sup>20</sup>

Those difficulties are overcome by trusting other natives, those with whom Jones developed a personal relation based on trust, conviviality and sometimes even friendship. In other words, failed official relationships are resolved and the authority of distrusted people bypassed thanks to the private ties that British orientalist maintained with Indian counterparts. Sir William Jones refers to "[his] private establishment of native readers and writers" in one of his letters to the Marquis of Cornwallis, who took the position of governor general of India in 1788, after Warren Hastings's dismissal. By his "private establishment" he means the pundits and maulavis he pays for teaching him Persian and Sanskrit, for collecting texts, transcribing them and helping in their translations. According to Jones, those devoted partners perform their duties with great dedication.

This cooperation involves intersubjective relations which are always described by the orientalist in a very positive way. In a letter to the governor general Warren Hastings, Jones mentions the moments of sociability he enjoys with Indian scholars: "My principal amusement is botany, and the conversation of the pundits, with whom I talk fluently in the language of the *Gods*".<sup>21</sup>

He also uses the *topos* of the Oriental wise man and thus expresses personal esteem and reverence. In his letter to John Shore, for instance, he describes scenes of intellectual retreat which he enjoys in the company of a familiar *pundit*:

You have sent me a treasure, which will enable me to satisfy my mind at least on the chronology of India; need I say, that I shall ever be happy in the conversation of so learned a man as Rhadacaunt? Before I return to Calcutta, I shall have read his interesting book, and shall be better able to converse with him in Sanscrit, which I speak continually with my pundit?<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, "To C. W. Boughton Rouse. 24 Oct. 1786. On the River of Hugli", II: 720.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 795.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, "To Warren Hastings. 20 Oct. 1791. Chrishna-nagur", II: 900.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, "To John Shore. 12 May 1787. [Gardens near Calcutta]", II: 737.

Indian scholars are called by their proper names and the use of possessive pronouns (my/your *pundit*) indicates at least a relation of proximity, if not of intimacy. One must remember, however, that this letter was addressed to a fellow orientalist in India and it might be that the reverence due to Rhadacaunt is only a way to pay homage indirectly to his student, namely John Shore. No matter how rhetorical this sentence might sound, one cannot turn a blind eye to the sheer enthusiasm expressed by the orientalist who considers the scope of the *pundit*'s knowledge and his will to cooperate. In another letter to the same John Shore, Jones praises the elegancy of Rhadacaunt's work:

I am charmed, my dear Sir, with the short but comprehensive work of Rhadacaunt, your pundit, the title of which I see is Purān-arthupracusam, or the meaning of the Purans displayed [...] If the pundit at your request, will lend me the original, my *marhatta* writer shall copy it elegantly, with spaces between the lines for a literal English translation.<sup>23</sup>

Again here, Jones's eulogy is not only rhetorical. He mentions Radhaucant's financial problems to John Shore and offers to help the *pundit*.<sup>24</sup> Only strong and sincere bonds can account for his decision.

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The frontispiece of Charles Doyle's book *The European in India*, published in London in 1813, stages a private meeting between a European and his *munshi*. This illustration represents a scene of gentility where two knowledgeable men, one European and one native, meet in the home of the orientalist. The location is quite important here: since the scene takes place indoors, it precludes the intrusion of the colonial outside world, and as it is a study, it excludes women as well.

There is something striking about the organization of the picture. The native occupies the foreground of the picture, whereas the European is placed in the background. This position reverses the pattern of colonial domination, and stresses the *munshi*'s superiority as "schoolmaster" to a European pupil. Yet, this superiority is not equivalent to domination. Indeed, the two characters do not face each other but are symmetrically represented in three-quarter length. This choice is redolent of the symmetrical relations that Jones wishes to maintain with his Indian counterparts. The European recognizes the superiority of the native in Indian learning but it is no impediment to conviviality, as one may notice the relaxed position of the European with his arm dangling over the back of the chair, and even friendship.

They share a private space, a common dedication to knowledge, and a common set of values based on gentility. It is no coincidence that the Indian should sit with folded legs, mimicking the European way. The native is made to conform to an hegemonic code of conduct, in the sense that European norms are implicitly considered as universal imperatives. But this interpretation prevents us from seeing another aspect of the picture which is the depiction of a symmetry between schoolmaster and pupil, between the Indian scholar and the orientalist, as seen in the very position of the legs.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, "To John Shore. 25 March 1787. Gardens near Calcutta", II: 735.

<sup>24</sup> "at present, I pay more salaries to my native scholars than I can well afford; nevertheless I will cheerfully join you in any mode of clearing the honest man [Rhadacaunt], that can be suggested; and I would assist him merely for his own sake, as I have more Brahmanical teachers than I can find time to hear"; in *Ibid.*, "To John Shore. 16 Aug. 1787. from Crishna-nagar", II: 763.

If Jones fancies himself as part of the Military tribe and as such included in the Indian circles of learning, the native also partakes of European values and is invited to share an intellectual space with the orientalist. The “contact zone” is established behind private doors and within restricted circles.

### **Cooperation, intersubjectivity and the elaboration of orientalism.**

Cooperation with the natives took place both for official projects and for private research. We have tried not to use the heavily connoted term “collaboration” because such a parallel with twentieth-century European history must be analyzed and vindicated with scrutiny and it is not within the reach of this paper to do so.

The insufficient knowledge on the part of the British regarding the cultures and languages of India made the cooperation of Indians an absolute necessity. However, the latter’s involvement was sometimes won with difficulties. Jones, again in his letters, refers to Indian scholars refusing to assist the orientalist in his project. Jones turns this act of resistance into a sign of backwardness, which he then quite easily opposes to European modernity and enlightenment. Nonetheless, Jones changes his interpretation when he personally knows the natives who have turned his offer down. He then shows an understanding of religious and social prohibitions which prevented the *brahmins* and the *pundits* from transmitting their knowledge to strangers or a members of a lower cast.<sup>25</sup> He also raises the issue of salaries and by doing so forestalls the natives’ misgivings.<sup>26</sup>

Jones also mentions collaborative projects in his correspondence. By collecting, transcribing and interpreting codes of laws, the *pundits* and *munshis* helped British judges to bypass the intervention and disruption of native interests in the making of justice. In a letter to Charles Chapman, Jones explains that he uses reliable third parties to validate or invalidate the evidence of unknown informants.<sup>27</sup> Kate Teltscher’s interpretation of this practice, as a process which aims at “outpanditing” the pundits, implies that the Indian natives were the victim of a deceptive scheme forged against them by the orientalists. Kate Teltscher’s argument, however, tells us very little about the actual responses and positions of native informants in this process of transfer of knowledge; and it risks purveying an extremely reductive image of the native’s awareness and positioning towards colonial rule.

Native’s cooperation was both punctual and continuous. They helped for instance in the compiling, editing and translating of a Digest of Hindu and Muslim Laws. The project was launched by Jones who wanted to help the future generations of British civil servants to understand Oriental cultures and to interpret their codes of law. As he wrote in a letter addressed to C. W. Boughton Rouse and dated 24 October 1786:

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<sup>25</sup> “This brings me to my mind your honest pundit, Rhadacaunt, who refused I hear, the office of pundit to the court, and told Mr. Hastings that he would not accept it, if the salary were doubled; his scruples are probably religious”; in *Ibid.*, “To John Shore. 16 Aug. 1787. from Crishna-nagar”, II: 762.

<sup>26</sup> In his correspondence, Jones refers to a lack of trust that the Indians felt towards the British. Jones is aware of the accusations of unpaid or poorly paid work that were common at the time and tries to reassure the *pundits* he wants to work with: “In the meantime, pray tell Mohammed Ghāūth, that, if he will call on Mr. Chambers, he will receive some money, and that I will pay him his wages regularly when I come myself. I wish him to set about the Inscription from Gaia, which you so wonderfully deciphered”; in *Ibid.*, “To Charles Wilkins. 17 Sept. 1785. From Crishn-nagar”, II: 682.

<sup>27</sup> “if you can collect from Mahesa pundit, who seemed a worthy honest man, how Hindu witnesses ought to be examined, and whether the Brahmins can give absolution (I think they call it pryarchitt) for perjury, and in what case, you will greatly oblige me, and contribute to the advancement of justice”; in *Ibid.*, II: 684.

it cannot be expected that future Judges will take the trouble to learn too difficult languages, I wish much to see compiled and printed a complete Digest of Hindu and Musliman Laws, on the great subjects of *Contracts* and *Inheritances*.<sup>28</sup>

The project is completed in 1792 and 1794 with the publication of *Al-Sirajiyah* and *The Institutes of Hindu Law*.

Jones explains to the governor general, Lord Cornwallis, how this laboratory of orientalist research is to be organized.

I offer the nation my humble labour, as far as I can dispose of my time consistently with the faithful discharge of my duty as a magistrate [...] I should be able, if my health continued firm, to translate every morning, before any other business is begun, as much as they could compile, and the writers copy, in the preceding day.<sup>29</sup>

Jones hires two *pundits* and two *maulavis* for the compilation, two writers for the transcription and decides that he will be in charge of translating this compilation of Hindu and Muslim law into an English digest. The transcribers take over from the compiler and hand over their work to the orientalist. Knowledge is shifted down one single line from one intermediary to the next, and the very sustainability of the whole project is based on trust.

Thus, Jones repeatedly outlines his reliance on native counterparts. In a letter to Henry Dundas, a politician in England involved in Indian affairs, he puts forward the quality of the work performed by native scholars:

I will take the liberty, as soon as possible, of laying before you the outline of a Digest, which the Pandits and Maulavi's will, I am persuaded, fill up with accuracy. The Brahmans are so highly gratified with the attention shown to their laws and literature, that they have entirely shaken off the habits of reserve, which the Moguls had caused by their sternness and intolerance; and the Muselmans, who also believe their laws divine, are not less pleased with the due administration of them between Muselman parties.<sup>30</sup>

Jones deplores the consequences Moghul domination had on the development of Sanskrit culture. British rule is opposed to the hierarchical system put in place by the Moghuls and to their arrogance. Under British colonial rule, *pundits* and *brahmans* are allowed to express themselves, and are presumably free to share their knowledge and unlock what had been kept hidden for years.

Jones is left to choose the native informants he wants with him on the project. He must then report to the governor general, Lord Cornwallis, about his selection. Again, although the panegyric sounds overly rhetorical, it does show a personal acquaintance with certain native scholars:

Since I was favoured with your obliging letter dated the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, in which you do me the honour to express your reliance on me for the selection and appointment of the Hindu and Muselman lawyers, whose assistance will be necessary in compiling a Digest of their respective laws, I have made

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 720.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, "To the first Marquis of Cornwallis. 19 March 1788. Calcutta", II: 799.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, "26. Feb. 1788. Gardens near Calcutta", II: 791.

very diligent inquiries for persons eminently qualified to engage in the work; and I beg leave to recommend four, whom, partly from my own personal knowledge of them, and partly from the information of those, in whose judgement I have perfect confidence, I believe to be Men of integrity and learning. Permit me to name, 1. as the Pandit for this province, *Radhācānt Sarman*, a Brahmen of distinguished abilities, and highly revered by the Hindus in Bengal for his erudition and virtue; 2. as the Pandit for Bahar, *Sabur Tiwāri*, who formerly attended the council at Patna, and is universally esteemed in that province as a lawyer of accurate and extensive knowledge; 3. as the Maulavi for the doctrines of the Sunnis *Muhammed Kāsim*, who has applied himself from his earliest youth to the study of jurisprudence, and has acquired very just fame for his proficiency in it; 4. for the doctrines of the Shiāhs, where the two sects differ, (and, where they agree, both Maulavi's will unite in compiling approved texts) *Sirāju'lhākk*, who is an excellent scholar well versed in law and in many branches of philosophy. As writers of Sanscrit and Arabick, I cannot recommend, (because I do not believe that all Asia could produce) two men better qualified, than *Mahtāb Rai* and *Hāji Abdullah*; the first a native of Decan, and the second, born at Medina, but educated at Mecca: both write beautifully and distinctly, and both are competently skilled in the several languages, which they undertake to copy.<sup>31</sup>

Jones explains to the governor that his choice is safe because it is done on the basis of personal acquaintance or indirect but trustworthy knowledge. In this passage the orientalist provides a short but consistently laudatory moral portrait. Although the letter is official, the relationships are of a private order. Here, Jones does not address himself to another orientalist scholar, and the scholars, this time, are not part of his household. Thus, the reader cannot suspect him of being either paternalistic or condescending. Those “men of integrity and learning” are called by their names and are praised for the scope of their knowledge and the reputation they have acquired. Cooperation in this case is a way for these native scholars to make themselves both known and respected by British authority in India.

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This paper is part of a larger research project which aims at revisiting – but not erasing – the history of colonial encounters in India. The present paper shows that, within a context of colonial domination, the personal relationships that both British orientalists and their Indian counterparts engaged in were based on scholarly conviviality and even friendship. These intellectual bonds clearly run across the usual pattern of colonial domination.

This argument is related to what Rosane Rocher explains about the construction of knowledge in the context of British colonial rule in India:

Knowledge is more than cognition, more than the binary relation between a scholar, such as Sir William Jones, and an object, such as Indian culture. Scholarship, the production and dissemination of knowledge, is a complex

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., “To the first Marquis of Cornwallis, Governor-General of Bengal in Council. 13 April 1788. ‘Aārifnagar’”, II: 801-802.

exercise, in which practitioners are engaged with allies, subalterns, and competitors, and with publics that provide the subjects, targets, and consumers of produced knowledge. Knowledge is generated, configured, and marketed in temporal and social ambits. It is incremental at times, yet is more endemically negotiated. We must take a nonfoundational and dynamic view of knowledge if we are to learn from, and progress beyond, simple revisionism such as the recent anti-Orientalist critique.

What is needed is not a single painting in broad strokes of protagonists reduced to the single dimension of colonial predators and victims, but fine-grained analyses of the interwoven and constantly reconfigured tapestry of scholarship.<sup>32</sup>

As we have shown in this paper, Sir William Jones's view and practice of orientalism are certainly more "nonfoundational and dynamic" than fixed and straight. Focusing on the period running from 1784 to 1794, or, as his biographer Garland Cannon calls it, Jones's "Sanskrit period", we have shown that his comments on Indian scholars are ambivalent, both laudatory and derogatory. We have shown how this ambivalence neatly feeds into the spatial distinction of private and public spheres. These discrepancies in the representations of the Indian elite correspond to the distinction between official discourse and personal relation, between general statements and intersubjective knowledge. Jones's split discourse is not so much, we believe, a sign of insecurity, as an acknowledgement of the ambiguity of the British scholars' position in India. It also underlines the limits of a systematic collusion between orientalism and colonialism.

With this distinction between personal and the institutional levels in mind, we hope to uncover what Kapil Raj calls "a dialogic process involving interactions, albeit – and this must be stressed – unequal and asymmetrical" between British orientalists and their indigenous counterparts.<sup>33</sup>

Still, the question of native collaboration needs to be more thoroughly addressed as it may reveal tensions already existing within the Indian cultural elite and help us reassess the impact British colonial rule had on these groups.

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<sup>32</sup> Rosane Rocher, "Weaving Knowledge: Sir William Jones and Indian Pandits, 1746-1794" *Objects of Enquiry. Life, Contributions and Influences of Sir William Jones*, eds. Kevin R. Brine and Garland Cannon (New York: New York UP, 1995) 51-52.

<sup>33</sup> Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science. Circulation and the Construction of Scientific Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, Seventeenth-Nineteenth Centuries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 101.