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Merchants, Mediators and Mannerly Conduct: The East India Company and Local Intermediaries in the Western Indian Ocean 1700–1750

PETER GOOD 

On 30 November 1722, Henry Albert, the Agent of the East India Company's factory in the port of Mocha, received a formal letter from his superiors in Bombay. In this letter, he was given permission to dismiss 'Sheikh Haddy',¹ who had been acting as the Company's broker in the city. Albert had been lobbying for this dismissal for some time, with his superiors now agreeing that the broker had proven himself 'unfit' for the Company's service due to his 'haughty and insulting nature'.² William Phipps, the Chief of the Company's Council at Bombay, gave Albert further instructions on who to hire instead, saying that he would not send another Muslim broker from Bombay, nor should one be hired at Mocha as they had proven 'unfit for servants under a government of their own religion'.³ Instead, Phipps suggested, a local Banian should be appointed to the post in order to avoid similar trouble as the Company's merchants had experienced with their former Arab appointee. All this was necessary, as none of the Mocha factory's staff had 'enough of the [Arabic] language to be understood' should they call upon Mocha's governor or other officials in the town or beyond. A decade later, the Company's local broker, Khosrow, in the Persian city of Kerman died suddenly after a long tenure organizing the purchase of wool in the city, which was prized by local weavers along with the felters and hatters of London and Amsterdam.⁴ In order to protect Khosrow's property for his family, the Company's local Factor in the city, William Cordeux, was ordered to take possession of it and then hand it over to Khosrow's family once it was safe from seizure by the local Khan.⁵ These two cases highlight the differing responses of the Company to

¹ Sheikh Hadi.

² Letter to the Council at Mocha from William Phipps and the Council at Bombay, 30 November 1722, IOR/G/17/1 pt.2 ff.191-v.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Peter Good, *The East India Company in Persia: Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Eighteenth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022), 165.

⁵ Consultation on Wednesday 14th of March 1732, Instructions to William Cordeux, IOR/G/29/5 ff.200-v.

its non-Europeans employees. On the one hand, it could be a generous employer, extending financial and legal support beyond a salary or an exchange for services rendered; on the other hand, the visceral nature of Company merchants' responses to slights or perceived ill behaviour.

This article explores the relationship between the East India Company and its brokers, linguists and other non-English employees in the Western Indian Ocean, particularly the economically important port cities of Mocha on the Arabian Peninsula and Bandar Abbas in the Persian Gulf. These two cities represent distinctive case studies concerning the conditions under which the Company's brokers were employed and how their relationship with their European employers was transacted and maintained. Previous studies concerning the Company's non-European staff have tended to focus on specific relationships within the Indian Subcontinent, where there are many examples of interactions between non-Europeans and the Company's hierarchy. By looking beyond India, however, it is possible to discern attitudes to non-Europeans that are unrelated to the personal or sexual relationships and politics of the Company's senior staff and that are likewise separated from the vested interests that arise from these relationships. In the port cities of the Western Indian Ocean, English merchants had to adjust to very different conditions and state structures, all the while needing to carry out the business of the masters, along with trying to guarantee their own financial success. They could not rely upon familial connections of their own, nor were they welcomed into the commercial networks of local mercantile groups, like those of the Armenians of Persia. Instead, the English turned to recruiting local merchants to act as translators, brokers, interpreters and intermediaries. Understanding why and under what conditions these individuals engaged with the Company and its merchants will reveal much greater insight into the nature of the Company's presence and *modus operandi* beyond the immediate vicinity of its major settlements and networks. By doing so, the Company's success and longevity in these critically understudied areas of its business can be better understood. In essence, the Company's treatment of non-Europeans in India is akin to envisioning a bank only by looking at its head office in a city, while not considering the work and conditions of the staff in the same bank's branches at home or abroad. By doing so, one can only get a distorted impression of the operation of a business through reports written for and received by a management at a distance from the day-to-day running and understanding of each branch. In the case of the Western Indian Ocean, this distance, both in space and time, was extreme. In addition, the Company had to fit itself around local norms and standards of behaviour, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach. This involved negotiating customs, language and expectation, both with local interlocutors and those they employed in any given place. In the Western Indian Ocean, this led to the Company becoming surprisingly diverse, both in terms of its approaches and the

religious, ethnic or cultural background of those employed to represent them. This article will explore how different groups and communities were employed and co-opted by the Company to best effect and how these practices changed over time and in response to conditions on the ground.

As David Veevers has most recently shown, the Company's operations in India were often closely linked to familial ties to Indian elites. This closeness to local power structures was a direct result of the Company founding and populating its own forts and settlements around the Subcontinent while being adopted into the political and cliental structures of South Asian kingdoms.⁶ Veevers builds on a rich scholarship concerning the interactions between English merchants, settlers and colonisers and states and societies as divergent as the Powhatan and the Japanese. Alison Games has argued that the English built up a tradition of cosmopolitanism that emerged in the Mediterranean which was then carried around the globe, allowing English merchants to 'fit in' to new commercial and political contexts with relative ease.⁷ English success was, however, completely predicated on the receptivity of their hosts. Games uses the example of Japan, where despite adoption of local customs, intermarriage and modest commercial success, the Tokugawa Shogunate's antipathy towards Christianity and European settlement ultimately won out.⁸ In Persia, where the Company's arrival in 1614 was a welcome stimulus to local industries, particularly following English assistance in the capture of Hormuz from the Portuguese in 1622, relations were easier. Indeed, Shah Abbas I (r. 1588–1629) offered the Company a Royal Decree (*Farmān*) entrenching the Company's rights to access Persia's markets.⁹ This lent the English a privileged status amongst the many merchant communities in the Safavid state but did not guarantee their success, particularly given that they were pitted in direct competition with the Armenian merchants of New Julfa.

The Armenians had long controlled the flow of silk from the Caspian provinces of Persian westward in Anatolia and the Mediterranean. The value of their presence and cooperation was such that Mehmed the Conqueror courted them following his seizure of Constantinople in 1453, while Armenian communities proliferated around the major ports and commercial centres of Europe from London and Amsterdam to Poland.¹⁰ During the first decade of the seventeenth century, the ongoing war between the Safavids and Ottomans in the Caucasus led Safavid Shah Abbas

⁶ David Veevers, *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 16–17.

⁷ Alison Games, *The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion 1560–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 290.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁹ See Peter Good, 'The East India Company's Farmān, 1622–1747', *Iranian Studies* 52, 1–2 (2019), 181–97.

¹⁰ R. W. Ferrier, 'The Armenians and the East India Company in Persia in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries', *Economic History Review* 26, 1 (1973), 39.

I to forcefully displace many Armenians from the region as part of a wider scorched earth policy. In order to try and guarantee the cooperation, or at least quiescence, of the Armenian merchants, they were resettled in their own quarter of Abbas' new capital at Isfahan, separated from the city by the Zayandeh Rud river.¹¹ While the displacement was a trauma to the community, being present in Isfahan put the Armenians right at the heart of the commercial networks of the Safavid Empire. Not only were they able to maintain their control of the westward silk trade, but Armenian merchant families also built significant networks of their own, largely based on family firms and trust contracts known as *commenda*.¹² After the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639, Ottoman–Safavid relations enjoyed a long period of relative diplomatic tranquillity which allowed the Armenians to establish themselves, according to R.W. Ferrier, as a true 'commercial elite', with Rudi Matthee going as far as to place them as part of a 'service gentry'.¹³ Both titles are appropriate, with Armenian merchants and families operating both independently and on behalf of the Safavid state, often simultaneously, amassing great personal wealth while helping to fill the coffers of successive Shahs. It was due to their major stake in the silk trade during the brief monopoly set up by Abbas I that the Company's factors made contact with the Julfan Armenians when both parties were invited to bid for silk. For the Armenians, this was an unwelcome intrusion, but for the Company's merchants it was a salutary lesson in their inadequacy as potential competitors in the silk market. Indeed, Armenian antipathy, along with the gradual abandonment of the Safavid royal silk monopoly, was a major cause in the Company's failure to enter the market successfully.

By the 1640s, the Company had largely abandoned any pretensions to the silk trade, finding that competition from the Armenians, in addition to the cost and varying quality of the silk itself, precluded a profit from the business. By doing so, they removed the major point of contention between the two communities. The Company could also offer significant benefits to Armenian merchants who traded with India, particularly by providing space on their large, well-armed ships, giving much greater security to their customers.¹⁴ With the withdrawal of English competition from the silk trade and the facility they could offer through their ships and connections with Indian markets, relations with the Armenians began to improve considerably. In the following decades, increasing numbers of Armenians began to take up residence around the Company's settlements in India. By 1688, the Armenians and the Company went so far as to sign an 'Agreement' which would guarantee ever closer

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Sebouh Aslanian, 'Trade Diaspora vs. Colonial State: Armenian Merchants, the English East India Company and the High Court of Admiralty in London, 1748–1752', *Diaspora*, 13, 1 (2004), 44.

¹³ Ferrier, 'The Armenians', 40; Rudi Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid: Silk for Silver 1600–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 84.

¹⁴ Ferrier, 'The Armenians', 45.

cooperation. The signatories represented the Company and five major Julfan families, under the pen of Panous Callendar.¹⁵ As Ferrier notes, the signing of the agreement in London meant little to the Armenian families back in Persia, who preferred to look after their own interests, rather than concerning themselves with improving the Company's position either in the silk trade or elsewhere.¹⁶

Cooperation between Armenians and the Company in India, unlike Persia, benefitted markedly from the Agreement and the mutual benefits enjoyed by both parties. This is most clearly borne out by the role played by Khwaja Israel Sarhad in the Company's 1715 embassy to the Mughal Emperor Farrukhsiyar's court in Delhi. While John Surman, a Company merchant from the factory at Patna, was appointed to lead the embassy, Sarhad's powers and responsibilities were significant; he was expected to act as interpreter for Surman, in addition to acting as his second in command in the negotiations.¹⁷ In return, Sarhad was offered 50,000 rupees should the embassy be successful in securing a Farmān and a further 50,000 for orders extending the Company's land grants around Calcutta and Madras.¹⁸ Sarhad enjoyed a long association with the Company, having undertaken to represent the Company's interests several times before. He helped to secure the land upon which Calcutta was founded in 1691 and was involved in the negotiations which led to the Company purchasing the villages in the immediate hinterland of Calcutta 7 years later.¹⁹ Sarhad was clearly not working merely in respect of an agreement signed by his uncle nearly 40 years before, but cooperation with the Company in India bore fruit for the Armenian merchant in a way that the Company's merchants in Persia were unable to replicate.²⁰

While Israel Sarhad made an effective agent for the Company in its interactions with the Mughal Court, he was never entirely trusted in his missions by his English employers.

At least two capable Englishmen ought to go in order that if one died, the other could take his place; both should have a good knowledge of Persian, that should the head of the expedition die, the negotiations would not be left entirely to Khoja Sarhad, who would most like enrich himself at the Company's expense if not well looked after.²¹

At issue was not Sarhad's probity as a representative for the Company *per se*, but seemingly his relative failure as a merchant, having twice found himself

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ C.R. Wilson, *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal* (Bimla, New Delhi, 1983), 2:157–8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:125.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:157–8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2:154.

heavily indebted to the Company at Calcutta.²² For Armenians in India with good connections then, the Company was not only a trading partner, but also an understanding, if not generous, employer. In Persia, meanwhile, influential Armenian families and merchants garnered their political connections jealously, while being happy to work with the Company where their interests aligned, particularly in regard to shipping for India. Similarly, Lord Bellomont's embassy to the Persian court in 1654 was accompanied by another Armenian, Khwaja Pedro, whose interests lay in European commerce.²³ In both cases, the trade of the individual Armenian was not tied to the silk trade, nor directly to the merchant elite of Julfa. This is a pattern that can be seen in the involvement of other Armenians who worked for and with the Company, particularly in Persia.

The factors of the Company's Persian factory at Bandar Abbas employed several Armenians for different posts and positions. These ranged from the appointment of Armenians as the Company's 'linguist' or interpreter, a position very often associated with them, to stable hands and port agents checking maritime passes. The presence of Armenians at the factory was therefore ubiquitous in almost every walk of the Company's life and business in Persia. In the case of the linguists, they were also exceptionally well paid, by the Company's standards at least, for the work that they did. In the case of the Company's two linguists employed to serve the factories at Bandar Abbas and Isfahan, both were paid significantly more than anyone else with the exception of the Agent responsible for all business transacted in the Persian Gulf.²⁴ This gives a sense of the importance of these employees to the factories' ability to function, while also raising an important question about who the Company's interlocutors saw as the 'face' of the Company. It seems from this evidence that it was the linguists or brokers who often fulfilled the customer facing roles, rather than English merchants. The position of the Company's linguist provides the most diverse example of this, with those hired to fulfil the position performing a wide variety of tasks far beyond interpreting and translation. Michael Talbot, in his work on Anglo-Ottoman relations, places the work of translators at the heart of ambassadorial missions and exchanges in Istanbul.²⁵ In the Ottoman Empire, dynasties of translators and officials served both the English embassy and the Sublime Porte, often accruing considerable power in the process. While in India English merchants relied on intermarriage and familial bonds to form the basis of networks of communication and representation, in the Mediterranean, similar networks were based on the

²² *Ibid.*, 1:150, 315, 318, 2:100.

²³ Ferrier, 'The Armenians', 48.

²⁴ Account Salary for the year commencing 1st August 1735 and ending Ultimo July 1736, IOR/G/29/5 f.394v.

²⁵ Michael Talbot, *British-Ottoman Relations, 1661–1807* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2017), 152.

professional relationship between an individual or a family and the embassy as an institution. In Persia, the representational role of the linguist was far more personal than its Ottoman equivalent, though unlike in India it was firmly based on a professional, rather than an individual relationship. We see this through the high wages paid to the linguists, instances where their personal circumstances are included in the archival record and finally, the points where they are dismissed.

The case for which we have the most data is that of 'Stephen Daud', as he was known to the English.²⁶ While it is not clear when Stephen joined the Company's service, he is first mentioned in connection to the Company's house at Isfahan while that city was under siege by the Afghan army of Mahmud Hotak in 1722. Stephen's conduct at first seemed noble, offering to sell his wife's jewels and other valuables so that the Company's merchants could afford to pay for the renewal of the Company's privileges by the new Afghan regime after the city had fallen.²⁷ He did this while also offering to loan the merchants further sums to be repaid at Gombroon (Bandar Abbas), where both the English and their dependents planned to flee once permitted to leave Isfahan. Stephen went on to negotiate with the Afghans for the safety of the English factory and its inhabitants with the victorious Afghans, seemingly being sent alone to do so, rather than directly translating or interpreting for one of the Englishmen during the interaction. Stephen was then clearly invested in the Company's business success, working to secure the Company's rights under the new Afghan government and also trusted enough to carry out an extremely sensitive mission on his own initiative. It was only after the siege had ended and all the merchants and their attendants had safely left Isfahan that arguments flared up over Stephen's conduct. He was found to have been selling the Company's goods fraudulently during the siege in order to raise money for his own use, including by sending cloth to Shiraz, where he and his family were responsible for the Company's vineyard. He was also accused of using his standing with the Company to gain protection for his village and family from the Afghans, rather than relying on the grants given to his English employers. Lastly, Stephen was found to have attempted to draw on the Company's credit with the Afghans to pay tax on his own vineyard and stores in Shiraz, while deliberately detaining the Company's merchants in Isfahan.²⁸ Stephen's behaviour and the Company's response to it are illustrative of the general ubiquity of the linguist as not only an interpreter but also as an independent actor imbued with authority through their association with

²⁶ This could be rendered several possible ways into modern spelling: Stepan, Stephan, Stephen, Davit, David or Davityan. For the sake of clarity and rather than guessing, the spelling from the archival document will be retained.

²⁷ Consultation of Thursday 30th April 1730, IOR/G/29/15 f.112v.

²⁸ Letter to the Court of Directors from Isfahan 28th June 1726, IOR/G/29/15 ff.239v-41.

the English and their business. Stephen was able to sell the Company's goods with relative impunity, while his *Vakil* (agent) was able to draw significant sums of money to cover the tax demanded by the Afghans. This case clearly shows how Company employment opened up significant opportunities for its linguists, in addition to the latitude the standing of their employers gave them.

Previous studies, particularly those of Ferrier and Aslanian, have looked at the Company's linguists through the lens of the Armenian heritage and identity of many of those that held the post. While Armenians often held these positions, ethnic and religious identity was not a prerequisite or defining feature of the post. Indeed, Stephen's actions, particularly regarding his protection of familial business interests ahead of those of his employers, signalled a break in this policy. After Stephen and then later his brother were removed from Company service, they were replaced by a different pair of brothers, Joseph and Stephen Hermet.²⁹ Joseph was employed first to act for the Company at Bandar Abbas and the entry in the Company's diaries and letters gives a good insight as to why he was chosen:

We approve the Orders from Bombay of their entertaining Joseph Hermet as the Chief knows him to be a diligent brisk young man and we doubt not by the Resident's Instructions he will soon become capable to transact the Honourable Company's affairs besides being of French parents and having no wife or family in Persia he has not that Tye on him as an Armenian would to byass him from the Company's interests which we shall therefore represent to Bombay to use our endeavours for his confirmation.³⁰

The content of this letter is very telling; the Company was actively trying to shift away from employing Armenians in this most sensitive role in order to keep separate the business of Company and employee. The choice of Hermet who clearly had some connection to the Company in India and had the requisite language skills represented a transition away from the Company's reliance on, and competition with, Armenian vested interests. The employment of Hermet also fundamentally changed the face of the Company for its Persian interlocutors, who had always previously interacted with a familiar, Armenian, façade of Company business. Hermet, French ancestry notwithstanding, was far more familiar to his employers than to their customers and other servants.

The dismissal of the Daud brothers did not mark the end of the Company's merchants hiring and deploying Armenians in Persia for various purposes and missions. 'Khwaja Gregore' an Armenian merchant resident in Basaidu, the major town on the island of Kishm, was tasked with checking whether

²⁹ Letter to Bombay dispatched from Gombroon 2nd April 1733, IOR/G/29/16 f.86.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

ships that called there had the relevant, Company issued passes, showing that they had paid freight charges to the English either in India or upon entering the Gulf.³¹ Gregore does not appear to have been paid directly for this service. Instead, he seems to have engaged the Company in business carrying his goods to India while buying and selling portions of cargoes brought to Persia by the English merchants. He was one of many who did so: the Company's records of their Persian trade, particularly bills of lading, are filled with the names of Armenian merchants taking advantage of the Company's large, fast and relatively well-armed ships.³² The relationship between the Armenian community and English merchants was clearly interconnected interpersonally and in business. However, as the case of Joseph Hermet shows, this close contact was not always desirable. Instead, artificial distance between the linguist and merchant communities resident in Persia was promoted in order to better serve the Company's needs. Armenian merchants worked with the Company, not because of the 1688 agreement, but rather out of a clear sense of self-interest, whether that be communal or individual. Stephen Daud and his brother drew large salaries, while gaining favoured status for their family's wine business, while Khwaja Gregore acted on the Company's behalf while shipping large quantities of goods on English ships.

The Armenians were not the only mercantile community in Persia to enjoy a close relationship with the Company in this period. Banians, a general term for a large number of different religious and ethnic communities from South Asia, were also present in Bandar Abbas and fulfilled the vital function of acting as the Company's brokers. The familial and business networks of Persia's Banians represented one of the few ways of accessing financial instruments or cash between India and the Gulf, something the Company was incapable of in its own right until well into the eighteenth century. Bandar Abbas and Mocha were no exceptions to this, with Banians acting on the Company's behalf as brokers, purchasers and, on occasions, translators and interpreters as well. Superficially, we see some similarities between Persia and India: for example, the reliance on families of merchants to act as brokers across generations was common, with the office of broker in Bandar Abbas passing from father to son. What is missing again, as with the Armenians, is the intermarriage between Company merchants in Persia and the Banians who acted as their brokers. Here, we again see that Banian families and merchants accepted employment by the Company not only primarily due to familial ties with English merchants or residency in an English settlement but also for separate personal gain. Unlike the linguists, the brokers were not paid a salary, instead they were given

³¹ Consultation on Tuesday 3rd December, IOR/G/29/5 f.13v.

³² Lists of freight in the year 1729, IOR/G/29/16 f.21-v.

privileged access to the Company's goods and permitted to levy a charge on transactions which they oversaw. They were also paid a 1% brokerage on all sales transacted under their auspices, a clear sign of the physical presence when the Company's business was being undertaken. In Persia, this often took the form of first refusal in purchasing consignments of English cloth, for which Persia's hinterlands away from the sweltering coasts of the Persian Gulf were a major market.³³ The Company's diaries relate that on occasion, particularly after the fall of the Safavids in 1722, the brokers made a loss on the prices they paid to the Company for cloth, accepting short-term losses in order to retain their position and status. It is necessary to note here especially that the broker was not coerced or forced to do this; in fact, the Company's merchants are surprised at the relative willingness of the broker to do so.

the Broker has been the sole Purchaser of the woollen goods for some years past, soo we beg leave to assure your Honours as he has been rather a loser than a gainer in the bargain at the prices which we have rather obliged him to give for them, which is the reason why they have not varied much³⁴

This broker, 'Sanchar Heridas', clearly valued his place as the Company's source of ready cash and credit in Persia enough to accept some financial losses over the medium term. This must, of course, be further contextualized by the fact that the cloth that was losing him money was only one of his many business interests in Persia, the wider Gulf and India so that absorbing these losses was not necessarily as painful as it might appear. Sanchar's financial relationship to the Company was even more complex than this. He is noted on several occasions to have been both indebted to certain merchants, including John Geekie, the Agent, while also having substantial sums owed to him by others.³⁵ Later, Sanchar also found himself indebted to the Company due to the persistent political turmoil in throughout the 1730s. Rather than dismissing him, seizing his goods or taking other punitive measures, Sanchar was given a small credit with the Company's factory in Persia in order to maintain his trade and in recognition of his existing 'excellent credit'.³⁶ Keeping Sanchar financially liquid was a sensible move by the Persian factory's Council, as his ability to continue transacting his own commercial activities maintained his individual credit, through which the Company borrowed and channelled supplies of hard cash. Sanchar's reputation and presence was clearly a direct reflection of the Company's own in the money markets and bazaars of the Gulf Coast's port cities and

³³ IOR/G/29/16 f.178v Letter to the Court of Directors from Gombroon 28th January 1738.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ IOR/G/29/16 f.212 Letter to the Court of Directors from Gombroon 31st March 1739.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, f.222.

the Persian hinterland. Due to the relative lack of detail given by the Company's sources on the brokers, it is often hard to trace whether they were part of intermarried or related groups or households. Sometimes, the Company employed the son of the last incumbent to his father's position. This was the case with 'Kefsourjee', who was appointed after his father's death.³⁷ When Sanchar replaced his predecessor 'Chittra', he was obliged to pay a stipend to Chittra's family as a condition of his employment.³⁸ The families of brokers also enjoyed other benefits, including the intervention on their behalf by the Company in legal and property disputes, gifts at Christmas and Persian New Year (Nowruz) and personal celebrations like weddings.³⁹ Sanchar eventually chose to leave the Company's service due to the continued disquiet within Persia's markets. He was permitted to do so, while continuing to do business with the Company directly and with individual merchants. The fringe benefits of Company service were extensive, encompassing protection for the brokers' business interests, personal finances and familial wellbeing even after the death of the incumbent.

Thus when looking at both the role of linguist and broker in the context of Persia, the need to place Armenian and Banian individuals at the centre of the Company's business and interactions with local merchants and officials becomes ever clearer. While the Company experimented with different combinations of families, relying by turns on different Armenian families, whether from Julfa, or those involved in the Company's other trades such as wine. At the same time, the Banians employed to act as brokers maintained individual business interests, often intertwined with those of the Company in Persia and beyond. In both Isfahan and Bandar Abbas, that while a European might be present at different commercial negotiations or political discussions, they were almost invariably represented by the holder of one of these two positions. In Persia, it is very difficult to gauge the ability of the Company's merchants to converse in the local vernacular. At different times, we see the Company's merchants acting independently without the presence of a linguist or interpreter; both William Cordeux and Danvers Graves who both served at Kerman in this period both appear to have done so alone, with Graves even conversing with Nader Shah without mediation.⁴⁰ The Company's merchants also undertook their own private business, which may have been organized with the assistance of the broker and linguists, though this is not clearly attested. It seems most likely that the roles of the linguist and broker were reserved for the Company's official business, while private merchants had to make do with their own skills. In any case, both positions were essential to the smooth running of

³⁷ IOR/G/29/4 f.75v Consultation on Wednesday 12th July 1727.

³⁸ IOR/G/29/5 f.110 Consultation on Monday 27th April 1730.

³⁹ Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 143.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xv-xvii.

the Company's business and those who held each role enjoyed numerous privileges and perquisites associated with it, making Company employment both relatively secure and also highly lucrative. When one adds to this the legal protection the Company was able to extend over its non-European employees and their families through its Farmān, Company employment in Safavid Persia appears yet more attractive.⁴¹

In Mocha, the situation was rather different for a variety of reasons. First of all, the Company's Farmān, which was granted and renewed in a similar way to its counterpart in Persia, did not protect or recognize any rights for non-European employees. In fact it did little more than guarantee the Company's merchants freedom to trade in Yemen's various ports and coffee-growing regions, in addition to some guarantees for the safety of the Company's goods and shipping.⁴² Even after a change of government in 1728, the Company's only added concession from the new Imam was the removal of a 2% tax, known as 'verah' or 'verar' which was levied against 'Moors' (Muslim) goods transported on Company ships.⁴³ This tax appears to have been grounded in a desire by Mocha's rulers to protect the trade of local merchants both in the immediate area of their authority and also in the trade with India by imposing additional taxation on non-Muslim shipping and commerce. The religious imperative to protect Muslims and their trade from European encroachment was not present in the Company's dealings with Persia, where, as we have seen, a plurality of religious and ethnic groups transacted their business. In Mocha, this confessional divide was a constant issue for the Company.

Here, we return to the case of Sheikh Hadi, as the complaints against him and his conduct are rooted in a perceived incompatibility between Company service by a Muslim in a Muslim country;

Your broker, Sheikh Haddy being as you mention grown too proud for a servant its time you should lay him aside but to supply his place from hence is impracticable and to send you one from Surat would be continuing you under the same inconvenience you already complain of, they being all of a haughty insulting nature and unfit for servants under a government of their own religion, you must therefore employ a banian, who are best qualified for the office of brokers and can bring you word when the governor will be spoke with that when you have any thing to say to him, an Englishman may be sent with the message as we do suppose you cannot want such in the factory that understand the language enough to be thoroughly understood and then you will be certain of that message being delivered and of the answer given which the brokers oftentimes deceive you in.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 127–51 and Good, 'The East India Company's Farmān'.

⁴² IOR/G/17/1 f.3-4v.

⁴³ IOR/G/17/2 f.5v.

⁴⁴ IOR/G/17/1 pt.2 ff.191-v Letter to the Council at Mocha from William Phipps and the Council at Bombay 30th November 1722.

Here, we see parallels with the Company's complaints against the Persian linguist, Stephen Daud. Both Stephen and Sheikh Hadi were accused of allowing their personal business to interfere with the running of the Company's affairs. In Stephen's case, his loyalty to his family was at issue; with Sheikh Hadi, the suggestion is that he used the latitude that his religious affiliation gave him with the local authorities to turn the Company's business to his advantage. Previously, his service had been acceptable both in Bombay and Mocha, where he had managed the Company's accounts, including investigating potential frauds.⁴⁵ The conflict that arose is not explained any further, although clearly Hadi's conduct in his dealings with Company authorities both in Bombay and Mocha had given enough cause for his dismissal to be a foregone conclusion. The following year after a stay in 'Sinan' (Sana'a), Hadi had returned to Mocha, following its capture by the new Imam 'Sydee Hosson' (Syed Hassan), whose father's death had precipitated a rebellion by various regional governors, including in Mocha.⁴⁶ The erstwhile former broker carried with him an order from Syed Hassan which appointed him broker, not just to the English Company, but to all Europeans. Needless to say, the Company's response to this was swift, with Hadi being rebuked firmly by the English and his services being refused by the French and Dutch commercial agents. After this, Hadi did not try again to enforce this new privilege upon the Europeans of Mocha.⁴⁷ This latter event shows the potential complications of working with a local agent with political connections beyond the remit of the Company. Hadi was able to use his own networks to gain official recognition of his position within European business interests, despite his having been dismissed by them in the past. The Company's Agent in Mocha, Francis Dickinson, was able to counter this by organizing the French and Dutch in a united front against Hadi, aided by his own good relations with the local governor, 'Sied Hosson Eben Sallah', and 'Sidee Hamed', the new Imam's brother.⁴⁸ Dickinson was unusual in being a fluent Arabic speaker himself and did not reappoint a local broker for some time after Hadi's dismissal, instead undertaking negotiations with local merchants and potentates on his own behalf. The only mention of any interpreter assisting Dickinson in communicating with these local powers comes when the 'Arabic Scrivan', a scribe or copywriter, is shown on the Company's payroll in the town, receiving 10 Spanish Dollars for unspecified work.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ IOR/G/17/1 f.97v Letter from Charles Boone, Governor of Bombay to Henry Albert, Chief at Mocha on 3rd November 1721.

⁴⁶ IOR/G/17/2 pt.1 f.3 Letter from the Council at Bombay (William Phipps, Robert Cowan, Henry Lowther, Theodore Rammell, Arthur Upton) to Francis Dickinson, Commissary for Affairs of the English Nation at Mocha, 1728.

⁴⁷ IOR/G/17/2 pt.1 f.10v Letter from Dickinson to the Board of Directors 25th April 1729.

⁴⁸ IOR/G/17/2 pt.1 f.11 Letter from Dickinson to the Board of Directors 25th April 1729.

⁴⁹ IOR/G/17/2 pt.1 f.1v Letter from the Council at Bombay (William Phipps, Robert Cowan, Henry Lowther, Theodore Rammell, Arthur Upton) to Francis Dickinson, Commissary for Affairs of the English Nation at Mocha, 1728.

This Mocha 'Scrivan' is one of many unnamed local people who fulfilled various tasks throughout the Company's factories in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. These included Banians dispatched to oversee the inland portion of the coffee trade, which was managed from the coast by European merchants. While we know more about Stephen and Hadi than these other brokers, likely because of the trouble that they caused, the others' namelessness, or rather their appearance within the archives only as job titles with attached salaries, gives us an impression of the diversity of functions performed by non-Europeans. Mocha had its Arabic scribe, Bandar Abbas had a 'Persian Writer', both of whom presumably fulfilled the same function of writing up official correspondence in a fine hand. The Persian Writer, 'Mullah Zenaul' or 'Tenaul', presumably a local clergyman, accompanied the Company's linguist and broker on various missions and errands during the most violent period of the Afghan occupation.⁵⁰ For this he was paid 1,400 *shahis* (£17 10s) annually, which put his salary rather above that of the majority of the Europeans. It seems likely that co-opting the Mullah's spiritual authority, not just his penmanship, was an attempt by the Company to further protect their non-European employees from harm, as well as themselves.

In Persia, there were several other specialist merchants and brokers appointed to support particular areas or functions of the Company's business. We have already seen that the Daud family produced wine for the Company to use and sell in significant quantities, while also functioning as linguists. In Kerman, the brokers responsible for gathering the Company's investment in wool, for which the city was famous, were members of the same family, with the position being passed down through three generations over the course of 50 years. The brokers, Khosrow, Siavush and Esfandiar were paid 1 toman (£2 10s) per month and were given a valuable *Khalat* robe on their accession to their position with the Company.⁵¹ The giving of these robes was a mainstay of Persianate displays of patronage and protection throughout the Indian Ocean World. The bestowal of the robe was another way in which the Company was showing that its patronage had been extended to these men, which proved particularly valuable in 1747 when the city of Kerman was sacked by Nader Shah. Their names which come from the pre-Islamic Sassanian canon and the text of the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) strongly suggest that the wool brokers were Zoroastrian, as does their presence in Kerman and role in the wool trade. This is borne out in Dutch accounts of the capture of the city by the Afghans in 1720, when large numbers of Zoroastrians clashed with Muslims, particularly those who had recently converted to Islam.⁵² Company service for these men was clearly a sensible choice, both in terms of securing customers for the wool in which they already traded, while also guaranteeing a regular

⁵⁰ IOR/G/29/5 ff.29-29v, f.133, f.184, f.298.

⁵¹ IOR/G/29/17 f.39v.

⁵² Rudi Mathee, *The East India Company Trade in Kerman Wool, 1658–1730* (Etudes Safavide, 1993), 376.

salary. Their status as members of a religious minority within Persia made them vulnerable to state interference and persecution, so the Company's ability to extend legal protections to its servants was a valuable added dimension to the attraction of Company employment.

The examples given this paper show that Company service for non-Europeans in the early eighteenth century was contingent on a variety of economic, social and legal factors. The co-opting of Armenian and Banian financial expertise in both Persia and Mocha was not linked to familial or personal connections to Company merchants, nor to agreements made on behalf of particular families. Instead, the Company offered competitive salaries, often in excess of those paid to the British merchants alongside whom the non-European linguists and brokers worked. When combined with the potential benefits to individuals and families which Company service represented, it is clear that the impetus for retaining positions in the Company's hierarchy were predicated on personal advancement which was largely unattainable for members of religious and ethnic outgroups within Persian and Yemeni society. Vested interests, whether through family, religious, political ties, or business connections with particular industries, often discounted individuals from remaining in the Company's employ. Dismissal of non-Europeans was predicated on contravention of good practice or other malfeasance, while some, like Sanchar, left the Company's service of their own accord without prejudice, continuing to patronize the Company with his business after his formal connection ended. While James Onley has shown that by the nineteenth century, the salaries for native agents within the empire were low, with value being conferred far more through association with the structures of imperial patronage, the early eighteenth century presently a clearly different situation.⁵³ The Company and its merchants as individual traders were reliant on the expertise of non-Europeans for their financial wellbeing, not to mention the need to overcome barriers of language and court customs. The importance and ubiquity of these individuals, their high salaries and the consistent attention paid by the Company's local hierarchy to their safety and wellbeing, as well as that of their families represent a distinct model separate from the racial segregation of the 'black town' of Bombay. While the English in India could marry into the families of local potentates or business magnates, this was not an option for the small, often transitory communities of Englishmen in the factories of Persia and Arabia. Loyalty and good service were available to the Company but were earned through the promise of enhanced business prospects, high salaries and the promise of patronage and protection that were otherwise unattainable, or simply non-existent.

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⁵³ James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford, 2007), 70–1 and 76.

Abstract

Throughout the Early Modern Period, European trading companies in the Indian Ocean were reliant upon the advice, service and assistance of non-European, non-Christian agents, brokers and translators. These individuals came from diverse backgrounds, from Christian Armenians to Hindu Banians and local Muslims from Persia and the Arabian Peninsula. While the work of some scholars, notably Sebouh Aslanian, Vahe Baladouni and Margaret Makepeace, have centred particularly on the Armenians, and James Onley's work focuses on the period of informal empire and the concept of 'collaboration', studies up until now having focused on particular individuals or communities rather than taking a broader view. This article will go some way to rectifying this by examining the different roles played by the various employees of the English East India Company from non-European backgrounds in Persia and Yemen. These roles were necessary for the practical administration of the Company's business, including access to financial instruments, commodities and markets, translation services. These intermediaries also assisted Europeans in navigating properly courtly and social conduct when dealing with local and visiting officials and the social circles of local communities and structures. Some of these roles have often been associated with particular diasporic and local communities; however, as this chapter will show, the compartmentalization of particular roles to different ethnic or religious groups is often inaccurate. By using the records of the East India Company, travel accounts and the memoirs of merchants, this chapter will explore the extensive and invaluable contribution of non-European and non-Christian actors.