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# Order in the “Arbitrary”: The Distribution, Content, and Temporal Cycles of English Merchant Tribute in Eighteenth-Century Yemen

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## Abstract

Drawing on the documents of the English East India Company, along with comparative material from the Dutch East India Company and sources in Arabic, this article looks closely at the distribution, content, and timing of merchant tribute in relation to the practices of trade in eighteenth-century Yemen. The goal is to uncover the patterns surrounding English commercial gift practices at a time when European merchants were flocking to the southern Arabian Peninsula to procure coffee beans. This study casts gifts as central and regularized parts of the cycle of exchange, rather than as non-transactional or incidental social accessories of the Indian Ocean trade, thereby allocating an important place for gifts within early modern cross-cultural commercial interactions.

## Keywords

Mocha – Bayt al-Faqīh – Yemen – Indian Ocean – merchant tribute – gifts – English East India Company – EIC – coffee trade

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### Merchant Tribute in the Indian Ocean

... presents are here expected as due as the Kings customes, and not such as you will send but as they will choose.

THOMAS FOSTER, ED., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615-1619* (London, 1899), 94.

The presents you haue this yeare sent are extreemly despised by those who haue seene them (97).

... he accepted your presents well; but after the English were come away he asked the Iesuyte whether the King of England were a great Kyng that sent presents of so small valewe, and that he looked for some Iewells (119).

The above citations were excerpted from the correspondence of Sir Thomas Roe, written while on a mission to gain trade privileges for the English East India Company (EIC) at the court of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir in 1615 and 1616.<sup>1</sup> While specific to this foundational stage of the English overseas trade encounter, these passages, which have been much scrutinized by modern scholars, also describe the perennial European “confusion over etiquette and the form of gifts” that were to be tendered to Asian rulers and their representatives in order to establish or sustain trading privileges around the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup> These contested exchanges regarding the content, value, quantity, and types of gifts to be delivered began with Vasco da Gama’s first visit to Calicut in 1498 and continued into the eighteenth century to such an extent that the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam has called them “paradigmatic” of “European dealings with Asian monarchs.”<sup>3</sup> Roe’s remarks represent aptly the difficulties that Europeans faced in gauging local expectations for gifts, while also reflecting the widespread perception that Asian rulers were limitless in their demands for trinkets.

1 Thomas Foster, ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615-1619* (London, 1899).

2 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge, 1997), 139. For perspectives on Roe, his account, and the cross-cultural encounter, see Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, 1996), 17-18; Colin Paul Mitchell, *Sir Thomas Roe and the Mughal Empire* (Oxford, 2001); and Ania Loomba, “Of Gifts, Ambassadors, and Copy-Cats: Diplomacy, Exchange, and Difference in Early Modern India,” in *Emissaries in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Mediation, Transmission, and Traffic, 1550-1700*, ed. Brinda Charry and Gitanjali Shahani (Burlington, VT, 2009), 41-76.

3 Subrahmanyam, *Vasco da Gama*, 139.

Based on records like the ones left by Roe and those who followed him, historians of India and the Indian Ocean have duly recognized merchant tribute as a key feature of the European trade encounter in Asia, often invoking the vernacular terms for the practice, such as *pīshkash* and *nazr* in India.<sup>4</sup> Yet still, serious attention has not been paid to the specific contours and the exact structure of commercial gift exchange in the Asian trading world. In fact, merchant tribute is usually understood as a non-productive aspect of trade or one of its incidental social accessories, in contrast to the more overtly transactional exchanges that took place between merchants and local officials. Moreover, commercial gifts have not received the same attention that the more spectacular offerings that comprised premodern royal or diplomatic gifts have been accorded.<sup>5</sup> But, by overlooking the central role that gifts played in the temporal cycles of trade and ignoring merchant tribute as a mode of exchange that was as significant as its more evidently transactional counterparts, modern historians run the risk of affirming the tone of their sources, which, like Roe, dismiss the demands of local authorities as petty, fickle, greedy, and childlike in their seeming insatiability.

This article focuses on the distribution, content, and timing of the commercial gifts that were tendered by merchants of the EIC to the trade officials of Yemen from 1718 to 1736, a time when European merchants were flocking to the southern Arabian Peninsula to procure coffee beans. Gifts continued to appear as a major topic of discussion even into this period, when the English had become regular traders in Asian ports and were no longer naïve newcomers to local trade systems as they had been in the seventeenth century with Roe's mission to Jahangir's court. Even so, as will be described below, English customary gift practices were central, enduring, and in fact regularized parts of the cycle of exchange, rather than highly vexed objects that were demanded indiscriminately.

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4 In addition to Subrahmanyam as cited above, see Cohn, *Colonialism*, 118; Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011), 199; Douglas E. Haynes, "From Tribute to Philanthropy: The Politics of Gift-Giving in a Western Indian City," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (May 1987): 339-60.

5 Scholars of the gift have overlooked merchant tribute as a compulsory offering that is devoid of the subtle levels of meaning that can be discerned in more nuanced personal or political exchanges or contended that merchants and ambassadors were hardly distinguishable in the premodern context. Linda Komaroff, "The Art of the Art of Giving at the Islamic Courts," in *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts*, ed. Linda Komaroff (New Haven, CT, 2011), 25-28; Anthony Cutler, "Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 265-68.

The lens of this study has been circumscribed tightly to explore the dynamics of English merchant tribute in Yemen during a short period of time, with the understanding that any gift encounter must be situated within a fixed and specific historical context of exchange in order to be meaningful. While some comparative evidence of the gifting practices of Dutch and Asian merchants in Yemen will be considered to underline the uniqueness of or similarities to the English case, the hope is that such a delimited examination will inspire others who work on commercial politics to inspect gift practices with more precision, thereby opening a wider consideration about merchant tribute from which larger and more comprehensive conclusions can be drawn in the future.

### The Trade of Yemen in the Eighteenth Century

The era treated spans the rule of two of Yemen's imams, al-Mutawakkil Qāsim (r. 1718-27) and his son al-Manṣūr Ḥusayn (r. 1727-48), who ruled from their highland seat in the city of Sanaa.<sup>6</sup> The Zaydī Qāsimī imams of Yemen were famous for having achieved the formidable task of ousting the powerful Ottomans from the southern Arabian Peninsula in the early seventeenth century. After doing so, they then inherited the avid Ottoman engagement in the Indian Ocean trade, much of which was conducted through the Red Sea port of Mocha (al-Mukhā), located about ten days away from Sanaa.<sup>7</sup> During this time, Mocha's governors, Amīr Rizq (r. 1718-21, d. 1721) and his son 'Alī Amīr Rizq (r. 1724-27), communicated with foreign merchants on a daily basis. Both were cosmopolitan figures who had served as *nakhūdhās* (captains) of the imam's ships before assuming the post. Additionally, Faḳīh Aḥmad Khazindār governed the city in the period between that of the father and son (1721-24),

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6 Most historians who treat the Mocha trade have failed to consult local sources, and thus ignored the crucial inland stakeholders who oversaw coastal commercial activity. EIC and VOC records are unwieldy in this regard because they mention the imam and governors of various cities by title and not name. When names appear, they are sometimes transliterated unrecognizably. The various profiles of Yemeni official figures that appear in this article derive from readings across a variety of European trade sources and Arabic chronicles and biographical dictionaries. They correspond to those found in Nancy Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port* (Seattle, WA, 2009), 191-92.

7 Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford, 2010).

as well as the following one (1730-37).<sup>8</sup> In their trade documents, European merchants described Khazindār, who was deeply invested in Mocha's overseas trade, in a universally unflattering way. Ultimately, in 1737, he was blamed for inspiring the French to bomb the port of Mocha because he did not uphold the items of their trade agreement.<sup>9</sup>

While Yemeni ports had played a major role in the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean since at least the first century, as documented by *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, the first half of the eighteenth century marked a new stage in Yemen's global commercial visibility. During this time, western merchants raced to Yemen to procure a commodity of relatively new popularity in Europe, coffee. Although the Dutch and the English had traded at the port of Mocha since the early seventeenth century, their expanded interest in coffee fueled their trade in the following period. At this time, other groups such as the French and Ostenders appeared at Yemen's inland coffee emporium, Bayt al-Faqīh.

All accounts agree that as the participants in the coffee trade expanded in the early eighteenth century, this market witnessed a steep rise in prices.<sup>10</sup> These economic shifts had a direct effect on merchant activities from Iran to Amsterdam. Additionally, the market was volatile, such that the arrival of a ship in any of Yemen's Red Sea harbors would send the price of coffee up in Bayt al-Faqīh. Moreover, Yemeni officials placed certain restrictions and tariffs on the trade, often without notice.<sup>11</sup> Even with this instability, Yemen held

8 Between 1727 and 1730, a few short-term governors were posted in the city. Um, *Merchant Houses*, 191-92.

9 Pierre François Guyot Desfontaines, *Relation de l'expédition de Moka en l'année 1737 sous les ordres de M. de la Garde-Jazier, de Saint-Malo* (Paris, 1739); Mocha Dag Register, VOC 2447, January 25-April 6, 1737. Contrasting perspectives on Khazindār can be found in Muḥammad Zabāra, *Nashr al-'arf li-nublā' al-yaman ba'd al-alf* (Sanaa, 1985), 2:300 and 'Abbās al-Mūsawī al-Makkī, *Nuzhat al-jalīs wa munyat al-adīb al-anīs*, ed. Muḥammad Mahdī Khurasān (al-Najaf, Iraq, 1967), 2:262.

10 Dutch sources indicate that coffee prices rose considerably beginning in the year 1717 and English sources record a steady increase for the period from 1710-45. K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760* (Cambridge, 1978), 360; G.J. Knaap, "Coffee for Cash: The Dutch East India Company and the Expansion of Coffee Cultivation in Java, Ambon, and Ceylon 1700-1730," in *Trading Companies in Asia, 1600-1830*, ed. J. van Goor (Utrecht, 1986), 36.

11 For instance, in 1719, the imam temporarily banned Europeans from buying coffee at Bayt al-Faqīh based on a request from an Ottoman envoy. Nancy Um, "1636: From the Edge of

its corner on the market until at least 1725, when coffee became a viable global commodity. Its cultivation then spread rapidly through the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.<sup>12</sup>

Although this study focuses on the English, it is crucial to recognize that Europeans were not the most significant or numerous merchants at Yemen's coffee market at this time. It is impossible to establish the exact volume of coffee bought for the markets of Cairo or the Persian Gulf, but historians generally agree that the European trade of coffee did not equal that of Asian and Muslim counterparts.<sup>13</sup> According to VOC documents, in 1724, the Dutch purchased 1750 bales of coffee, the French 800, and the English 3000, equaling 5550 bales or around 1.5 million pounds total.<sup>14</sup> One can use those figures as a benchmark to project the much larger sums that headed to markets in North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf. In addition to other local goods, such as aloe and myrrh, foreign products, such as textiles, spices, and bulk metals, were traded actively along Yemen's coasts. The merchants of Surat, such as the famous shipping magnate 'Abd al-Ghafūr (d. 1718) and his grandson Mullā Muḥammad 'Alī (d. 1732), dominated Yemen's trade as they conveyed these products from the east to the Red Sea region.<sup>15</sup> The Europeans, however, left invaluable accounts of Arabian commerce, which belie their secondary position within it.

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the Mediterranean World to the Center of the Global Coffee Market: Yemen after the First Ottoman Era," in *Asia Inside Out: Changing Times*, ed. E. Tagliacozzo, H. Siu, P. Perdue (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming). In 1723, the governor of the city of Zabīd levied a fee of 10 *kabīrs* (a local coin of .7-1.1 grams of silver) per camel load of coffee that passed through his city, which could not be avoided on the route from Bayt al-Faqīh to Mocha.

- 12 On the global expansion of coffee cultivation, see Um, "1636."
- 13 Economic historians lack commensurable quantitative data from these Asian and Mediterranean markets, making precise comparisons difficult. Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, 379. Using Ottoman sources, Jane Hathaway described the Turkish investment in the Yemeni coffee market, but her study did not involve quantitative assessments. Hathaway, "The Ottomans and the Yemeni Coffee Trade," *Oriente Moderno* 26, no. 1 (2006): 161-71.
- 14 Letter from J. Steenwijk, J.E. Mijlendonk and P. Camerbeeck in Mocha to Batavia, dated August 14, 1725, VOC 9105, 51. Each bale is calculated at 277 pounds, which is the average gross weight that Glamann gives. Kristof Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade 1620-1740* (The Hague, 1958), 306.
- 15 On this family and its legacy, see Ashin Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat* (Wiesbaden, 1979; New Delhi, 1994) and Ghulam Nadri, "The Maritime Merchants of Surat: A Long-term Perspective," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50, no. 2-3 (2007): 243-6.

## The Sources

Eight gift registers that were left by EIC representatives who traded in the port of Mocha and the coffee emporium of Bayt al-Faqīh constitute the primary source material for the present examination.<sup>16</sup> Held today in the British Library, these records document gifts that were bestowed to the administrators of Yemen's trade from 1718 through 1736, although gift records were not kept from each year, particularly from the period between 1723 and 1733. This gap in documentation stems, at least in part, from the fact that the factory was temporarily lifted from Mocha in 1726. Beginning in 1729, the English company representatives did not maintain permanent residence in Mocha, but rather occupied their establishment only during the high trade season. Most of these records are dedicated lists that enumerate the recipients and their gifts and values line by line. The shortest one, dated May 11, 1720, is a diary entry consisting of ten lines of information. The longest one, dating from 1721-22, spans five pages and exists in a duplicate copy. These types of gift registers, which can be found also in the Dutch East India Company (VOC) archives, are extremely useful in developing a detailed understanding of the scope and schedule of the distribution of commercial gifts, as well as of their content and value.

The present study uses the EIC documents as key sources with the acknowledgement that they were not neutral records of the trade. The extant factory records from Mocha, from which these gift registers were extracted, begin around the year 1720 and then drop off in frequency by 1740.<sup>17</sup> This 1720 surge in documentation coincided directly with the arrival of an EIC official named Mark Anthony Crommelin in Mocha from Surat. Crommelin was sent to replace

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16 They are listed in chronological order: Acc't of what presented the following persons for two Ships, dated 1718, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 12r-12v; Diary excerpt, dated May 11, 1720, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 8r; List of what Presented the Governours and Officers of Mocha and Beetlefuckee, dated August 1720, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 34r; Account of Presents given the Sundry Officers of Mocha and Beetlefuckee from July 17, 1721 to July 14, 1722, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 134r-136v and its duplicate IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 138r-141v; Account Particulars of Presents given to the Governour & ca. Officers of Mocha as Customary for Ship Princess Louisa, Capt. Richard Pinnell Comm., dated July 1734, IOR/G/17/2, pt. 3, 315r; Account of Presents given the Governour and Officers of Mocha for Ship King William, dated July 25, 1735, IOR/G/17/2, pt. 3, 322r; Account Presents to the Governour and Officers of Mocha, dated August 5, 1736, IOR/G/17/2, pt. 3, 357r. In this study, the registers are mentioned by year, so full citations will not be repeated in footnotes.

17 The first gift register lists presents given in 1718, but was only shipped out to Bombay in 1722. More consistent records begin two years later.

the chief factor of Mocha, John Hill who was declared suspended upon his arrival. Although Crommelin died unexpectedly soon afterward and could not assume his specified position, his was the first of continuing inquiries into the financial activities of the Mocha factory.<sup>18</sup> Other more prominent (and physically robust!) company officials, such as William Phipps, who became governor of Bombay from 1722 to 1729, and Sir Robert Cowan, who succeeded Phipps in Bombay until 1734, were sent to the Mocha factory to evaluate its management in the following years.<sup>19</sup> Because of this intense oversight, many of the documents from this era served the specific purpose of substantiating and analyzing all expenditure, including gifts, on the part of local factors.<sup>20</sup> Some had a clear stake in portraying the local trade as dominated by corruption and extortion and as financially taxing during a time when the English grappled with the high economic demands placed upon coffee. As such, their correspondence to company directors takes a distinctly defensive tone<sup>21</sup> that was formatted to respond to queries about their activities and decisions, but also to perennial accusations of financial mismanagement.<sup>22</sup>

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- 18 Hill was supposed to return directly to Bombay in order to answer to his charges but because Crommelin died suddenly this order was not carried out. The Chief factor role then went to Edward Say.
- 19 After leaving Mocha in 1721, Phipps accused the factors Edward Say and Thomas Hartnett of skimming quantities of coffee beans off of the company bales for their own profit, leading to the discharge of both. The case of Mr. Edward Say late Chief of Mocha, received in court May 5, 1722, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 2, 309r-309v. Cowan, who arrived in 1724, was later accused of having engaged in private trade before making purchases for the company. A Relation of the Manners of M. Cowan abusing the company in their investment of coffee at Mocha in the Year 1726, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 3, 526r-531v.
- 20 The stewards' accounts, which detail every egg, tomato, chicken, lime, and onion purchased for consumption, represent this directive quite clearly. For one example of many, see the Stewards Account of Disbursements for the Month of February 1721, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 43r-43v.
- 21 As an example, in a 1722 letter to Bombay, Mocha factors Henry Albert and John Geckie express relief that the directors were satisfied with the previous year's investments and go to great lengths to provide reasons why the weight of the coffee purchased in Yemen could differ from that at its destination point. Letter from Henry Albert and John Geckie to the Honourable William Phipps Esqr, dated April 22, 1722, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 20r-20v. Additionally, Mocha received ships from both England and India, each with separate orders that sometimes produced conflicts for Mocha's factors. Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, 366-68.
- 22 Chaudhuri mentions the "skepticism" of the directors about the intentions of local factors as a universal feature across trading ports. Miles Ogborn also takes up concerns with abuse of power and due respect as major features of this type of commercial

For these reasons, it is important to read the English documents from Mocha, particularly the narrative letters and reports that were sent to both London and Bombay, without assimilating their tone and evaluative stance about Yemen's rulers and officials. The Dutch scholars of Mocha and the coffee trade, C.G. Brouwer and Kristof Glamann, were relatively resistant to the paradigms of oriental despotism that appear quite rampantly in the VOC sources.<sup>23</sup> Particularly, Brouwer understood that gifts were "an indispensable element in the delicate intercourse between authorities and captains" in the commercial world of early-seventeenth-century Mocha, when it was still largely under Ottoman rule.<sup>24</sup> Brouwer's treatment of commercial presents, albeit brief, serves as an important comparative basis for the present study. By contrast, the few modern historians who have utilized English sources often echo the words of their factors with little modification, thereby directly mimicking their subjective sentiments. For instance, in his article about the English factory in Mocha, the historian of Yemen John Baldry cites the "corruption of the officials," "arbitrary imposition of taxes," and "demands for gifts in return for permission to trade" as key obstacles to profitable trade in Yemen.<sup>25</sup> In his much broader study of English overseas activity, the esteemed historian K.N. Chaudhuri echoes by citing the "arbitrary powers and exactions of the imam and his representatives" as problems endemic to Arabian coffee commerce.<sup>26</sup> The term "arbitrary" comes directly from the EIC sources and has been duly duplicated by these modern observers.<sup>27</sup>

The goal here is not only to challenge the notion that arbitrariness governed the customary gift cycle, but also to explore how English merchants constructed this idea in their letters and records. To that end, while using the British Library

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correspondence. Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, 113; Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago, 2007), 98.

23 Glamann, however, made the crucial error of assuming that the Ottomans were still in control of Yemen in the eighteenth century, based on his reading of early-seventeenth-century sources. C.G. Brouwer, *Al-Mukhā: Profile of a Yemeni Seaport as Sketched by Servants of the Dutch East India Company* (Amsterdam, 1997), 270-73; Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade*, 183-207.

24 Brouwer, *Al-Mukhā*, 270.

25 John Baldry, "The English East India Company's Settlement at al-Mukha, 1719-1739," *The Arab Gulf* (University of Basra) 13, no. 2 (1981): 15, 20.

26 Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, 370.

27 Of many examples, in a 1724 letter, factors Robert Cowan and Francis Dickinson refer to the "oppressions of arbitrary government" of Yemen, invoking both the governor of Mocha and the imam. Letter to the Court of Directors from Robert Cowan and Francis Dickinson in Mocha, dated July 12, 1724, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 2, 321v.

sources centrally, the present study also takes a critical stance toward their subjective analysis of commercial gifting practices, which assumed that such requirements were fundamentally capricious in nature.<sup>28</sup> Along these lines, I follow Subrahmanyam who has stated that “structural tensions and forms of perception can only be read out of the fine grain of events,” thereby calling for a renewed attention to primary sources, not simply as vehicles for the delivery of empirical data, but also as texts that need to be evaluated on their own terms.<sup>29</sup> I am also influenced by the Dutch scholars Maurits van den Boogert and Merlijn Olon, who, in their studies of the Ottoman legal treatment of foreigners in the early modern Mediterranean, have provided a useful approach to sources that are at once invaluable and biased.<sup>30</sup> Both question the widespread understanding of the *avantias* as “arbitrary Ottoman demands made upon European merchants,” with the knowledge that these complex disputes were often flattened out in European accounts that had an interest in portraying the opposing viewpoint as fundamentally unsubstantiated to their home offices.<sup>31</sup> Like both scholars, I return to the events themselves and avoid assuming the evaluative stance of the sources, in order to understand each conflict or disagreement as a two-sided negotiation, rather than as the outright injustice that European writers perceived or portrayed.

In order to do so, I explore the structure of gift exchange in regard to its distribution, content, and timing. Each of these questions—essentially who, what, and when—draws from a set of interdisciplinary preoccupations. Records of European trade in the Indian Ocean are filled with rosters of merchants’ names, many of which are Asian. We are often unable, however, to attach these

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28 These claims of merchant vulnerability, arbitrariness, extortion, and illegitimate demands from local governments are a constant feature of the European trade documents from the early modern Indian Ocean, outside of Mocha as well. For critiques on the utility of these documents and their implicit biases, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500-1650* (Cambridge, 1990, 2002), 254, 299.

29 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks* (Oxford, 2005), 15.

30 However, the Ottomans had a more clearly articulated set of legal principles in their governance of foreigners than was the case in Qāsimī Yemen. Maurits van den Boogert, *The Capitulations and the Ottoman Legal System: Qadis, Consuls, and Beratlis in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden, 2005); Merlijn Olon, “Towards Classifying *Avantias*: A Study of Two Cases involving the English and Dutch Nations in Seventeenth-Century Izmir,” *Friends and Rivals in the East: Studies in Anglo-Dutch Relations in the Levant from the Seventeenth to the Early Nineteenth Century*, ed. A. Hamilton, A. de Groot, and M. v.d. Boogert (Leiden, 2000), 159-186.

31 Olon, “Classifying *Avantias*,” 185.

names to identities, biographies, or trade profiles. By delving into the scope of distribution of English gifts, the present study seeks to elevate mere names to the status of gift recipients, thereby contributing to the presently uneven biographical scope of the Indian Ocean trade, even if we lack further information on the profiles and identities of Yemen's trading administration. The interest in the content of gifts derives, on one hand, from my art historical commitment to exploring the physical and tangible qualities of objects. But I also draw from the work of geographer Miles Ogborn, who studied the role that forms of writing and print played in the workings of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century EIC and insisted upon a close examination of the material practices associated with long-distance commerce. While it is nearly impossible, in this particular case, to engage in a detailed visual or material understanding of the gifts that were conveyed because they are described only in skeletal terms, the implicit desire is to move beyond a study of goods (including gifts) as simple carriers of raw economic value. The focus on timing draws directly from anthropological literature, such as that by Pierre Bourdieu and Arjun Appadurai, who argue that objects must be understood within the dynamic conditions of their exchange, as they moved through space and time, in this case, cycling through the stages of gift and commodity and punctuating key moments within the established rhythms of the maritime trade.<sup>32</sup>

### The Distribution of Annual Customary Gifts

Although they were expected of all major merchants in Yemen, annual gifts were not written explicitly into the detailed commercial agreements that were drawn up between foreign merchant groups and local polities. For that reason, we must reconstruct gift practices based upon registers that describe gifts that had been tendered, rather than on prescriptions for bestowals. Although each register is distinct in its distribution roster, as a group they reveal fundamental patterns that were sustained over the course of the two decades treated.

English merchants gave customary gifts to Yemeni officials in the two cities that were central to their engagement in the coffee trade, Mocha and Bayt al-Faqih, where they also held temporary residences. They procured the beans in Bayt al-Faqih's market and then transported them over land to Mocha, where

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32 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA, 1990), 98-111; Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge, 1989), 3-63.

they were loaded on ships to be sent back to Europe or India.<sup>33</sup> Their gifts recognized those who had contributed to their trade endeavors at all levels. In the Mocha administration, the governor and his second in charge were presented with large yearly gifts of diverse textiles that represented the highest level of value in the registers. Middle-ranking figures who were central to the workings of the trade were also consistently rewarded, such as the Amīr al-Baḥr (administrator of maritime affairs), the “chief of the seal” or notary, and scribes at the customs house, who in the years 1718, 1720, and 1721 were identified by the names Faqīh Ḥāmid Najm and Muḥammad ‘Alī Najm, and may have been related to one another.<sup>34</sup> The annual rosters also include a number of anonymous workers at the port, such as inspectors (called searchers), weighers, writers at the point, and porters of the customs house and point. In the particularly detailed roster of 1721, other anonymous recipients who aided in the transport and shipping of goods are mentioned, such as the servants at the Sea Gate (the point of embarkation for the harbor), the surveyors of coffee, the scribe of the Amīr al-Baḥr, the governor’s servants, the *muqaddam* (overseer) of the coolies, the *muqaddam* of the boats, the governor’s porters, officers at the Shādhilī gate (which was located at the walled city’s eastern edge, the main point of access to inland Yemen), fishermen, and peons.

A few individuals who were not associated with a particular office were also named in these registers. Some were recognizable figures, such as ‘Alī Amīr Rizq in 1718, six years before he would assume the role of Mocha’s governorship, a post then held by his father.<sup>35</sup> Muḥammad Yāsīn, a major merchant from Baṣra who would be appointed the chief *ṣarrāf* (money-exchanger) of Mocha in 1729, was also presented with a gift in 1718. A certain Ibrahīm *mufattash* who appeared in the 1721 register was obviously an inspector, but others who were mentioned in the same register by the names Faqīh ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Yaḥyā, ‘Alī Qarīb and Ḥāmid Qarīb can not be identified further. In the period 1734-36, the *qāḍī* (chief judge) of Mocha was also recognized with a gift.<sup>36</sup>

33 The English negotiated for the right to transport their coffee beans from Bayt al-Faqīh to al-Ḥudayda, a port located to the north of Mocha. If camel drivers were unavailable or their ships arrived late in the season, as they did in 1721, they shipped their beans from al-Ḥudayda, rather than using the longer land route to Mocha.

34 The scribes at coastal customs houses were named directly by the imam of Yemen during this time. Um, *Merchant Houses*, 52.

35 Ibid., 94-95.

36 In the 1730s, European merchants increasingly sought the intervention of the *qāḍī* of Mocha, a relatively neutral figure, in matters pertaining to the trade. After their 1737 attack on the city, the French asked specifically for the *qāḍī* to handle negotiations with the local government.

In Bayt al-Faqīh, annual customary gifts were allocated similarly, with recognition of the governor and his second in charge, as well as other officials and workers associated with the coffee trade.<sup>37</sup> Registers from 1718 and 1721-22 provide the most detailed information about the distribution of gifts, mentioning the servant of the city's governor, the chief weigher, the *muqaddam* of the coolies, the porter at the customs house gate, the searcher, the servants at the house that the English rented seasonally, the servants at the customs house, the *muqaddam* of the camels, and the Baniyans that assisted in the purchase of coffee. In 1722, a "linguist" or translator named 'Abd Allāh Ramaḍān was given a shawl for his work.

While these lists, which are comprised almost exclusively of officials and workers associated with the trade, may not be surprising in scope, it is worth noting that they did not include the imam of Yemen as a recipient of annual customary gifts. As will be described below, the English debated the imam's yearly gift, but in general he was excluded from these customary practices. This finding is all the more important when one looks to the gifting scope of some elite Asian merchants in Yemen, which one can reconstruct in a fragmentary way based on the brief observations of the VOC merchants, who kept daily logbooks, or *dag registers*, of events at the port of Mocha.<sup>38</sup>

The Mocha *dag register* records that on March 21, 1729 "the *nakhūdhas* of the Muslim ships belonging to the renowned merchant Mullā Muḥammad 'Alī prepared their usual yearly gifts for the Imam and the court's notables on camels. Under the supervision of two servants and eight peons, they were sent to Sanaa."<sup>39</sup> While tantalizingly short, this record is important for several reasons. A native of Gujarat, Muḥammad 'Alī set foot in Mocha only once on the way to Mecca in May 1727.<sup>40</sup> After this initial appearance at the port, his name finally

37 Like the case of Mocha, these individuals are identified by post, but without names. However, there is a lack of corresponding sources for Bayt al-Faqīh, so it is difficult to say more about their identities.

38 While they are silent about merchant tribute, Arabic chronicles describe diplomatic gifts given to and from the imam of Yemen. For two embassies sent by the Qāsimī imam to the Safavids and the Mughals in 1109/1697-8, see Muḥsin bin al-Ḥasan (Abū Ṭālib), *Tārīkh al-yaman fī al-‘aṣr al-istiqlāl ‘an al-ḥukm al-‘uthmānī al-awwal*, ed. A.M. al-Ḥibshī (Sanaa, 1990), 265. A European source mentions an Ottoman embassy that appeared at the court of al-Mahdī in the year 1712, carrying a large clock. Jean de la Roque, *Voyage to Arabia the Happy by way of the Eastern Ocean, and the Streights of the Red-Sea: Perform'd by the French for the first time, A.D. 1708, 1709, 1710* (London, 1726), 203.

39 Mocha Dag Register, March 21, 1729, VOC 9123, 175.

40 Even so, Muḥammad 'Alī was not considered a dislocated foreign merchant in the Red Sea. One Arabic account from Mocha omits any qualifiers that would distinguish him as

superseded that of his famous grandfather, the ship-owner 'Abd al-Ghafūr, and then circulated widely around Mocha.<sup>41</sup> During the period under consideration he sent several ships to Mocha each year and thus may be considered the most important Indian merchant at the port. This logbook entry reveals that Muḥammad 'Alī was in communication with the imam of Yemen, al-Manṣūr Ḥusayn, who had just assumed the imamate in 1727, after a drawn-out struggle with a competing imam, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad bin Ishāq.<sup>42</sup> Although the highland officials who also received gifts are not named specifically, it is likely that al-Manṣūr's wazir Faqīh Muḥsin al-Ḥubayshī, a constant intermediary to the imam who was always consulted on matters concerning the overseas trade, was one of the recipients.<sup>43</sup> The sources do not mention that Muḥammad 'Alī tendered gifts to the local administration of Mocha at this time, but the absence of a reference does not mean that gifts were not given. They likely were tendered at some point during the trade season, but apparently went unnoted in the available documents.<sup>44</sup> At least one other major Indian merchant, Sīdī Yaqūt Khān, the admiral of the Mughal fleet, whose ships began to appear regularly at Mocha beginning in the 1730s, would send his *nakhūdha* up to the highland court with gifts as well.<sup>45</sup>

This entry conspicuously specifies these offerings to the imam and his notables as “usual yearly gifts,” a claim that can only be verified by looking to gift practices from other years.<sup>46</sup> Again, we cannot use the absence of a reference in a given year as indication that a gift was not sent because the Dutch were inconsistent in mentioning these bestowals in their registers. But, two other

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foreign, simply identifying him as the “famous merchant” [*al-tājir al-mashhūr*] and as the “progeny of 'Abd al-Ghafūr, king of merchants” [*najl 'abd al-ghafūr malik al-tujjār*]. Al-Mūsawī al-Makkī, *Nuzhat al-jalīs*, 2:262.

- 41 In Mocha, the ships of 'Abd al-Ghafūr were still referred to by his name for almost a decade after his death, at least by the Dutch. After 1727, the grandson was finally recognized locally.
- 42 Muḥammad bin Ishāq is called “Mhamet Mersaak” in the Dutch documents. For the Dutch perspective on his struggle for the imamate, see entries in the Mocha Dag Register for 1727 (VOC 9122). For his biographical dictionary entry, see Zabāra, *Nashr al-'arf*, 3:9-29.
- 43 Um, *Merchant Houses*, 64-68.
- 44 On a comparative note, a *nakhūdha* of an Indian ship gave the Ottoman governor of Mocha a gift of five hundred Spanish reals in 1616 and another gave gifts to the governor and Amīr al-Baḥr in 1639. Brouwer, *Al-Mukhā*, 271-2.
- 45 Mocha Dag Register, July 20, 1730, VOC 2252, 219-20.
- 46 “*hunne gewoonlijke jaarlijxe geschenken.*” Mocha Dag Register, March 21, 1729, VOC 9123, 175.

entries from 1725 and 1730 add evidence that Muḥammad 'Alī sent gifts directly to the imam as a regular practice until his death in 1732.<sup>47</sup> It is also striking that in each case of these bestowals, the imam responded by sending a counter-gift to Muḥammad 'Alī. Two horses were sent for the merchant in 1725, some horses and a robe of honor in 1729, and six horses in 1730. It is clear that Muḥammad 'Alī's tradition of gift exchange with the imam of Yemen was fundamentally different than the tributary ones of the English to local administrators in Mocha and Bayt al-Faqīh, which moved in only one direction and rarely merited counter-gifts.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, these acts of tribute were meant to confirm the status of the recipients (Yemen's provincial trade officials), as well as their presumed responsibilities to ensure the fair trade of the giver, thereby underlining the fragile position of the English in Mocha's trading world.

### Cash and Textiles

What is most surprising about the gifts that the English bestowed to Yemeni officials is how little variation there was in their contents. In almost every case of customary gifts, as well as occasional ones to be described below, the English gave officials and workers in Yemen cash or textiles. Only two exceptions may be noted. Five guns were given to the Imam as a special gift from Phipps in 1721 and watches were given to 'Alī Amīr Rizq and Muḥammad Yāsīn in 1718.<sup>49</sup> But, these rare examples of non-textile or non-cash gifts are insignificant in comparison to the countless cash bestowals and the hundreds of pieces of textiles that moved from English hands to Yemeni officials during this period. Although it is impossible to evaluate fully the material qualities of these various gifts, one can draw certain conclusions about their contents based on the short textual passages that describe them. Even cash, which may be assumed

47 The earlier source from 1725 still refers to the *nakhūdhas* as those of 'Abd al-Ghafūr, although the older merchant had passed away years earlier. Mocha Dag Register, June 10, 1725, VOC 919, 182-83. In 1730, Muḥammad Ḥusayn, eldest son of Muḥammad 'Alī, served as the *nakhūdha* of his father's ships and went to Sanaa to deliver the imam's gifts. Mocha Dag Register, March 30 and May 22, 1730, VOC 2202, 273, 291.

48 Similarly, in the early seventeenth century, gifts from local authorities to Dutch ships' captains were rarely mentioned in the Dutch documents. Brouwer, *Al-Mukhā*, 272. In August 1730, the governor of Mocha gave the EIC merchant Francis Dickinson a horse from his stable, a rare example of a counter-gift from a local official.

49 By this period, European watches and clocks were made specifically to cater to the Muslim market with local chaptering rather than Roman numerals, such as those produced by Markwick Markham.

to carry a neutral meaning, must be looked at closely because it was tendered in either local coin or international currency.<sup>50</sup>

From 1718 to 1722, the highest-ranking figures, the governors of Mocha and Bayt al-Faqīh and the second in charge of both cities, were given gifts of diverse textiles rather than cash. At the same time, the anonymous workers at the port, such as the searchers, weighers, and servants, were given cash sums. In most cases, these cash sums were tabulated in Mocha dollars, a coin of account, and then tendered in local currency that was minted by the imam, coins that went by the names *ḥarf*, *kabīr*, komassi (from *khumsīyya*) and *buqsha* and were used widely around the city, particularly in the bazaar. Middle-ranking officials, such as the Amīr al-Baḥr and the scribes of the Customs house, were gifted in either textiles or cash, which was tendered, by contrast, in Spanish reals of eight, the international currency of the wholesale trade. This distinction seems to have been related to the overall sum bestowed, with smaller amounts tendered in local currency and larger sums in Spanish reals. It also suggests varying levels of engagement in the world of overseas trade on the part of the recipients.

The dominance of textiles in these bestowals is by no means surprising. For precedence, one only needs to look at *Kitāb al-Hadāya wa al-Tuḥaf*, a text which highlights countless pieces of luxury textiles as the main fodder for gifts in the early centuries of Islam, a practice which continued into the early modern era. And, of course, Indian-produced textiles had constituted the major part of English overseas trade in Asia since the late seventeenth century, after they had given up attempts for direct access to spices. Even so, these textile gifts were not assembled haphazardly, but rather grouped to portray a certain amount of diversity in type and value. For instance, in 1720, the gift to Mocha's governor Amīr Rizq included bolts of unfinished cloth in scarlet and blue, as well as various finished pieces from India, that went by the names dimities, baftas, hummums, and shalbofts, in addition to varieties of embossed cloth without specified places of origin.<sup>51</sup> It also included pieces of taffeta from both China and Bengal. It is notable that the majority of these textiles were Indian and that they represented the various South Asian weaving centers of the time. Baftas were a type of calico made in Gujarat, hummums (derived from the word *hammām* or bath) were plain cottons from Bengal, shalbofts were

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of Mocha's currency, see Um, *Merchant Houses*, 33-35.

<sup>51</sup> The names of Indian textiles are kept in their Anglicized forms, even when they may be identified with cognates in Persian or other Indian languages, generally following the spellings and descriptions that appear in the glossary of John Irwin and P.R. Schwartz, *Studies in Indo-European Textile History* (Ahmedabad, India, 1966).

muslin from the Deccan, and the embossed cloths were either from India or from England.

A single bestowal always included a combination of textiles at various price points. For instance, among the textiles given to Amīr Rizq in 1720, the most expensive pieces of Chinese taffeta were valued at twelve Spanish reals per piece and the least expensive, the Bengali taffeta, was valued at a fifth of its price at 2.4 Spanish reals per piece. Additionally, new and different types of textiles were introduced each year. As an example, in the following year 1721, the governor of Mocha was given a gift that included cloth by the yard, three shawls (probably made of wool), four different types of soosies (striped or checkered cotton or cotton/silk cloths), mulmuls or embroidered muslin from Bengal, and two different types of allajars, striped cottons that were used as handkerchiefs in England. None of these types of Indian-produced textiles were included in the previous year's package. It appears that the recipients expected a certain amount of variety in their yearly textile gifts, in terms of type, color, quality, and place of manufacture.

The value of these gifts did not remain flat over time.<sup>52</sup> For instance, in 1718, the Mocha governor's gift was valued at 187 Spanish reals, 196 in 1720, and 375.66 in 1721.<sup>53</sup> The second to the governor of Mocha received textile gifts that were valued lower than the governor's at 80 Spanish reals in 1718, 97.85 in 1720, and 207.32 in 1721. In order to get a sense for the meaning of these figures, it should be noted that in 1719-20, the price of one Bayt al-Faqih bahar of coffee weighing 735 pounds could be purchased at 130 to 150 Spanish reals. So, these gifts constituted only a minute fraction of the larger English coffee trade, which usually encompassed several hundred thousand pounds of coffee in a given trade season. Thus, the significance of gifts, which were tallied on their own separate registers and were the subject of much discussion, far outstripped their simple economic value. The year 1721 stands out for its particularly lavish gifts, which may be associated with the arrival of Phipps to the port, although it is generally difficult to ascertain how the value of gifts was determined. Some registers explain the amount of the governor's customary gift as tethered to

52 In some letters, the English factors of Mocha distort these values retrospectively, portraying them as more stable than they were. In 1724, they described the customary gift to the governor of Mocha as a fixed expenditure of textiles equaling 180 Spanish reals worth of goods, which is lower than the value of gifts that had been tendered in previous years. Baldry, "English East India," 24; Letter to the Court of Directors from Robert Cowan, dated August 8, 1724, IOB/G/17/1, pt. 3, 352-354.

53 All sums are presented in Spanish reals, even those that were recorded in Mocha dollars in the original registers. The exchange rate used is 1.21 Mocha dollars = 1 Spanish real.

the number of ships that were served in the port in any given year. But the associated figures do not reflect a clear correlation.<sup>54</sup> For instance, in 1720, two company ships came to the port and in 1721 three arrived. The governor's 1721 gift was much larger than the previous year's, but it did not increase by an identifiable increment, as with the Amīr al-Baḥr's present, which was always tabulated with a fixed value of thirty Spanish reals per ship.

In the 1730s, after the factory had been closed down temporarily and then reopened on a seasonal basis, material gifts were completely dispensed with and everyone in Mocha was given flat sums of cash as customary presents. The governor received one hundred Spanish reals in 1734 and 1735, which represents a significant decrease in the value of his gift from previous years, but two hundred Spanish reals in 1736. His second received fifty Spanish reals each year and the Amīr al-Baḥr continued to receive thirty Spanish reals per ship.<sup>55</sup> It is worth noting that the factors of Mocha had resisted this turn to flat cash bestowals in previous years. In 1725, the Bombay directors counseled them to replace their ordinary textile gifts with cash, but the local factors refused to comply claiming that a cash gift would look more like "a tax or custom" and would thus be subject to periodic increases. They did state, however, that they had already started giving the governor of Bayt al-Faqīh a cash gift by that time.<sup>56</sup> So, although cash gifts eventually replaced textile gifts to Mocha's governor in the 1730s, there was noted resistance to the change in the preceding decade, which signals that the objects given were not conceived of as simple tariffs or as undifferentiated conveyors of liquid value.

Once again, it is useful to look at the contents of gifts given by other merchants, such as the Dutch, which were equally consistent in their yearly composition but contained different goods than those offered by the English. In 1722, VOC merchants sent a gift to Mocha governor Aḥmad Khazindār, which equaled 441.9.2 rijksdaalders, around 461 Spanish reals, much larger than the value of the English gifts mentioned above. It included various spices, fourteen pounds of cloves and nutmeg each, in addition to a number of preserved or

54 Additionally, private merchants had an uncertain status that was being vetted during this period. In some cases, these gifts were meant to cover the activities of English private, as well as company, merchants in Yemen.

55 Even in the 1730s, only some of the higher-ranking administrators received their gifts in Spanish reals, such as the governor, his second, the *qāḍī*, the head scribe of the customs house, and the *muqaddam* of the coolies. The rest were tendered in local currency calculated in Mocha dollars.

56 Letter to Court of Directors, signed Robert Cowan, John Gerrard, Thomas Rammell, John Style, Francis Dickinson, dated August 6, 1725, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 3, 434v.

"*geconfijte*" ones, such as cloves, ginger, and nutmeg, and some *oliteiten*, a fragrant oil or balm. Textiles included muslin produced in northeast India, named cassas and mulmuls, but also one piece of velvet that was probably from Iran and three rolls of Chinese silk. A shawl that had been purchased in Mocha's market, and was likely made of wool and from India originally, and sixteen elle (roughly seventy cm) of brocade, perhaps from Europe, were also included.<sup>57</sup> Unlike their English counterparts, which were comprised mostly of cotton or silk piece goods from India, the Dutch-tendered textiles constituted only a part of their gift. The remainder represented their direct access to Southeast Asian spices. In this way, each European gift may be perceived as a scaled-down sample of its respective trading empire.

### The Regularized Timetable for Gifts

In order to be fully understood, the English gifting timetable must be overlaid with the schedule for trade, which, before the age of steam, was fixed by the global wind cycle. Boats arrived in Mocha from the east and south as early as January or as late as May. But they had to leave the port by August or wait until the next year to travel to Asia or Europe.<sup>58</sup> Although some merchants, such as the English, French, and Dutch, would reside continuously in Mocha during the low season, they too had to wait until the arrival of the ships in the winter or early spring in order to purchase the bulk of their coffee with newly arrived chests of silver. The coffee market at Bayt al-Faqīh operated entirely on a cash basis, with Spanish reals as the main currency of exchange. By contrast, other goods in Mocha, such as textiles, spices, bulk metals, and aromatics, were purchased on credit, with payment due after the departure of ships in the fall.<sup>59</sup>

In line with the regimented schedule for trade, the English operated on a fixed timetable of customary gifting in Yemen. At Bayt al-Faqīh, the English gave gifts to local trade officials in mid-July after they had completed their investments of coffee for the year.<sup>60</sup> In Mocha, they tendered their gifts in late July or early August while they were in the process of lading their ships with

57 Gift register, dated August 25, 1722, VOC 9104, 21.

58 Those who came from the northern ports such as Jidda and Suez, as well as those from the Persian Gulf, had more flexibility in their shipping schedules.

59 For calendars of payment in Mocha, see Um, *Merchant Houses*, 33.

60 Not all registers mark the dates of bestowal, but some do. In 1721, gifts were given to Bayt al-Faqīh recipients on July 17 and then the next year on July 14.

goods and preparing to dispatch them.<sup>61</sup> Thus, merchant tribute was formatted as the final operation in an extended process of travel, trade, and negotiation. After satisfying the governor of Mocha with his gifts, ocean-going ships were released, thereby clinching the deal for the English. Although it may be tempting to view gifts as non-transactional, merchant tribute must be seen as playing a crucial role in the linked activities of trade and shipping. Bourdieu and Appadurai, who argued that gifts should be understood within (rather than removed from) the cycles of commodity exchange, are instructive in making this conceptual shift.<sup>62</sup>

The English also gave gifts to their employees at Mocha who were not associated with the trade. This separate schedule of non-commercial gifting further underlines the tight relationship between the trading timetable and that of merchant tribute. For example, employees and servants of the English factory, such as the farrier and horse keepers were given their gifts in April, as shown on the 1722 gift register. Other employees such as the *ṣarrāf*, who was essential to the trade but served the English year-round, and peons in their service were given gifts according to specific occasions, such as their “feasts,” which were unnamed and undated, but recorded in April 1722 as well. The Baniyan broker of the company, a Hindu or Jain middleman from India who was a key figure in all trade transactions but served the English for the whole year, was usually gifted more than once, first in the fall along with the other trade officials and then again for his “feast.”<sup>63</sup>

Once again, comparative information about schedules for gift giving underlines the singularity of English practices. The VOC factors gave gifts to the governor of Mocha in late August or September after the departure of their ships.<sup>64</sup> Muḥammad ‘Alī, who was mentioned above, operated on a gifting timetable that was distinct from both the English and the Dutch. Referring again to the events of 1729 and 1730, his gift was sent to Sanaa in late March, a month after

61 Exact dates are not always provided, as in 1720, when the register was simply dated to August. By contrast, in 1721 it was dated August 15, in 1735 July 25 and in 1736 August 5.

62 Bourdieu, *The Logic*, 111-21; Appadurai, “Introduction,” 6-16.

63 Baniyans resided in most of the major cities of Yemen. Linguistically skilled, they were largely responsible for facilitating the wholesale trade of Mocha. Although unidentified by a name or date, this “feast” may have been Divali, which was celebrated in October and marked in Mocha by fireworks, or Holi, which was celebrated in February or March.

64 For instance, they tendered gifts in cash to the governor and other officials of Mocha on September 28, 1724. Resolutie genomen in ‘s E. Comp. gehuurde wooning ter steede Mocha, signed by J. van Steenwijk, J.E. Mijlendonk, P. Camerbeek, and C. Langevelt, VOC 9105, 68-69.

his ships had arrived at port.<sup>65</sup> So, Muḥammad 'Alī's gifts, which circulated to a different group than those of the English, inaugurated the year's negotiations, rather than closing them. This early bestowal allowed the imam to respond duly with his return gift, which would arrive at the port in May or June, in time to be transported back to India by the end of the summer.

### Disputes about Gifts Outside of the Customary Cycle

It should not be surprising that a system of annual customary tribute would be highly regularized in terms of its scope of distribution, contents, and timetable. But as described above, this perspective of the structured nature and ordered processes of English gifting stands at odds with the way in which gifts in Yemen have been described in the many letters and reports that were sent to London and Bombay regarding the trade of Yemen. When these gift registers are read closely and independently, they reveal that, to the contrary, there was a fixed timetable for the delivery of English annual gifts at the end of each summer trading season. The gifts delivered were not diverse, yet they were selected for the rank and position of the recipient, whether it was a gift of textiles or a bestowal of cash in international currency or local coin. Although the value of these gifts was not fixed, it did not increase or decrease steadily, but rather rose and fell within given limits over the time period under consideration. The gift registers consulted reveal not only that there were clear rules for the timing and type of gifts that were acceptable as annual bestowals, but, more importantly, that the English were wholly aware of and compliant with these rules because they abided by them yearly. Furthermore, although we do not have registers from each year, the available documents suggest that the English tendered customary tribute to these provincial officials annually without fail, regardless of other demands on the company from Mocha's officials or from the directors of Bombay and London.<sup>66</sup>

65 The *dag register* does not indicate when the 1725 gift was sent to Sanaa, but the return gift was sent on June 10. Mocha Dag Register, VOC 9119, 182-83. It is clear that Mullā Muḥammad 'Alī's 1729 gifts were intended to arrive at the Sanaa court at the beginning of the month of fasting, Ramaḍān, which began on March 30.

66 For instance, in September 1727, European merchants were asked to fund the new imam al-Manṣūr Ḥusayn's fight against his rival to the imamate, Muḥammad bin Ishāq. Their contributions were often accounted for as pre-payment of future duties or loans. Sometimes they were referred to as "gifts" or "presents" in the sources. These contributions may not be folded into the regular customary gift expectations, despite the loose use of similar terms in the sources.

Even with this rigidly maintained schedule and mutually understood expectations, disagreements about the gift responsibilities of the English did arise. On one occasion in 1724, Mocha's governor 'Alī Amīr Rizq asked for an increase in his yearly present to four hundred Spanish reals and also that this gift be delivered in cash, which was not approved.<sup>67</sup> But most of the disputes about gift expectations were not oriented around the customary annual bestowals, which were tendered in a relatively rote and uncontroversial manner.<sup>68</sup> Rather, the most heated discussions were related to the question of whether English merchants were required to send a yearly gift to the imam, a concern of the Dutch as well. The paragraphs below explore a series of disputes between the English and local officials about this question. These exchanges are notable because they illustrate the competing claims surrounding the imam's contested gift, but also highlight the need to read English sources carefully, so as not to adopt the one-sided perspective that they implicitly advocate.

In 1721, the EIC supervisor and governor-elect of Bombay, Phipps arrived at Mocha to take the chief factor position for the season, before traveling to India to take up his post. In Yemen, Phipps's uncommon rank was clearly recognized, as he was received with "more marks of distinction than other European chiefs that only come to reside here."<sup>69</sup> Word of his arrival reached all the way to Sanaa, prompting Imam al-Mutawakkil Qāsim to send him a gift directly. Phipps described this offering in a letter to Bombay:

I have been given to understand that y<sup>e</sup> Imaum doth expect a Present from me and I believe it is absolutely necessary for Y<sup>or</sup> Hon<sup>rs</sup> Affairs that one be sent him which is accordingly preparing, and shall be done with all the Frugality, the nature of the case will bear. He sent me a horse which I am told is an unusual respect when a present is not sent him first. The French Director General on his arriving dispatched up a Present to him, but had no Horse return'd, which is esteemed on the other hand a great slight.<sup>70</sup>

67 Baldry, "English East India," 23-24; Letter, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 3, 352.

68 This subtle distinction was overlooked by Baldry, who claimed that in 1722 the English refused to give the governor of Mocha a gift. In fact, this gift was requested for the imam, an episode to be described at length below. Baldry, "English East India," 22.

69 Letter to the Court of Directors from William Phipps, Edward Say, Thomas Rammell, and Henry Albert, dated July 20, 1721, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 52r.

70 Letter, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 65v. The horse was sent to India the next year because it was too expensive to keep in the factory. Moreover, the governor had forbidden Europeans from riding horses within the city. Letter to William Phipps from Henry Albert, John Geckie, Thomas Rammell, John Style, dated August 11, 1722, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 168v.

As stated above, the English did not maintain a tradition of sending the imam yearly gifts, although they did send him occasional ones, particularly as accompaniments to formal letters with questions, requests, or usually complaints about the trade.<sup>71</sup> This special and unsolicited gift for Phipps, however, clearly warranted something in return. So, Phipps sent a gift to the Imam in addition to one for each of his two wazirs or ministers, al-Ḥubayshī (mentioned above) and Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥuraybī, who had previously been governor of Mocha and Bayt al-Faqīh.<sup>72</sup> Phipps added a special gift for Mocha's governor, Khazindār.

The gifts, which were delivered on August 3, 1721 in line with the schedule for customary gifting, may be differentiated from the annual ones mentioned above not only for their wider scope of distribution, but also because of the inclusion of some costly and unique items that did not appear on the regular yearly rosters.<sup>73</sup> The imam received a piece of "atlass" (heavy satin sometimes woven with threads of gold and silver) from Surat that was valued at sixty Spanish reals, the single most expensive item found on any of the gift registers. Phipps also sent him five guns, a rare example of a non-textile or non-cash gift. In total, the imam's gift was worth 633.40 Spanish reals, which is far more than any of the customary gifts bestowed by the English to the governor of Mocha on a yearly basis.

It appears that Phipps' impressive offering was seen as a precedent for future practice, even though the supervisor had left Mocha at the end of the 1721 trade season. According to an English letter, through the governor as intermediary, the imam requested another present the next year in 1722. Initially, they tried to resist, clarifying that it was not customary to grant the imam an annual gift and that the one from the previous year was a special offering on the occasion of the supervisor's visit to the port. Apparently, the governor then replied with threats that he would keep their ships from leaving without it. Eventually, they complied, complaining of the "new impositions they yearly lay on us."<sup>74</sup> In 1724, they again delivered gifts to the imam, this time worth seven hundred

71 For example, see the letter from John Sarson and Francis Dickinson to William Phipps in Bombay, dated May 31, 1723, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 2, 233r.

72 Only the duplicate register from 1721-22 specifies that these gifts to the wazirs were from the supervisor. IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 138r.

73 Special gifts were sometimes included on the annual gift register (as they were in 1721-22, although listed separately from the customary ones), but at other times excluded from the customary rosters. In 1721, Phipps was overseeing the factory and obviously had advocated for precise documentation policies. For this reason, the 1721-22 register was the most detailed and complete of the group of eight.

74 Letter, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 166v.

Spanish reals.<sup>75</sup> By 1725, the gifts to the imam and his wazir were described as “customary,” but this practice came to an end when the factory was lifted in 1726.<sup>76</sup>

After the English reestablished their residence on a seasonal basis in 1729, they did not resume the tradition of sending annual gifts to the imam. This interruption was remarked upon occasionally, but then reached an impasse in May 1733 when Mocha’s Amīr al-Baḥr refused to allow the English to ship their coffee from the jetty to their ship the Prince William on the account of an unfulfilled gift for the imam.<sup>77</sup> Excerpts from the Prince William’s diary describe the communications between Mocha’s chief *ṣarrāf* Muḥammad Yāsīn, the English translator, and their Baniyan broker named Pursutum on this issue.<sup>78</sup> Yāsīn explained that the imam expected his yearly present in exchange for the six hundred duty-free bales of coffee that the English were allowed to ship yearly, as a stipulation of their trade treaty, which had been renegotiated in 1729 by then governor Sayyid Ḥasan bin Ṣāliḥ with the EIC merchant Francis Dickinson.<sup>79</sup> He went on to cite six years of arrears on these gifts, which, according to his calculation, equaled five thousand Spanish reals in total. To the contrary, the English believed that their trade agreement did not require any gift in exchange for the tax-free allowance. While they regarded this demand as “so plain and palpable an imposition” and “exorbitant and unjust,” the chief *ṣarrāf* argued that the imam’s gift “was always understood to be due in such cases.”<sup>80</sup> After much deliberation, the English finally decided to submit a much smaller sum of twenty-five hundred Spanish reals to the local administration in order to continue their shipping efforts, thereby settling the issue.<sup>81</sup>

I have no intention to adjudicate whether the imam was due these gifts or not, or whether these demands were schemes on the part of local officials to make some extra money from merchants, as the English surmised.<sup>82</sup> If I were

75 Letter, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 2, 231r.

76 Letter, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 3, 434v.

77 Extract of Sundry Minutes taken by the Supercargos of the Prince William Diary at Mocha, IOR/G/17/2, pt. 2, 182v.

78 The governor, Aḥmad Khazindār, was in Sanaa at this time, so his son, ‘Abd Allāh, was ruling in his place. On matters of the trade, the chief *ṣarrāf* was the ranking official.

79 Extract, IOR/G/17/2, pt. 2, 185.

80 Ibid.

81 The amount was to be divided among three parties, one thousand to Khazindār, one thousand to the wazir and five hundred to the local officials.

82 When they did send gifts to the imam, the English and Dutch conveyed them through the governor of Mocha as an intermediary. Both groups suspected that the governor and the wazir would take these gifts for themselves without passing them on to the imam. Indeed,

to do so, the available documents would, of course, point to the rectitude of the English position, which they were penned precisely to affirm. But rather, the goal here is to underline the fact that this disputed gift for the imam was not a novel introduction or an arbitrary imposition from Yemen's imam and his administrators. In both 1722 and 1733, when gifts for the imam were requested, a particular rationale was delivered to support these requests, one based on precedent and the other on a trade privilege.<sup>83</sup> While it is tempting to assimilate the argumentative position of the English while reading their documents, one must recognize that these debates were clearly two-sided.<sup>84</sup> The English had firm reasons to resist an expansion of their customary gift burden, just as the Yemeni position was represented by a cogent rationale and arguable position in both years.

In fact, a previous incident shows how an occasional or special one-time gift could become standardized in future cycles, thereby resulting in an overall increase in yearly expectations. Every spring, the governor of Mocha would travel to the imam's court in the highlands in order to present gifts and revenue from the port's treasury. These visits were important for the success of any coastal governor because the continuation of his position hinged upon the imam's satisfaction with these offerings.<sup>85</sup> After the governor of Mocha Amīr Rizq returned from his successful highland sojourn in May 1720, the English factor, Edward Say noted that the occasion warranted a gift from them, particularly because the governor had spoken to the imam on their behalf, but also because the governor had "already rec'd one from the Dutch."<sup>86</sup> This was the first time that such a gift was bestowed on this occasion, but within a

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there is evidence that this took place in the first decade of the eighteenth century, when then governor of Mocha al-Ḥuraybī would send presents received for the imam at Mocha directly to the wazir al-Ḥubayshī, who kept them in his own possession. The imam found out about these abuses and both were duly punished. Um, *Merchant Houses*, 66-67.

83 In the documents there is a great deal of confusion over whether the imam's gift developed because of the precedent of Phipps' 1721 bestowal or as a trade privilege, with both sides using both arguments at various times. Letter to the Court of Directors, signed Francis Dickinson, dated January 15, 1729, IOR/G/17/2, pt. 1, 5-6. Baldry draws the conclusion that this demand had its origins in Phipps' special gift of 1721, although this was not the original rationale given by the *ṣarrāf* in 1733. Boxhall calls it "the Governor's black-mail." Baldry, "English East India," 29; Peter Boxhall, "The Diary of a Mocha Coffee Agent," *Arabian Studies* 1 (1974): 108-110.

84 For a comparable approach, see Olnon, "Classifying *Avanias*," 185.

85 In 1724, Aḥmad Khazindār was removed from his first Mocha governorship after having presented the imam with insufficient gifts. Um, *Merchant Houses*, 69.

86 Diary, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 8r.

couple years, the governor's yearly return from his highland visit was marked by a regular gift. That EIC merchants then considered this gift as an accepted addition to the yearly cycle of gifting is indicated by the register from 1722, which recorded that diverse textiles from India comprised of shawls and various soosies and allajars and valued at 201 Spanish reals were given to the governor of Mocha "when he came down from ye King as *customary*" (emphasis added).<sup>87</sup> In this earlier episode, the English acknowledged the possibility that a one-time gift could become a permanent commitment.

In regard to the renegotiated contract referred to by the chief *ṣarrāf*, Dickinson had, in 1729, noted with pride that the six hundred duty-free bales that he had managed to secure did not come tethered to a gift for the imam, as was usually expected.<sup>88</sup> By mentioning this special exemption he clearly acknowledged the prevailing standard. Even the writer of the 1733 Prince William diary recognized that there had been a precedent for the imam's gift from 1721 to 1726, when "a thousand dollars yearly" had been sent to the imam.<sup>89</sup> Although that writer referred to the demand for a gift in 1733 as one of the "innovations of the government," in the very same document, he contradicts himself by acknowledging a clear precedent for it.<sup>90</sup> The yearly gift burden of the English did have the capacity to expand, but its mode of growth was not arbitrary or capricious. Rather, it operated within a system of precedents that entailed quite obvious rules of escalation.

### Conclusion

By reading the English records from the Mocha factory as empirical documents on one hand, but also analyzing them interpretively against their grain, I have shown that the "arbitrary" demand for gifts was actually quite structured in regard to distribution, content, and timing, even as it was vexing for the English, thereby resisting the subjective perspectives conveyed by

87 Account of Presents, IOR/G/17/1, pt. 1, 135v.

88 Letter, dated January 15, 1729, IOR/G/17/2, pt. 1, 5r-5v.

89 After agreeing to hand over this sum, the tone of the diary changes considerably from anger and outrage to conciliation and explanation, attempting to assure the readers that they had made the right choice in succumbing to this demand. At this stage, the ship's captain wanted to diminish the effect of the sum that they had just tendered under pressure, which explains why they would inflate the value of past gifts, which had been around six or seven hundred Spanish reals rather than one thousand.

90 Extract, IOR/G/17/2, pt. 2, 187v.

their documents, some of which have been reproduced by modern historians. English gifts served as the final step of long-distance trade processes in a diverse commercial world where the participants were categorically itinerant and legal systems were hardly universal.

Moreover, the expected cycle of annual gifting in Yemen was usually conducted with little dispute. The disputes that did arise, however, treated gifts that were outside of the customary cycle and should be read as negotiations between two parties, each with interests and expectations, rather than as reflections of an unchecked and volatile system of extortion. Although the English, and other merchants of Mocha, had to cope with the constant political instability that affected Yemen's markets, unexpected administrative intervention in their trade, and sometimes flat out demands for cash or commodities, this system of yearly merchant tribute remained a key standardized feature of the Arabian coffee trade and one that must be separated from other types of financial demands and constraints, which were markedly less stable in the period under consideration. Even new gift requirements that were added followed certain patterns of precedence that the English understood, as much as they disliked them.

Through comparative data, this article has also made a strong case for looking closely at the specific gift practices of an individual group in a single site within a circumscribed period of time. Although the cases of the English and Dutch were similar, they were not identical. As far as we can tell, both were markedly different from the gifting practices of the Indian merchant Muḥammad 'Alī, particularly in terms of timing. These specific variations demonstrate that one cannot generalize about protocols and expectations for merchant tribute even in a single city such as Mocha, and thus they add purpose to the call for a close and precise examination of early modern commercial gifting practices.