

Perspectives for a Comparative Cultural History of the Ostend Company Interactions in Bengal and China

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A Historical-Anthropological View of the Ostend Company

When the Southern Netherlands were removed from Spanish control in 1713, merchants and sailors had to seek alternatives for continuing their maritime trading activities, and departed for South Asia under the Austrian flag. They attempted to establish trade in Gujarat, on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, and eventually in Bengal and China. In 1722, the “General Imperial India Company (GIC)” was established. It was also named the “Ostend Company”, after its port of departure.¹ This company rented an annual trading post in Canton, and established its own factory or trading establishment in Bengal, which was later unjustly called the first Belgian colony.²

Due to both a colonial and econocentric bias, aspects of cultural interaction in the GIC’s history have hitherto been neglected.³ However, an approach focusing on such cultural interaction can be of great value for a history of cross-cultural exchange in the Indian Ocean World.

In order to obtain trading establishments and privileges, social and courtly negotiations were required. These established conditions for the possibility of any further presence or economic activity in Bengal and China. In these negotiations, GIC-agents were considered as foreigners and placed into a submissive relationship with local authorities. As their ways seemed unpredictable, and communication with them was difficult, institutional arrangements were made expressing different foreign policies.⁴ The contents of the GIC archives reveal a much larger amount of source material on Bengal than on China. This might be explained by a difference in foreign policies of authorities in these two areas.

1 De Winter and Parmentier 2013, 35-42.

2 De Winter 2014.

3 As I argue in De Winter 2014.

4 Curtin (1984, 1) pinpointed the difficulties of cross-cultural trade.

This article attempts to reveal possibilities and topics for a historical-anthropological study of the GIC's cross-cultural interactions through comparative archival research. Such a study should investigate beyond spatial elements of interaction, or flows of commodities, by also taking into account the roles of culture, community and agency. In its anthropological approach, this present research considers culture as contextual processes of learning, rather than as a system or structure.⁵ Comparative research on these processes of learning can be undertaken by considering sources as "virtual informants".⁶ One can carry out such research on the GIC in Bengal and Canton, by comparing the personal diaries and letters of some of its agents, revealing how they had to participate in and make sense of foreign customs and policies from the perspective of an environment characterised by maritime trade.

The Learning Process of Two Agents of the General Imperial India Company in China and Bengal

In order to obtain trading privileges and a factory in Bengal, an embassy consisting of Jacobus-André Cobbé (1682–1724), merchant Alexander Hume and Captain John Harrison was sent out to the Nawab of Murshidabad in 1723.⁷ Part of its negotiations included threats and actions to block the Ganges-river shipping, the forging of alliances with local benefactors, and handing out of expensive gifts. In China, such a context of negotiation seemed unthinkable, as fixed rules were in place according to which European trading companies were assigned to specific merchants and lodges.⁸ In Chinese or Japanese waters, European trading companies were highly aware of the need to conduct trade by negotiation, instead of taking vessels by force, which would "make them into robbers".⁹ However, this awareness also shows that the possibility of using force was considered by European maritime trading companies. The GIC employed this strategy of force twice in Bengal, with disastrous consequences. In 1724, Cobbé decided to force the slow process of negotiations by halting all "Moorish shipping" on the Ganges, a strategy he learned from former employees of the East Indian Company (EIC), Hume and Harrison. Therefore, he hijacked the

5 An anthropological method proposed by Pinxten and Orye 1997, 23-26.

6 Cf. Pinxten and Orye 1997, 38.

7 Cf. De Winter and Parmentier 2013, 44.

8 An administrative structure which was described in great detail by Van Dyke 2007, 1-3.

9 Cf. Pratt 1821, 152.

heavy freighting ship of the wealthy Armenian merchant Khoja Mahomet Fazl and his son, destined for Surat. These events sparked a reaction from the authorities, resulting in a small-scale war in which Cobbé lost his life.¹⁰

One can examine the influence of Cobbé's textual universe on his personal interactions during this embassy, by referring to his personal library and letters. For instance, reading François Bernier's (1620–1688) 1711 published account of travels in Moghul India¹¹ might have provided him with knowledge that influenced his worldview and actions. In Bernier's account, he would have read about the importance of courtly embassies sent to the Mughal emperor Shahjahan (1592–1666),¹² the bestowing of gifts such as richly decorated robes or daggers by emperor Aurangzeb (1618–1707),¹³ and the preparation for the ceremony of the Salam:

Which was to be represented, as well as that of delivering all letters through the medium of a third person, as a custom that has invariably obtained from time immemorial.¹⁴

When the time came for Cobbé to prepare his own courtly visits, this text might have complemented his own experience as well as the advice he received. This goes beyond an intra-European learning process, as there was a considerable influence of informants, brokers and intermediaries on the practical learning process. In particular, a local informant told him about the importance of performative courtly acts in Bengal: all conditions and negotiations were already fixed beforehand, through requests and contracts, but could be cancelled if the requirements of a formal personal audience were not correctly fulfilled.¹⁵ To do this, he received practical advice from the Armenian merchant Coje Delon, who instructed him on “the ordinary Customs of making the Salaams, Sitting and more Moorish manners”.¹⁶

Cobbé's account can be compared with the reflections of Canton merchant Robert Hewer, through his personal diary, on his dealings with Chinese offi-

10 Cf. Prims 1927, 262.

11 A list of Cobbé's books features, amongst other works, Bernier's *Voyages* in two volumes. An edition of this was printed 1711 in Amsterdam.

12 Bernier 1916, 127.

13 Bernier 1916, 184.

14 Bernier 1916, 146.

15 Cobbé 1723–1724, 106.

16 Cobbé 1723–1724, 51. Saalam is an alternative writing form for Salam.

cials and merchants. Hewer mentions the advice he received from Portuguese, French and Chinese merchants upon arrival in Macao

who gave us a miserable Account of all affairs relating to the trade & Commerce of Canton; that the Fewen or Vice Roy was a very ill man, a perfect Tyrant and the very worse ever filld up that Post, and beyond repression had miserably oppressed all the trade and Merchant at Canton, by making new Impositions, and additional Duties on trade, where he had confind all the trade with the Europeans, to be negotiated with six men; and that no trade was to be done without his having the greatest share and profit therein, we also found here severall merchants of Canton whose Informations were much the same.¹⁷

In Canton, he received visits from “all the Chief Merchants of this place & find all the Reports we hear at Macao confirmd or rather worse”.¹⁸ Just like in Bengal, he mentions courtly visits were required in order to establish the conditions of trade:

We are always petitioning to have an Audience of the Vice Roy, but find it impracticable, till his Tryal and Examination is finished, till when we know not what to do, no Linguist dare come nigh us, or to speak to us [...] I know not whatt to think of the affairs att this place. I hear so many different Stories from different People. However from the whole I conclude it will be bad enough.¹⁹

Getting reliable information, and knowing how to use it, proved difficult. Hewer’s anguish and confusion are almost tangible, when he writes that:

Our present Circumstances gives me many Melancholy Reflections for should we ever consent to suffer any of these new Impositions, they will always make it a Presidem for the Future, and Prhaps I shall have that ill character put upon me as the Beginer of them but then to remain here in doubt and run the Risque of loosing our Passage [...] I know not what to do.²⁰

Courtly visits were crucial in Bengal as well as China, in order to create or influence the circumstances for maritime trade, and to position oneself in the foreign policy. Hewer mentions the Chinese merchants accompanied him to

an Audience with the Fewen, being received with great pomp & Magnificence [...] after we was introduced to his presence by a Chief mandarine, and being seated in Chairs, We let him know by our Linguist, that our Ship belonged to the Imperial

17 Hewer 1726, 4f.

18 Hewer 1726, 9.

19 Hewer 1726, 11.

20 Hewer 1726, 12.

Company [...] and that we was Subjects of his Imperial Majesty and come here to Trade, and desired his Favour and Protection. [...] and that it was our own inclination brought us here and therefore we hoped he would be so gracious, as not to put any new Impositions upon us and that we desired to be received as in the time of the Late Old Emperour [...] he seemingly with some Difficulty told us by our Linguist that he agreed to them; he then recommended us, not to attempt to run any goods, and that we would take care that the Sailors committed no abuses; and then, after having drank two or three Glasses of wine we took our Leaves, and he said that no other Ship would have such good Conditions. We had some doubt during the Conference, that our Linguist did not represent the Case as we stated it, to the Few-en, but had made wrong Interpretations and answers through design and Roguery.²¹

The comparison between China and Bengal reveals different contexts in which merchants-diplomats were facing similar decisions on the information they could acquire or the behaviour they could learn. Sanjay Subrahmanyam has characterised such processes of learning as situations which did not necessarily represent mutual indifference or incomprehension, but show “shifting vocabularies and changes wrought over time by improvisations that eventually themselves become part of a received tradition”.²² These improvisations becoming tradition seemed to be precisely what Hewer was struggling with, in his fear for creating a precedent.

A Longue Durée Comparison of Cultural Customs

The comparative approach can also be extended in collaboration with other research, in order to reveal complementary perspectives or intersections on similar topics. As an example, a comparison of the above GIC-diaries and records with the section on Bengal in Shen Maoshang’s 慎懋賞 *Siyi guangji* 四夷廣記, compiled from information dating back to at least the fifteenth or sixteenth century,²³ reveals some striking continuities in customs and culture of Mughal Bengal, which lasted for at least several centuries. This comparison can also reveal the ways in which European and Chinese chroniclers attached different importance or meaning to these elements. The *Siyi guangji* discusses how color and style of dress “conform [to] the system of the Muslims” under a sec-

21 Hewer 1726, 15f.

22 Subrahmanyam 2012, 29.

23 As mentioned in Papelitzky’s *Introduction to the Siyi guangji*, in this volume.

tion on “the Administrative System of Bengal”.²⁴ This section reveals how Chinese authors deemed clothing as an important sign of administration.

Official styles of clothing are also mentioned in Cobbé’s description of receiving an embroidered serapah, or official robe, on his first courtly visit in Cabelon, which he considered as a distinct sign of personal honour,²⁵ rather than an administrative sign. The actual giving of robes of honour formed part of the Mughal ritual of *khilat*, which signified the subordination of the recipient.²⁶ This was part of a ritual and idiom of subordination reminiscent of gradual relations to a master in sufism,²⁷ as an expression of loyalty towards Mughal ruling elites, through Persianate cultural forms belonging to a unifying ideology.²⁸

Another custom mentioned in the *Siyi guangji* was that “The people do not have tea, [and so] they offer betel nuts to the guests”.²⁹ This refers to the importance of tea in the receiving of guests, as Chinese custom.³⁰ Chinese sources seemed to consider betel nuts as holding the same significance. GIC-accounts also mention the importance of betel and rosewater in both formal and informal encounters. On concluding his court visit in Cabelon, Cobbé received betel and rosewater from the governor, and had the special honour and distinction of smoking tobacco from the governor’s own pipe.³¹ Cobbé also used betel and rosewater in receiving guests, revealing his awareness of its use, stating in his diary how he escorted a guest and

regaled him with Rosewater and betels, and let him depart with a small gift. – Note. The small gift and good treatment were done because aforementioned is a very good friend of the Moorish gouvernor and, as they tell us, has many friends at the Nabab’s court.³²

Of course its refusal was equally significant, indicating a breach of protocol. Cobbé’s diary mentions how merchant Hume treated a local governor disrespectfully by immediately wanting to discuss business matters, to which the governor replied:

24 Sen 2005, 508.

25 Cf. Cobbé 1722–1724.

26 Pinch 2012, 4.

27 Gommans 2002, 61.

28 Metcalf and Metcalf 2012, 17.

29 Sen 2005, 509.

30 Which was also a Japanese custom, as mentioned in De Winter 2013, 576.

31 Cf. Cobbé 1722–1724.

32 Cobbé 1723–1724, 15.

That Hume didn't seem to know how privileges were obtained in this country, and that he acted like a child, though if he wanted to know how to behave, he could come to him for instruction [...] when the betels came, he presented them with his own hand to Cobbé and his secretary, but not to Hume.³³

This demonstrates how mistakes were made in the learning process of courtly ritual. The gift of betel and rosewater was a traditional custom in courtly visits, as part of a range of symbols and codes of behaviour present at the Mughal court, which belonged to the lifestyle of a gentry class and its social recognition.³⁴ Similar experiences were already reported by Ibn Batutta (1304–1369), during his 1343 visit of the Maldives court, where robes were exchanged and betel and rosewater were brought in, as signs of honour.³⁵ In Mogadishu he was likewise offered betel nuts on a tray, and was showered by a pitcher of Damascus rosewater.³⁶ As Somalia also borders the Indian Ocean, the custom could have been imported through the influence of Persian Muslim traders.

In Canton, the use of betel obviously did not occur, as that custom belonged to a Persianised courtly culture not existing in China. However, tea also remains unmentioned in GIC-sources, except as a trading commodity. Instead, Hewer indicates the drinking of wine when received by the Fewen,³⁷ or in serving the appointed Mandarin who came to measure their Ship in Canton.³⁸ A further comparative investigation of tribute between Europeans, Bengal and China, could also be carried out, investigating which gifts mediated human relations. These gifts can also be considered as valuable carriers of specific meanings, such as in the case of betels and rosewater.

Armenian Merchants as Cultural Intermediaries

For the learning process of courtly culture, and in daily social or economical interactions, intermediaries were needed. In Canton this was the role of the linguists, compradors, or Canton merchants themselves. In Bengal there were fewer restrictions on social and commercial interaction. On the basis of a 1727 Cassembazar account book, containing a balance of all income and expenses of the GIC in that trading post, a list of merchants and agents involved in their

33 Paraphrased from *Dagboek en klad van M. Cobbé* in Prims 1927, 92f.

34 Haque 1992, 122.

35 Dunn 2004, 231.

36 Dunn 2004, 124.

37 Hewer 1726, 16.

38 Hewer 1726, 30f.

trade can be established. Adding up the values of individual debts and profits, one finds a distribution of the total capital circulating between local and GIC-merchants. This serves as an indicator of the main merchants involved in interactions. The frequency of the highest capital flows also seems to indicate the highest rate of contact, registered as separate trading encounters. For the Banquibazar factory, which was the GIC's main trading post in Bengal, there were ten principal merchants. Due to their names and contextual cross-reference with narrative sources, at least six of them can be identified as Armenians.³⁹

Cobbé's diary also mentions frequent social visits and encounters with Armenian or Persian merchants, such as Aga Moetaer:

Walking through Hughli, we were invited by a Moorish Merchant named Gardens Ceik and were well received, when we were requested to see a beautiful garden belonging to the Persian merchant Aga Moetaer, when we left after receiving betels and rosewater &c. to the house of that Persian merchant; who regaled his Excellence with much politeness and invited for dinner, and also arranged music to be performed for the duration of our stay.⁴⁰

The merchants in Canton had little occasion for such visits, except for the occasional invitation at a Chinese merchant's house, for as Hewer mentioned:

We Observe that no Person comes nigh our Factory but the Six Merchants aforementioned, and severall of the Shops and little Merchants that we have been with, tell us, if we buy any thing of them; they cannott have Liberty to Ship it off. Which I find is a truth that my Intelligence is true, but we find we can have no Redress.⁴¹

The crucial role of Armenian merchants as intermediaries in courtly interactions can be explained by what Edmund Herzig points out as their privileged relationship with the Persian Safavid Court, as a vital element in their commerce.⁴² This implies their familiarity with Persianate cultural forms and ideology, through which they could also easily integrate into a Mughal courtly environment, even as royal agents and ambassadors.⁴³ The wealthy Armenian merchants in Bengal originated from New Julfa, near the Persian city of Isfahan, and had great influence and friendship at the royal courts of Bengal.⁴⁴ This would have made them perfect mediators for guiding European or foreign

39 Cf. "Colonie de Banquebazar L. Liasse. Rekeningen, dagboek enz. Van Cassembazar 1727".

40 Cobbé 1723–1724, 12f.

41 Hewer 1726, 27.

42 Herzig 1991, 11.

43 As indicated in Seth 1937, 4–15.

44 Sinha 1956, 67f.

merchants in the spheres of shared Persianate cultural forms between Mughal India and Persia. The *Siyi guangji* also points to these shared cultural forms, or might even already refer to merchants coming from Persia, when stating that “There are also people who speak Parsi”⁴⁵ in Bengal. The quote itself originates from the 1433 *Yingya shenglan* 瀛涯勝覽 by Ma Huan 馬歡 (fl. 1414–1451), which mentioned some people spoke Parsi language.⁴⁶ This might indicate the presence of Persian or even Armenian merchants in Bengal for at least two hundred years before the GIC’s interactions.

Through the accounts of a seventeenth century Armenian merchant, we also know that an Armenian company was even trading between India, Lhasa and China.⁴⁷ At latest by the 1790s, Europeans also mention the presence of Armenian merchants in Canton, such as the Armenian Mattheus Joannes (d. 1794), who invited the European merchants for a meal.⁴⁸ The GIC-sources therefore also enable a comparative view on the role of interactions with the Armenian community in Bengal and China.

A Contingent History: Robbers and Shipwrecks as Calamities

The focus on processes of learning and interaction in the GIC-historiography runs the risk of presenting a history of structured and institutionally solid sets of practices, neglecting the role of unforeseen occurrences in shaping historical encounters. This becomes very clear when comparing shipwreck-situations in China as well as Bengal, and the resulting improvisations and attitudes of those involved in getting themselves and their cargo to safety, while being sheltered or hindered by local agents. For instance, when the 1724 ship *St. Carolus* stranded at the mouth of the Bengal River, many crew members drowned or were eaten by crocodiles. The people who came to shore were badly treated by locals and could not find supplies or lodgings.⁴⁹ This was also a common occurrence in Canton, as a 1791 account relates in great detail how a Dutch boat was destroyed in a hurricane, and the crew became lost when wandering through rice fields, where they were eventually received in a friendly fashion by the locals,

45 Sen 2005, 509.

46 Mills 1970, 161.

47 Curtin 1984, 193.

48 Braam Houckgeest 1791–1792, 39.

49 As mentioned in Luck, Cayphas and Hye-Hoys 1724 and in Cayphas 1724.

who even tried to help in recovering the boat.⁵⁰ Also, official reactions to the consequences of such disasters could be drastic, such as when Hewer mentions how the Fewen punished the Chinese merchant Chen Shouguan 陳壽觀, who was involved with the French, for the accidental loss of their ship.

The reason for this harsh punishment was probably an attempt by the Fewen to get his part of the taxes paid back by this merchant, or by the merchants as a group:

Suqua by order of the Fewen, was caried away in chains to the Quanchisew or Chief Officer of Justice & ther Confind with a Chain [...] about his neck, and put in the Publick prison, it is said that the Fewen is preposed, that he is the occason that the French Ship does not enter Port [...] whereas it is very well known that she ran ashore [...] & applied screws to his thumbs to force him to promise that the French ship would come into Port, tho' not in his power to do it [...] if all the Merchants had not gone in a Body to disuade him therefrom, & promised to make good the Loss. This shows what an Arbitrary Tyrannical creature this is.⁵¹

Hewer's depiction of the Fewen as a "tyrannical creature" is understandable in this context. However, this notion would have also been informed by and played into a negative view that European merchants held of Qing Chinese authorities since at least 1682. European maritime trading companies, such as the British EIC, were highly aware of this chronological endpoint to the period of Ming-Qing transition (1619–1683), and especially of the potentially disruptive effect of this transition on their maritime trade.⁵² In 1683, the "Tartars" were described by the EIC as "having taken all customs and liberties", even refusing the distribution of rice to local merchants' families.⁵³ Upon access to the Canton trade, it was made clear that the "Tartars" were in full power to deny admittance, and had to be obeyed:

We had at ye time brought a Present for his Excellence ye General; but since we were denyed admittance, we would not stay nor deliver it. Then wth. Abundance of springing complements, came & received ye Present; and told us if we would send it to ye General, he would goe [...] Ye General gave us many thanks for Or. Present, & was sorry, he could not show us more civility; for yt. did not lye in his power to permit us on shore, or into ye city to buy refreshment; but it was the Tartars, yt did oppose him, they have gotten most part of ye. Government of ye. Place, and in a man-

50 Braam Houckgeest 1791–1792, 54.

51 Hewer 1726, 81–82.

52 Pratt 1821, 259.

53 Pratt 1821, 312.

ner does wt. They please [...] ye Tartars being s great enemies, & hath threatened to inform against him. Herefore sent us word we must not have any thing [...] On ye morrow thee came and ankered by us fifteen sayl of Tartar warr boats, wth. An ordr. From ye. Emperour of Pekin, as they pretended yt. We must forthwth. Be gone from this place wth. Or. Ship & goods; & although they would not prmit us a Trade, they could not force us away until ye. Weather was fitting to goe hence in safty.⁵⁴

Calamities were thus not only of a natural, but also of a human kind. Therefore, one should also consider unexpected encounters with robbers and smugglers. Such an encounter is mentioned by Hewer, as taking place near the mouth of the Canton River, where him and his crew

lost our way in the Night, and came among a parcell of Rogues up a deep River, and was in great danger of having all our throats cutt, being forced to stand to our Arms all night, however after abundance of trouble the next day we found out our Way again, and after much Difficulty and trouble, and our People allmost half dead, we arrived the 11th about 12 att night at Canton having been almost three days and three nights in the Boat, and in much perplexity.⁵⁵

Another calamity was the unsuspected theft of cargo by Chinese smugglers in 1727, when the “copyboeck” of the ship “Marquis de Prié” mentions the crew discovered tea was stolen from the crates:

We have visited the barge and saw laying in the back, a big Bag full of tea, and as we discovered it, the master of the Barge jumped in the Water and stole said bag of tea with him under the water and thus swam away, while the Woman of the Barge blew out our People’s candles.⁵⁶

A comparative collaboration within a wider framework could shed more light on how Chinese authorities and coastal defences dealt with issues such as smugglers and rogues, or occurrences such as shipwrecks. Hewer’s above account revealed a cruel reaction, showing how relations of power could manifest in an extremely painful way. Further research on sources relating to the perspective of Chinese authorities can reveal whether this was an exceptional or common occurrence.

54 Pratt 1821, 314.

55 Hewer 1726, 9.

56 Literal translation from “Copey boeck Marquis de Prié” 1724, 19. The mention in the copy-boeck is under the heading “Wampo 14 9bre 1727”.

Conclusion, Themes and Comparative Perspectives

This summary has revealed the comparative potential of Ostend Company sources for a history of cross-cultural interaction in maritime China and Bengal, and their possibly innovative use for a historical-anthropological research. It also seeks to transcend the purely textual level inherent to historiography, by relating it to non-textual experiences such as ceremonies and accidents. Not only treating specific topics which the Ostend Company historiography hitherto neglected, it can also prove significant for a general study of cross-cultural interactions in the wider Indian Ocean World. It provides an opportunity for collaboration with other researchers, by tracing specific customs, attitudes and commodities over a *longue durée* period and from multiple perspectives.

The present overview has provided some preliminary indications as to where this may lead. It has already revealed some differences in the context of social and courtly interactions in Bengal and China, specifically as to how the learning process of social and courtly rituals functioned. It has also touched on the role of informants and intermediaries, such as Armenian merchants, in this process. It has explored the information and doubts of GIC-merchants, revealing how the notions of power and precedent Hewer was struggling with differed from those of the Bengali context. Although notions of power and subordination were also present there, the process of interaction leading up to its use proved different.

Lastly, it has pointed out the importance of unforeseen occurrences such as shipwrecks or encounters with robbers and smugglers. These themes are being pursued in my current research.

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