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The Agency of Empire: personal connections and individual strategies in the shaping of the French Early Modern Expansion (1686-1746)

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Citation

Heijmans, E. A. R. (2018, March 22). *The Agency of Empire: personal connections and individual strategies in the shaping of the French Early Modern Expansion (1686-1746)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/61078>

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Issue Date: 2018-03-22

Chapter 4: Securing the position of overseas director

1. Introduction

European overseas chartered companies possessed a dual nature; political and economic.⁶⁶⁴ The French king and Company shareholders entrusted overseas chartered companies with a double mission. They had to develop overseas trade profitably and represent the king overseas. Following this reasoning, Company overseas agents were both traders and diplomats.⁶⁶⁵ The first step toward assessing overseas directors' agency and how it shaped the early modern French expansion in Pondicherry and Ouidah, is to understand how they secured their position politically. Given the challenges intrinsic to their role as multi-lateral go-betweens, the priorities of overseas directors were twofold. First, they had to ensure the safekeeping of their presence in Ouidah and territorial jurisdiction in Pondicherry, no matter how small. Second, they had to meet the most pressing financial needs to ensure the survival of the factories. The asymmetrical relationships that characterise the French interactions with African and Indian rulers generated little room for negotiation. In a similar manner, overseas directors' economic and financial dependence on locally-embedded merchants and workers restricted their latitude. Lastly, the orders coming from France added to the constraints on their agency.

Nevertheless, in her study on diplomatic relations on the west coast of Africa, Christina Brauner argues that cross-cultural encounters were “*no dialogue of deaf.*” Rather, directors were aware of the signs and demands to which they had to adapt.⁶⁶⁶ It is clear that “accommodative strategies” of individuals on-the-spot and their Indian or African partners were instrumental good cross-cultural diplomatic and commercial relations.⁶⁶⁷ Acknowledging overseas directors' ability to understand, at least partially, a different culture, including social norms, standards of behaviour and mercantile rules, allows us to expose the intentional and strategic aspect of their decisions. They positioned themselves within the power dynamics at play by testing the limits of their agency.

How did overseas directors engage with Indian and African political authorities in Pondicherry and Ouidah? How did they find solutions to basic financial needs? The chapter

⁶⁶⁴ Steensgaard, ‘The Companies as a Specific Institution in the History of European Expansion’, 262–63.

⁶⁶⁵ Carlos and Nicholas, ‘Giants of an Earlier Capitalism’, 414.

⁶⁶⁶ Brauner, ‘Connecting Things’, 423.

⁶⁶⁷ Guido Van Meersbergen, ‘Dutch and English Approaches to Cross-Cultural Trade’, in *Beyond Empires: Global, Self-Organizing, Cross-Imperial Networks, 1500-1800*, ed. Cátia Antunes and Amelia Polónia (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 87.

begins with the interactions between the overseas directors of Pondicherry and the rulers upon which the settlement depended. Second, I explore overseas directors' different strategies to access funds that would guarantee the continued existence of the settlement. In the third section, the interactions and strategies in Pondicherry are contrasted with the situation in Ouidah.

2. Managing relations with changing political authorities

In the first years of the French settlement in Pondicherry, Director Martin maintained friendly and frequent contact with Sher Khan Lodi, governor under the sultan of Bijapur. In his diary, Martin recorded the development of a close relationship between Sher Khan and himself. He mentioned their long conversations and the lessons he learned from Sher Khan regarding south Indian politics.⁶⁶⁸ According to Martin, it was Sher Khan who dissuaded the Dutch from attacking Pondicherry in May 1676. In return, Sher Khan asked for his help in attacking Valudavur in September of the same year.⁶⁶⁹ When Baron, the French director of Surat, had to return to Surat by land in April 1675, the governor gave Martin advice regarding the best road to take. Sher Khan also offered to write letters of recommendation to the governors of the towns Baron would cross, and supplied him with one hundred soldiers and forty horsemen to escort him. All this help from Sher Khan proved to be crucial for Baron's journey.⁶⁷⁰ Because the relationship of mutual understanding was made on a personal level, it ended with the Maratha conquest in 1677 and the end of Sher Khan's power.

After 1677, Martin faced a new leader, Rajaram, with whom he was forced to develop a good relationship to keep Pondicherry safe. Two Maratha officers were appointed for the administration of Pondicherry. Despite the daily relations between the French and Maratha authorities, their interactions were mined by mistrust on both sides.⁶⁷¹ Given the bad relations, Martin made use of a different strategy than with Sher Khan. Rajaram needed funds for his army due to the war against the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb. When Rajaram asked for a loan in 1690, Martin granted it to him in order to stay under his protection. By doing so, Martin attempted to create a power balance with Rajaram through mutual dependency. Rajaram needed the overseas director for loans and Martin needed Rajaram for peace around Pondicherry and protection against the Dutch threat during the Nine Years' War (1688-1697).

⁶⁶⁸ Martin, *Mémoires de François Martin*, 2: 47.

⁶⁶⁹ Martin accepted and the expedition against Valudavur was a success, see Ménard-Jacob, *La première Compagnie des Indes*, 207–8.

⁶⁷⁰ Martin, *Mémoires de François Martin*, 2: 17-18. “[...] sans les lettres de Chir Khan on n'aurait pas pu franchir toutes ces difficultés”.

⁶⁷¹ Hatalkar, *Relations between the French and the Marathas*, 23.

However, this mutual dependency only remained viable if the French had enough money to lend, which was not the case in the long run. Even after the minister of the Navy reorganised and refinanced the Company in 1685, the settlements suffered from a constant lack of funds. The frequency of Company voyages to Pondicherry decreased to one ship per year after 1690, supplying barely enough funds for the trade to function. Martin could not keep up with the repetitive loans requested by Rajaram. When Rajaram asked for another loan in 1693, the French could not to fulfil his request. The Maratha ruler turned to the Dutch, who agreed in exchange for his help in conquering Pondicherry.

When Pondicherry came back under French control, Martin returned to Pondicherry from Bengal, where he had taken refuge during the Dutch occupation. Once there, he faced yet another leader, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Just as Sher Khan Lodi mediated the interactions with the sultan of Bijapur, relations with Aurangzeb took place through the *faujdar*, Da'ud Khan Panni who would later be succeeded by the *nawab* Arcot, Sa'adatullah Khan. However, the relationship with Da'ud Khan was not as close as that with Sher Khan. While Martin regularly visited Sher Khan to discuss business and politics, Da'ud Khan predominantly communicated with Martin through envoys. Nevertheless, Martin referred to Da'ud Khan as a friend who “*demonstrated repeatedly his friendship.*”⁶⁷² Similar to Trivelatto's definition of business friendship, the friendship that Martin refers to was utilitarian and does not imply intimacy.⁶⁷³ Martin expected his “*friendship*” with Da'ud Khan to protect the Company's interests in Pondicherry against external military threats or even internal ones.

Martin's successors also had to navigate political changes, but within the Mughal empire. When Hébert arrived in India in 1709, Aurangzeb had been dead for two years. The following political instability at the Mughal court as well as the ambitions of Mughal local officials in the region surrounding Pondicherry were putting the French grants at stake. Hébert's approach to diverting possible conflict consisted in negotiating: “*I hope we will extricate ourselves out of this situation through negotiations.*”⁶⁷⁴ Aside from the *nawab* of Arcot, Pondicherry's directors had to deal with the commander of the fort of Senji, Sarup Singh, because some of the Company's lands and villages fell within his territory. Beyond this, they engaged in diplomatic correspondence with nearby rulers. For instance, Director

⁶⁷² ANOM C2 67 f°252, letter of Martin, 19 February 1703: “*Daoudkan nous a donné en diverses occasions des témoignages de son amitié [...] Daoudkan et le diwan étoient de nos amis.*”

⁶⁷³ Trivelatto, *The Familiarity of Strangers*, 181.

⁶⁷⁴ ANOM C2 68 f°206, copy of the letter sent by Hébert to Pilavoine in Surat, 11 December 1708: “*j'espère que nous nous tirerons d'affaire par la négociation.*”

Hébert wrote to the ruler of Karungali, north of Pondicherry: “*we ask you to continue our friendship and in all occasions, we will let you know that we want to be your friend*” referring to the same utilitarian friendship.⁶⁷⁵

Gift-giving was a common strategy to build relationships with all political authorities. More generally, the offering of gifts has been acknowledged as a widespread diplomatic practice, both in Europe and outside of it.⁶⁷⁶ The offering of presents is a way to establish ties of mutual obligation.⁶⁷⁷ Therefore, gifts factored into the individual strategy of the director, because they were a way to ensure the “*quality of the future relations between donor and recipient.*”⁶⁷⁸ Gift-giving was not static and involved adjustment and interpretation by the overseas directors. While different variables can be used to interpret gift-giving transactions, the aspects that are the most telling indicators of the directors’ potential margin of manoeuvre are how voluntarily the gift was made and the physical reciprocity of the offering. If we consider the transactions between the Company and political rulers in Pondicherry on a sliding scale, the tribute would stand at the far end of the gift-giving transaction, where the overseas director would have no space to negotiate. In Mughal political culture there were different types of gifts, and the offering to a superior as a sign of acknowledgement of authority was called the *pīshkash*.⁶⁷⁹ It originally referred to a voluntary gift, it was in reality a obligatory tribute.⁶⁸⁰

Overseas directors adapted their gift-giving strategies to the power dynamics that characterised their position with the ruler. The gift-giving transactions with the *faujdar* Da’ud Khan, mostly took the form of tribute, or gifts strengthening a hierarchical relationship and confirming the ties of loyalty.⁶⁸¹ Reciprocity of physical gifts is rarely recorded in the sources. When there was indeed an exchange, the gift from the *faujar* or *nawab* would be of lesser value than that of the Company. Therefore, it re-enforced the asymmetrical power relations between the overseas director and the Mughal authorities. Aside from the regular tribute,

⁶⁷⁵ ANOM C2 68 f°325, letter of Hébert, 14 November 1709: “*nous vous demandons toujours la continuation de votre amitié et en toutes sortes d’occasions nous vous ferons connoître que nous voulons estre votre amy*”.

⁶⁷⁶ Michael Talbot, *British-Ottoman Relations 1661-1807: Commerce and Diplomatic Practice in Eighteenth-Century Istanbul* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017), 116.

⁶⁷⁷ Christian Windler, *La diplomatie comme expérience de l’autre: consuls français au Maghreb (1700-1840)* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2002), 485.

⁶⁷⁸ Windler, 486. “*Il était un gage de qualité des relations futures entre donateur et destinataire.*”

⁶⁷⁹ Ann Lambton, ‘Pīshkash: Present or Tribute?’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57, no. 1 (February 1994): 145.

⁶⁸⁰ Guido Van Meersbergen, *Ethnography and Encounter. Dutch and English Approaches to Cross-Cultural Contact in Seventeenth-Century South Asia* (University College London: Unpublished PhD Dissertation, 2015), 173.

⁶⁸¹ Van Meersbergen, 174.

other forms of gift-giving transactions took place between the Mughals and the French. In 1702, Da'ud Khan sent a letter that gave notice of one of his conquests, and Director Martin “*could not reply in this conjuncture without sending presents*” and sent brandy, crystals and some merchandise from the Company warehouse.⁶⁸² These irregular, indirect demands for gifts were a way for Da'ud Khan to assert power over the Company, which symbolically acknowledged Da'ud Khan's sovereignty through these offerings.

In 1714, Sa'adatullah Khan new *nawab* of Arcot, sent one hundred horsemen and 200 men on foot to reclaim some villages that had been offered to the Company by Da'ud Khan and the commander of Senji.⁶⁸³ After some attempts at negotiating, Dulivier was “*forced to send him some presents which satisfied him.*”⁶⁸⁴ Dulivier also entrusted his messenger with the mission to negotiate the gift of some lands that the French Company wished to receive in order to compensate for the costs. Although there is no evidence of reciprocity, Dulivier hoped to get something in return. This hope demonstrates that the implications of each gift-giving transaction were not self-evident and that they were negotiated by the actors.⁶⁸⁵

Regarding the relationship between the directors and neighbouring rulers, such as the fortress commander of Senji, Sarup Singh, the gift-giving transactions entailed a voluntary dimension.⁶⁸⁶ The cultural boundary that separated the overseas director from the local political rulers could be taken advantage of and gave Martin some latitude.⁶⁸⁷ Given the financial situation of the Company, the overseas director continually tried to either postpone a gift-giving ritual or ignore it. According to Martin, “*giving presents once in a while is a necessity, but it is also important to make sure that they do not think that we are forced into it by their insults otherwise they will come back frequently, we need to make them hear reason before giving them anything.*”⁶⁸⁸ To Martin, there was a clear distinction between the gift-giving relationship with Da'ud Khan and with the commander of Senji. By differentiating between the two, Martin determined the recognition of political hierarchies.

⁶⁸² ANOM C2 66 f°166, 30 September 1702.

⁶⁸³ ANOM C2 69 f°77, letter of Dulivier, 14 February 1714.

⁶⁸⁴ ANOM C2 69 f°88, letter of Dulivier, 18 July 1714: “*ce qui nous obligea de luy envoyer quelques présens qui l'ont apaisé*”.

⁶⁸⁵ Gadi Algazi, ‘Doing Things with Gifts’, in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner, and Bernhard Jussen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 10.

⁶⁸⁶ The fortress commanders of Senji were Central Indian Rajputs called Bundelas: see Subrahmanyam, ‘Friday's Child’, 74.

⁶⁸⁷ Algazi, ‘Doing Things with Gifts’, 20.

⁶⁸⁸ ANOM C2 66 f°17, 26 March 1701: “*tirer des présens de temps à autre, c'est une nécessité de leur en faire quelques fois mais aussy il est important d'obtenir que ce soit dans une conjuncture ou ils ne puissent pas se persuader que l'on y est forcé par les peines qu'ils font, parce qu'ils reviendroient souvent à la charge, il faut chercher des voys de leur faire entendre raison avant de leur rien donner*”.

The gifts could be delayed to a certain extent, and it was for the overseas director to assess the risks and the length of such delays. The longer Martin waited, the more he resisted the Senji ruler's assertion of power. In 1701, when Sarup Singh complained that the Company sent gifts to Da'ud Khan but not to him, Martin, along with the Sovereign Council of Pondicherry, decided that if they agreed to give gifts on these terms, the ruler of Senji would think that the French feared them and therefore demand gifts more frequently. The Company suffered from recurrent attacks by the Sarup Singh's men, destabilising the hinterland and placing arbitrary taxes on the use of roads needed for food provisions and textile supplies to the settlement. To solve these problems, the council and Martin decided to send some soldiers to guarantee the hinterland's security, rather than send presents to the ruler of Senji.⁶⁸⁹ A few years later, the same ruler sent another complaint to Martin, concerning the use of wood. The ruler asked for a gift and the Director Martin wrote: "*we think it good to wait a few days before sending it to him.*"⁶⁹⁰ Nevertheless, Martin and the council made decisions after carefully balancing the involved risks. Sarup Singh still held a position of power that allowed him to assert some authority on the overseas director and obtain funds from the Company in two ways: military threats and forced reciprocity.

The same year that Martin delayed the offering of gifts and sent soldiers to stabilise the hinterland, envoys from Senji came to Pondicherry to claim the Company lands. They stated that the Company had to pay 7,000 to 8,000 rupees, or around 11,000 to 12,000 *livres*, to "*re-establish friendship and correspondence.*"⁶⁹¹ Mentioning these values sent a clear message to Martin about the expected value of the gift he should send, and left little space for negotiation. It was agreed that the overseas director would give gifts to the son of Sarup Singh, who was traveling nearby and Martin received presents in return. The "*good correspondence and friendship*" was restored, but the ruler of Senji still mentioned that he was in need of money.

Another way the ruler enforced subordination over the Company overseas director was through the "*convention of equal reciprocity.*"⁶⁹² This strategy took place when the director waited too long or attempted to avoid a gift exchange. In 1701, Sarup Singh who had been appointed a year earlier as commander of Senji, sent an envoy to let the overseas director

⁶⁸⁹ ANOM C2 66 f°27-32, diary of Martin, July-August 1701.

⁶⁹⁰ ANOM C2 66 f° 168, diary of Martin, 21 December 1702: "*nous croyons être bien d'attendre quelques jours à luy envoyer*".

⁶⁹¹ ANOM C2 66 f°31, diary of Martin July August 1701: "*il nous demande 7 à 8 000 roupies, que cela restablira l'amitié et la correspondance qu'il y a eu entre nous*".

⁶⁹² Talbot, *British-Ottoman Relations 1661-1807*, 113. See also: Van Meersbergen, *Ethnography and Encounter*, 172.

know that he was surprised that the director had not visited him yet. The envoy brought gifts to the overseas director, who responded by sending one of his men with presents to Sarup Singh.⁶⁹³ The absence of counter-gifts from the French could have a major impact on diplomatic relations between the Company and the political authorities because it could be interpreted as a rejection of the relationship.⁶⁹⁴ Neighbouring rulers made use of this obligation of reciprocity to keep some authority over the French settlement.

The overseas director's evaluation of the timing and value of the gift was not always successful. It is relevant to examine one final instance with more detail because it provides us with an example of a failed negotiation through gifts. Analysing this failure allows us to better understand the director's agency in the gift-giving process.⁶⁹⁵ In 1714, Sa'adatullah Khan conquered the fortress of Senji, deposing the son of the late fortress commander, Sarup Singh.⁶⁹⁶ Consequently, lands that comprised part of the revenues of Pondicherry were threatened militarily once again. To end these intimidations, Dulivier considered it appropriate to send an agent to congratulate Sa'adatullah Khan on his new victories, along with 9,000 *livres* as a gift intended to convince him not to threaten the villages in question. The *nawab's* French surgeon wrote to Dulivier that Sa'adatullah Khan was disappointed by the present, but he managed to convince the *nawab* to accept it and end his threats on the village.⁶⁹⁷

However, the gift Dulivier received in return was of trivial value and made no mention of the lands, which had been the main purpose of the gift exchange. Dulivier feared that this silence indicated that the negotiations had failed. A few days later, five horsemen and fifteen soldiers from Senji arrived in Pondicherry, demanding rights to the village of “*Oulgaré*”, which was situated a small *lieue* away from Pondicherry, and earned 2,000 *écus*, or 6,000 *livres*, a year for the Company. Dulivier had underestimated the value of the present necessary for a successful outcome. The following silence and meagre gift from the *nawab* had been signs of a failed negotiation. In other settings, a counter gift of lower value than the first gift has been interpreted as a mark of the counter giver's inferior status.⁶⁹⁸ However, in this case, the lesser counter gift appears to be an indicator of the bad state of negotiations. Despite his experience, Dulivier failed this diplomatic negotiation. The interesting aspect of the

⁶⁹³ ANOM C2 66 f°32, diary of Martin, 26 August 1701.

⁶⁹⁴ João Melo, ‘Seeking Prestige and Survival: Gift-Exchange Practices between the Portuguese Estado Da Índia and Asian Rulers’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56, no. 4–5 (1 January 2013): 676.

⁶⁹⁵ Algazi, ‘Doing Things with Gifts’, 18.

⁶⁹⁶ For details on this episode see Subrahmanyam, ‘Friday's Child’, 75–78.

⁶⁹⁷ ANOM C2 69 f°152, letter of Dulivier, 26 February 1715.

⁶⁹⁸ Windler, *La diplomatie comme expérience de l'autre*, 497.

negotiation process is that the French surgeon warned Dulivier that the value of the gift had disappointed the *nawab*, and Dulivier did not increase his offering. The low value of his initial gift could be interpreted as a strategy to re-negotiate power relations with Sa'adatullah Khan.

Competition and intermediaries

Gift-giving transactions generated competition among the European settlements situated on the Coromandel Coast. This was hardly specific to the Coromandel Coast and it appears to have been a global phenomenon; it also occurred in North America, where the English and the French competed to offer the best gifts to their Amerindian trading partners, as well as at the Ottoman court and on the West African Coast.⁶⁹⁹ On the Coromandel Coast, each European company representative attempted to offer the most expensive gifts, to gain a good relationship with the Mughal authorities and guarantee the *farman* on which their settlement depended. The Dutch appear very competitive in French sources, which regularly refer to the “*considerable presents*” that the Dutch gave to the *nawab* and the *diwan*.⁷⁰⁰ However, the most striking case remains that of the English East India Company governor of Madras, Thomas Pitt.

When the Mughal army passed by Golkonda in early 1709, Pitt prepared an embassy for the new Mughal ruler to confirm the *farman*. Rumours that came to Pondicherry stated that this embassy involved more than 200 people and the expenses amounted to more than 100,000 *écus*, or 300,000 *livres*.⁷⁰¹ The French Company feared that it would have negative consequences for other European powers in the region, and particularly for themselves, if the Mughal emperor set the English gift as a standard. The state of the Company's finances did not allow for such large expenses and the only way for Hébert to secure his *farman* was to send a letter to Da'ud Khan with parrots and alcohol “*so that he would always keep protecting our interests.*”⁷⁰² Fortunately for Director Hébert, the English East India Company removed the governor of Madras and his successor did not approve of such a costly embassy for the Mughal ruler, who was already old, as after his death the gift-giving would have to be repeated.⁷⁰³ The overseas director's strategy was to be the first to give the new Mughal emperor a gift because if “*the Dutch present before us 'tis great odds but that theirs may be*

⁶⁹⁹ Brauner, ‘Connecting Things’, 415. Talbot, *British-Ottoman Relations 1661-1807*, 115.

⁷⁰⁰ ANOM C2 66 f°158, diary of Martin, 28 March 1702: “*les hollandois ont fait leurs visites au nabab, daoutcan, au diwan, et au Boxy, les présents ont été considérables*”.

⁷⁰¹ ANOM C2 68 f°315, letter of Hébert, 15 February 1709

⁷⁰² ANOM C2 68 f°315, letter of Hébert, 15 February 1709: “*je luy ay aussi adressé une lettre pour Daoud Khan afin de le retenir toujours dans nos intérêts*”.

⁷⁰³ ANOM C2 69 f°4, letter of Hébert, 15 February 1710.

so considerable as to reduce ours despicable.”⁷⁰⁴ The extent of the competition in the gift-giving transactions is only completely visible when one understands why Pitt planned to set up such an expensive embassy: to precede the Dutch.

In this competitive environment, directors frequently made use of intermediaries in their interactions with the *nawab* of Arcot, in order to assess the right diplomatic strategy for timing visits and determining the value of gifts. As a result, in addition to the official broker of the Company, who was in charge of deals with merchants, Pondicherry directors relied on an array of diplomatic mediators. A frequent intermediary in relations with Da’ud Khan was Venetian doctor, Niccolao Manucci. Manucci (1638-1715) is predominantly known for his book, *History of the Mogul India*, which he wrote based on his experience at the Mughal court. He arrived in India in 1656 and spent some time with the Jesuits in Delhi, where he learned some basic medical training. In 1661 he became the official doctor of, first, the family of the Mughal emperor’s ambassador, and second, of the harem of Aurangzeb’s son.⁷⁰⁵ In 1686, he established himself as an independent doctor in Madras and was informally involved in the English Company.⁷⁰⁶

Martin repeatedly referred to Manucci as “*his good friend*” and, indeed, Manucci acted as the witness at the wedding of Martin’s granddaughter in 1705.⁷⁰⁷ During personal meetings, Manucci gave Martin advice about local politics and the state of affairs in the region.⁷⁰⁸ His personal relationship with Manucci, who had acquired an extraordinary knowledge of Mughal court culture, was key to the relationship between Martin and Da’ud Khan. In 1701, Manucci was at Da’ud Khan’s camp when he received a letter from Martin, asking him to recommend the French East India Company to Da’ud Khan. Manucci promised to do so and mentioned in his diary that “*Monsieur Martin afterwards wrote me letters of thanks and gratitude notifying that my recommendations had been of great use to them.*”⁷⁰⁹ Through this recommendation, Manucci lent his credibility to Martin, which allowed the latter to form a better relationship to Da’ud Khan. Similar to letters of recommendation in mercantile correspondence, recommendations in the diplomatic sphere enabled individuals to

⁷⁰⁴ IOR/P/ 239/ 85 f°191, Public Proceedings Fort Madras, Saturday 15 January 1708/9 (old calendar).

⁷⁰⁵ Ménard-Jacob, *La première Compagnie des Indes*, 177.

⁷⁰⁶ Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, 3: 375.

⁷⁰⁷ ANOM C2 66 f°42-46, diary of Martin, December 1701-January 1702: “*mon ami particulier*” and “*bon amy Maunouchy*” and in 1705: “*the marriage took place of the Lord Governor Martin’s granddaughter to Monsieur Ardancourt commissary and second councilor.*” in Manucci, 3: 166.

⁷⁰⁸ ANOM C2 66 f°42, diary of Martin, December 1701 and f°170, letter of Martin, 20 January 1703.

⁷⁰⁹ Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, 3: 375.

establish new contacts or to strengthen pre-existing relationships.⁷¹⁰ Considering the competition among all European settlements engaging in diplomatic and trading relationships with Da'ud Khan, Manucci's recommendation could have been a competitive advantage for the French over their fellow European company representatives.

Another strategic contact was Guesty, a French private merchant who lived in São Tomé de Meliapore. The Frenchman arrived in São Tomé in 1681, where he became a wealthy merchant and married a Luso-Indian woman a decade later.⁷¹¹ Guesty had already helped the Company as an interpreter during the negotiations of the settlement of Masulipatnam. In 1686, he obtained the *farman* from the Golkonda ruler for the Company and renewed it after the Mughal conquest in 1687.⁷¹² Martin called on him for help in 1693, when the Dutch threatened Pondicherry.⁷¹³ Martin reciprocated when Guesty asked for permission to send his son back to France, presumably for his education, on the Company ship the *Phélypeaux* in 1701; Martin agreed to this favour immediately, in acknowledgement of the services Guesty provided to the Company.⁷¹⁴

Together with Manucci, Martin would call on Guesty to visit Pondicherry and discuss the “*current affairs*.”⁷¹⁵ The role of the personal relationship between Martin and Manucci, as well as Guesty, in interactions with the Mughal governor clearly appeared in Da'ud Khan's blockade of Madras. In January 1702, Da'ud Khan, who was irritated with the English in Madras because of the attacks carried out by English privateers against important merchants in Surat, asked a French, Danish and Dutch representative to come to him. Martin understood that it was either to discuss an attack on Madras or to ask for money.⁷¹⁶ Since neither of these options positively impacted the French situation in Pondicherry, Martin decided to send Da'ud Khan some presents instead of an envoy. On 12 February, a letter arrived from Da'ud Khan demanding an in-person meeting with Martin, to which Martin answered that he could not make the journey. He wrote to Manucci, who knew the *nawab* very well, and asked him to explain to Da'ud Khan why he could not attend. When a third letter came from Da'ud Khan reiterating his demand, Martin then considered sending Guesty, who was in Pondicherry at the time.

⁷¹⁰ Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*, 181–82.

⁷¹¹ Ménard-Jacob, *La première Compagnie des Indes*, 179.

⁷¹² ANOM C2 63 f°60, letter of Martin, 1 October 1686 and C2 63 f°100, letter of Martin, 29 November 1687.

⁷¹³ Ménard-Jacob, *La première Compagnie des Indes*, 179.

⁷¹⁴ ANOM C2 66 f°11, letter of Hardancourt, 22 February 1701.

⁷¹⁵ ANOM C2 66 f°169, 10 January 1703: “*j’envoie des pions au devant des sr Guesty et Menouchy à qui j’avois écrit de venir à Pondichéry sur les conjonctures présentes*”.

⁷¹⁶ ANOM C2 66 f°49, diary of Martin, 12-13 February 1702.

Guesty was a perfect fit for the mission and Martin considered him a trustworthy man. Also he spoke Persian and therefore did not need an interpreter.⁷¹⁷ Guesty accepted, but when Martin learned that Da'ud Khan had begun a blockade on Madras, he changed his mind: “*we realised that by choosing Guesty for this mission we would have to compensate for all the harm that could happen to him during the operation where we send him. He is a wealthy man, known in São Tomé and this fact alone suffices for the Moors to provoke an affront which would ultimately harm the Company.*”⁷¹⁸ The fact that Guesty was Martin's first choice to defend the interests of the Company and that he accepted the mission shows how Guesty's knowledge of local politics and language, as well as the Company's affairs, made him a key element of French settlements in India, without being an official part of the Company. Martin granted him the status of Company agent to guarantee his security, but he remained a private merchant in São Tomé; that is how he was the most useful to Martin.⁷¹⁹

Eventually, Martin decided to send Desprez, a Company merchant, since he had Martin's trust and the experience needed for such a mission without being one of the Company's most important merchants. Martin dispatched Desprez with gifts, for “*presents were the best passports to be well received.*”⁷²⁰ Manucci came from Madras to join Desprez after Martin's letter. They visited the *diwan* together, where they obtained two audiences with Da'ud Khan. When Desprez came back from his visits he delivered two letters from the *diwan* and the *nawab*, as well as gifts: a good horse and textiles. According to Desprez, Manucci had been of great service to the French. The negotiations had indeed discussed the English in Madras, and Martin, who was farsighted, decided to stay out of the conflict when he wrote, “*we should not expect the Moores to hand Madras to us, if they chase the English out of it, their plan if they can succeed is to reduce the European settlements to mere trading stations so they can regain control over them.*”⁷²¹ The fact that he had the choice to stay out of the conflict illustrates the negotiable aspects of the Mughal governor's demands.

⁷¹⁷ ANOM C2 66 f°154, diary of Martin, 18 February 1702.

⁷¹⁸ ANOM C2 66 f°156, Diary of Martin, 10 March 1703: “*Nous faisons réflexion en destinant mr Guesty pour ce voyage que nous serons obligé de luy donner un billet de l'indemniser de tout ce qui luy pourroit arriver de facheux dans l'action ou nous le commettons c'est un homme riche connu à St Thomé, ce point seul suffit à porter les mores de faire une avanie qui retombera sur la compagnie*”.

⁷¹⁹ Martin, *Mémoires de François Martin*, 2: 450.

⁷²⁰ ANOM C2 66 f°156, diary of Martin, 10 March 1703: “*y joindre des présens pour le général et pour le Diwan qui sont les passeports les plus assurés pour estre bien receux dans ces visittes*”.

⁷²¹ ANOM C2 66 f°158, diary of Martin, 26 March 1703 “*il ne faudroit pas s'attendre que les mores nous remissent Madras, sil ils en avoient chassé les anglois, leur dessein si ils peuvent réussir est de réduire les nations d'Europe de n'avoir que de simples comptoirs sur leurs terres, afin d'en estre les maistres*”.

To maintain the settlement of Pondicherry and its lands, overseas directors engaged in diplomatic relations with different rulers, adapting to the power dynamics. A common aspect of these interactions was the overwhelming presence of gift-giving sessions. Aside from the tribute, military threats and reciprocity were mechanisms used to force the Company's submission, and to enable rulers to access much needed funds. Gift-giving was not strictly defined and left space for interpretation on both sides. The overseas director had to evaluate when these transactions were negotiable and when they were not, how long they could wait before giving and how much they should give. They relied on their personal connections to act as intermediaries to facilitate the negotiation process. These intermediaries were key characters in the daily negotiations with political authorities in a competitive environment, and were often personally tied to the director. Nevertheless, failed negotiations through gift-giving happened despite intermediaries and the director's experience. This testifies to the dynamic character of the gift exchanges and the existence of possibilities for directors to re-evaluate power relations.

In 1715, when the Company directors attempted to control Director Dulivier's right to receive personal gifts from Indian rulers and merchants, Dulivier opposed the Company's decision: "*we cannot believe that if a viceroy or a diwan or any other power or qualified person sent marks of his esteem to a governor (as has happened before), that messieurs would claim them*".⁷²² Aside from the personal gain these gifts brought to Dulivier, the director's opposition to the Company's orders shows the interpersonal aspect of the gift-giving transaction. By controlling Dulivier's ability to offer and receive gifts at a personal level, his connections, his authority and power when addressing local rulers would be curtailed. This could negatively affect the next negotiation. Whatever the strategy adopted by overseas directors in these political relations, funds were paramount to the success of any negotiations and to the maintenance of the settlement.

3. Finding funds

Because of the unreliability of money transfers from France, directors had two main options to access funds locally. They could either find funds internally, by increasing the revenues of Pondicherry through demographic growth or attracting merchants, or they could ask for loans. To stimulate demographic growth, directors had to provide safe environments

⁷²² ANOM E 152, personnel file Dulivier 1715, Company instructions "*Aucun présent ne pourra être fait aux grands du pays que par délibération du conseil*" Answer of Dulivier "*nous ne pouvons pas croire que quand un vicery un diwan ou autre puissance ou personne qualifiée envoyra à un gouverneur (comme le cas est quelques fois arrivé) quelques marques d'estime, que Messieurs veullent se l'approprier.*"

for weavers and other inhabitants in Pondicherry.⁷²³ Martin aimed to develop the coral polishers and weavers' craftsmen villages and offered them the Company's protection and a neutral status in local wars.⁷²⁴ To make sure the settlement remained protected, Martin refused to decrease the wage of both European and Topaz soldiers out of fear of a mass desertion.⁷²⁵ Martin's experience played a role in his decision. In 1690, he had explained that a lower wage in Pondicherry would make other European settlements on the Coromandel Coast more attractive to soldiers.⁷²⁶ Additionally, when he sent the state of the garrisons to Paris, Martin warned that he would not let the high number of Topaz and Lascarins go until he received a sufficient number of French soldiers.⁷²⁷

His successor, Hébert, did not think it necessary to keep three garrisons or to work on the fortifications. According to him, if the Mughals wanted to harm them, they could easily starve them and the fortress could not protect them against that. His strategy therefore relied entirely on good relations with the Mughal governor of Karnataka. "*All our strength consists in taking care of our relations with the governor of Carnatic on which we depend, with whom I maintain a good correspondence, visiting him every six months with gifts because one never appears empty handed in front of the Moors.*"⁷²⁸ In contrast, when Dulivier took over the management of Pondicherry in 1713, he argued against cutting down the number of Company soldiers and in favour of reinforcing the fortress. His main concerns were not Mughal attacks or the conquest of another European power, but the pillages and robberies perpetrated by neighbouring rulers, because "*if the inhabitants find themselves in insecurity they will look for a safer place somewhere else.*"⁷²⁹ Under constant threat of a demographic haemorrhage, Dulivier held the opinion that the good existing relations with the Mughal governor were necessary, but not sufficient. He built the image of Pondicherry as a place of safety by maintaining enough soldiers and exhibiting a strong fortress, even if it was only representational.

⁷²³ ANOM C2 66 f°5, letter of Martin, 22 February 1701.

⁷²⁴ Labernadie, *Le vieux Pondichéry*, 47.

⁷²⁵ ANOM C2 67 f° 248, letter of Martin, 19 February 1703.

⁷²⁶ ANOM C2 63 f°151, letter of Martin, 20 February 1690.

⁷²⁷ ANOM C2 66 f°7, letter of Martin, 22 February 1701.

⁷²⁸ ANOM C2 69 f°5 and f°11 letter of Hébert, 15 February 1710: "*toute notre force consiste à nous bien menager avec le gouverneur du Carnate d'où nous dépendons avec lequel j'entretiens une bonne correspondance, l'envoyant visiter tous les six mois et luy faisant quelques prés ens suivant nos moyens car on ne se présente jamais les mains vides devant les maures*".

⁷²⁹ ANOM C2 69 f°73, letter of Dulivier, 14 February 1714: "*les habitants ne se trouvant plus avec leur famille en seureté auroient été chercher un azile plus sur ailleurs*".

A second important element for the growth of the settlement was religious tolerance. As shown by Danna Agmon, the legislation curtailing the religious freedom of Indian weavers enacted by Director Martin in 1701, and strongly supported by the Jesuits, led to the uprising of a great majority of Pondicherry's population.⁷³⁰ At that time, the Hindu population stood at 30,000 people against 500 Christians. Martin understood the potential disaster and cancelled the legislation. Whether the initiation of this legislation against non-Catholic worshippers came exclusively from Martin, or from the Jesuits, is outside the scope of this chapter. However, sources prior to 1701 suggest that Martin realised the necessity of religious tolerance. In September of 1699, he wrote to the Company in Paris that "*it is sure that people from all nations and religions will come to settle [in Pondicherry], the English, the Danes and the Dutch receive indifferently in their settlements, Catholics, mosques, pagodes, this freedom is granted to attract inhabitants.*"⁷³¹ The fact that he efficiently and rapidly cancelled the by-law after the uprising in 1701 shows that he was in favour, at least for pragmatic reasons, of religious tolerance in Pondicherry.

The Parisian directors' instructions to Hébert regarding his visit to the French settlements in India paid particular attention to religious matters. Despite the distance, Parisian directors had learned from the religious conflicts under the directorship of Martin, and saw it as a threat. In their instructions, they repeatedly made the direct connection between freedom of religion and population increase in Pondicherry, which would result in an increase in the town's revenues. They wrote that "*he [Hébert] will make all necessary efforts to increase the revenues of Pondicherry, and he will examine if it would be appropriate to give freedom of conscience in order to attract the people, and increase taxes.*"⁷³² The memory of the two strikes under Martin's management was never far from Hébert's mind. He had read the minutes of the Council proceedings during the unrest of 1705 in detail and reported that a similar event happened in Madras in 1707.⁷³³ Therefore, in July 1708, just after Hébert's arrival in the French settlement, Hébert and the Sovereign Council granted freedom of

⁷³⁰ Agmon, *An Uneasy Alliance*, 69–71.

⁷³¹ ANOM C2 65 f°31, letter of Martin and Chalonge, 14 September 1699 : "*il est seur qu'il y viendra des gens s'y établir de diverses nations et de religions différentes, les anglois les danois et les hollandois reçoivent tous indifféremment chez eux catholiques, mosquées, pagodes, l'on accorde cette liberté pour avoir des habitants*".

⁷³² ANOM C2 12 f°115, 29 May 1706 : Company instructions to Hébert "*Il faut s'il luy plait soin de mettre tout en usage pour augmenter les revenus de Pondichéry et il examinera avec soin s'il est convenable de donner liberté de conscience, afin d'attirer le peuple, et augmenter par-là les droits d'entrée et de sortie*".

⁷³³ ANOM C2 68 f°278-279, letter of Hébert, 12 February 1709.

commerce and religion to everyone who wished to settle in Pondicherry, in order to increase commerce.⁷³⁴

By the end of Hébert's first year in Pondicherry, he appointed a Hindu as chief broker (*courtier en chef des Malabars*), Nayiniyappa Pillai (1654-1717), to replace a Christian broker. From the religious context of Pondicherry, the appointment of a Hindu broker in the religious context of Pondicherry served as yet another step towards Hébert's pragmatic tolerance. He explained his tolerant strategy to the directors in the beginning of 1709 when he wrote: "*these people reason like everywhere else in the inhabited world, someone wants to force us to stay in a place where we do not earn a living and where we suffer by our religion, it is better to find somewhere else to go.*"⁷³⁵ He concluded his reasoning behind his decision to grant freedom of religion in Pondicherry by stating that: "*the English who are opposed to the Catholic religion in England, endured it publicly in Madras.*"⁷³⁶ By distinguishing between the situation in Europe and that in India, Hébert tried to show the Parisian directors that Catholicism in France and tolerance in Pondicherry were not mutually exclusive.

The Jesuits kept considerable power and influence in Pondicherry because they communicated directly with Louis XIV, whose confessor was a member of the Society of Jesus.⁷³⁷ When the Jesuits demanded that the function of courtier-in-chief only be given to a Christian, thereby excluding the current Hindu broker Pillai, Dulivier was faced with a difficult conundrum. On the one hand, he had to please the Jesuits and, on the other hand, the trade in Pondicherry depended on the skills of "*one of the most capable men of all of India for the negotiations of a company.*"⁷³⁸ Unable to take sides and thus illustrating the narrow margin for manoeuvre in this scenario, Dulivier opted to compromise and appointed a Christian assistant to Pillai.⁷³⁹ Furthermore, when orders came from France to restrict Hindu ceremonies following pressure exerted by the Jesuits, Dulivier opposed these orders, stating: "*the difficulties that I foresee and the risks by troubling them on their religion of losing this*

⁷³⁴ Agmon, *An Uneasy Alliance*, 92.

⁷³⁵ ANOM C2 68 f°265, letter of Hébert, 12 February 1709: "*Ces gens raisonnent comme on le fait partout dans le monde habitable, on veut nous forcer de rester dans un lieu où nous ne gagnons pas notre vie, ou l'on ne souffre pas notre religion il vaut mieux chercher ailleurs*".

⁷³⁶ ANOM C2 68 f°265, letter of Hébert, 12 February 1709: "*les anglais qui sont si opposé à la religion catholique en Angleterre la souffre publiquement à Madras*".

⁷³⁷ Agmon, *An Uneasy Alliance*, 113.

⁷³⁸ ANOM C2 69 f°103, letter of Dulivier, 18 July 1714 "*un des plus habiles hommes pour la négociation d'une compagnie qu'il y ait dans l'inde*".

⁷³⁹ Agmon, *An Uneasy Alliance*, 113.

colony.⁷⁴⁰ Once again, Dulivier's dependency on the Hindu workforce motivated his opposition and demonstrated the usual pragmatic tolerance of his predecessors.

However, the pragmatic tolerance strategy was not consistent. The entanglement of power dynamics, economic motives and religious matters resulted in contradictory religious policies from the director. In 1709, the same year Hébert argued in favour of religious freedom in Pondicherry, he had the "*happiness of forcing some non-Christians to demolish a small pagoda where they performed their adorations and deliberations*."⁷⁴¹ During the same month Dulivier opposed the orders of the Company to restrict Hindu ceremonies, he forbade a Hindu celebration. The response was instantaneous: between 60,000 and 70,000 Hindu people left Pondicherry.⁷⁴² Similar to Martin before him, Dulivier reinstated full religious freedom. Most strikingly is the case of Hébert, who after appointing Nayiniyappa as chief broker of Pondicherry, imprisoned him to replace him with a Christian broker under the influence of the Jesuits. The following mistreatment of Nayiniyappa and his death generated a scandal that made its way to France and would cost Hébert his job. Martin, Hébert and Dulivier kept attempting to restrict religious freedom as a way to enforce their power over the population, while simultaneously voicing their concern and awareness of the necessity of such religious freedom for the economic development of the settlement. Tolerance attracted people to the settlement but feelings of fear and uncertainty helped governing bodies assert their power. However, in the first decades of the eighteenth century, attempts to restrict religious freedom and therefore establish a stronger French authority over the inhabitants of Pondicherry were unsuccessful.⁷⁴³ Overseas directors had to adapt their policies to the demands of the Indian population and not the opposite.

The other way to stimulate the economic growth of the settlement was not only to increase the population but also to attract wealthy merchants. After the hard blow of the Dutch conquest, the Company had to rebuild trust with merchants and weavers; the accounts between the Company and its merchants had not been cleared, contracts had been broken and promises that funds would come on the next ships had not been kept. Some merchants had left Pondicherry for Madras or the Dutch settlements and the only way to attract them back was to become an economically dynamic settlement. One of the factors that attracted wealthy

⁷⁴⁰ ANOM C2 69 f°154, letter of Dulivier, 26 February 1715: "*les difficultés que je prévoyois et les risques qu'il y auroit en les inquiétant sur leur religion de perdre un jour cette colonie*".

⁷⁴¹ ANOM C2 68 f°322, letter of Hébert, 10 October 1709: "*J'ay eu le bonheur d'obliger les gentils d'abattre une petite pagode, ou toutes les nuits ils faisoient leurs adorations et délibérations*".

⁷⁴² The population had increased steeply during the first decade of the eighteenth century, see: Agmon, *An Uneasy Alliance*, 95.

⁷⁴³ Agmon, 96.

merchants was guaranteed access to the French passport for their ships, security of their assets and protection of their confidential business information, similar to other European settlements on the Coromandel Coast. However, the Parisian directors instructed Dulivier not to deliver a Company passport to any enemy of France, demanding that if Armenian, Muslim or Hindu merchants asked for a passport they would have to disclose their trading route, business partners and a complete list of their goods. The directors' demanded that he seize the goods of those businessmen guilty of trading with French enemies. The specificity of the order indicates that the French authorities knew that Armenian, Hindu and Muslim merchants frequently traded with French enemies, including European competitors. These cross-cultural trading partnerships happened frequently enough for the metropolitan directors to regard the selling of passports to these merchants as an indirect way to contribute to the economic development of their enemies.

Dulivier opposed the Parisian directors' orders when he answered that "*wanting to touch the subjects of the Mughal, the Gentils [non-Christians] or the Armenian would mean losing everything, the smallest complaint about the refusal of a passport could lead to very bad consequences*" adding that the merchants would never let anyone into the "*secrets of their trade*."⁷⁴⁴ Dulivier's strong refusal to obey these orders reveals both the gap between the Parisian directors' vision and the reality of the situation in Pondicherry, and the strong dependence on local merchants and the necessity to comply to local mercantile rules. Another reason for Dulivier's opposition was that the selling of French passports to foreign ships was a source of revenue for the settlement. In 1711, Hébert sold a French passport to Seatergood and Joones, merchants from Madras who sailed on a Muslim ship owned by Persian merchant, Bérangey, to trade in China and Malacca, for 1,000 pagodas (8,500 *livres*).⁷⁴⁵ Dulivier justified granting a French passport to English merchants during the War of the Spanish Succession by arguing that the Company had not sent any aid to Pondicherry the previous year. This example illustrates the widespread web of cross-cultural trading partnerships and the difficulty differentiating the so-called enemies from the allies in these intricacies of interests. Stopping the distribution of passports to merchants who traded with French enemies would virtually put this profitable activity on hold. Furthermore, aside from

⁷⁴⁴ ANOM E 152, personnel file Dulivier, Company instructions to Dulivier dated from 1711 and the reply in 1714: "*de vouloir toucher aux dis sujets du Mogol, aux Gentils ou Arméniens se seroient vouloir tout perdre, car sur la moindre des plaintes mesmes sur un refus de passeport on nous suciteroit de très facheuses affaires, on les obligeroit ainsy jamais à déclarer la quantité des marchandises ces sortes de gens sont trop jaloux du secret de leur commerce pour se soumettre à une pareille maxime*".

⁷⁴⁵ Council minute, 23 May 1711 in *Procès-verbaux Procès-verbaux des délibérations*, 98.

bringing much-needed funds into the Company's coffers in Pondicherry, the passport system, which originated in the Portuguese system of Cartazes, enabled the French Company to spread its sphere of influence beyond controlled territories, without costs.

As a last option to find funds, the overseas director of Pondicherry borrowed money. Credit opportunities for the French in Pondicherry were scarce. In 1707, the French East India Company's "South Sea squadron" was delayed and Dulivier, as interim director, had exhausted all credit. He decided, with the agreement of the council, to send a small boat (*quesche*) to the Mascarens, where he sold for 5,000 piasters of merchandise and borrowed 20,000 piasters from the inhabitants of the island of Bourbon, at an interest rate of ten percent.⁷⁴⁶ The strategy had been successful, since it had brought 25,000 piasters to Pondicherry at a critical moment as only one of the "South Sea Squadron" ships made it to Pondicherry: "*the piasters have been of great help, without them it would have been hard to keep the fortress of Pondicherry*".⁷⁴⁷ The minister of the Navy himself congratulated Dulivier on his initiative.⁷⁴⁸ Connections between French settlements not only in the Indian sub-continent but in the whole Indian Ocean demonstrate that they were not self-contained and interacted independently from the metropolis.⁷⁴⁹

In September 1708, an important creditor of the Company, the Armenian merchant Khoja Safar of Madras, asked Dulivier to pay the Company's debt, which amounted to 19,000 pagodas, or 153,900 *livres*.⁷⁵⁰ The debt had increased in the last years of Martin's directorship. In 1705, Martin renewed the loan of 10,000 pagodas, or 81,000 *livres*, made to Khoja Safar in 1700 at an interest rate of ten percent, and in 1706 he increased it to 15,000 pagodas, or 121,500 *livres*, on the same interest rate for the next four years.⁷⁵¹ Dulivier and the council were unable to repay the accumulated debt and decided to pay half of the debt back and make a new contract for 10,000 pagodas.⁷⁵² Director Dulivier therefore soon relied on his good relations with other European governors, either for more credit or to pay back existing loans. In 1709, Dulivier had not received any news or supplies from the Company for the past two years and resolved to borrow 8,000 pagodas, or 64,800 *livres*, from the English in

⁷⁴⁶ ANOM C2 13 f°58, letter of Bouynot (Company ship captain) in Pondichéry, 30 September 1707.

⁷⁴⁷ ANOM C2 12 f°219, East India Company directors, 1 October 1707: "*qui ont esté d'un grand secours, et sans lesquels il auroit esté bien difficile de conserver la forteresse de Pondichéry*".

⁷⁴⁸ ANOM B//30 f° 351, Pontchartrain to Dulivier, 16 January 1709.

⁷⁴⁹ April Lee Hatfield, *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1.

⁷⁵⁰ Council meeting minute, 24 September 1708 in *Procès-verbaux des délibérations*, 64.

⁷⁵¹ Council meeting minute, 6 March 1705 and 1 April 1706 in *Procès-verbaux des délibérations*, 21, 30.

⁷⁵² Council meeting minute, 24 September 1708 in *Procès-verbaux des délibérations*, 64.

Madras with the promise to reimburse them in January. Aware that delaying the payment of this debt would ruin the director's reputation, Dulivier decided to ask for a loan of 30,000 piasters, or 150,000 *livres*, to the Spanish governor of Manila to reimburse his debt to the English.⁷⁵³

By 1709, private merchants, mostly from Saint Malo, owned most of the French ships coming to Pondicherry. The merchants enjoyed the infrastructure of the Company in exchange for ten percent of their profit. The financial state of the settlement worsened, because neither private traders nor the Company sent funds to Pondicherry. Hébert complained to Paris, stating that: “*the Company has to send us funds to maintain ourselves [...] because not providing us the means to maintain the fort, while giving passports to ships asking us for merchandise, it is expecting the impossible from us.*”⁷⁵⁴ According to Hébert, the Company spent 50,000 *écus*, or 150,000 *livres*, a year in Pondicherry. The bad financial state of the Company was known locally, which made it difficult to access any credit.⁷⁵⁵ If Hébert seemed to inflate the annual spending of the settlement to strengthen his argument, the lack of creditworthiness of the Company was a real obstacle to accessing funds. Indeed, the English company had more debt, but because its trade was known to be profitable, its solvency was not questioned.⁷⁵⁶ Facing this difficulty, Hébert resorted to selling the space reserved for the East India Company on the Saint Malo merchants' ships, which the merchants promised to the Company as part of their treaty. According to the 1708 contract, the Company was entitled to ten *tonneaux* of merchandise in each Saint Malo ship, free of freight costs.⁷⁵⁷ Hébert admitted that there was no merchandise available in the Company warehouses to fill the reserved space. The director made 36,000 *livres* on the sale of cargo space, which, according to him, could have been more profitable to the Company as it might have amounted to 100,000 *livres* of profit in France.⁷⁵⁸

The necessity to at least keep up the appearances of the Company's good financial state was expressed explicitly by the minister of the Navy. Pontchartrain had strongly argued against Hébert's proposition to sell all of the fort's cutlery to pay the Company's debts, by

⁷⁵³ Council meeting minute, 19 June 1708 in *Procès-verbaux des délibérations*, 39–40.

⁷⁵⁴ ANOM C2 69 f°7, letter of Hébert, 15 February 1710: “*la compagnie doit songer à nous envoyer des fonds pour nous soutenir [...] car de dire qu'elle donne cette permission aux vaisseaux, qu'elle nous envoie quoique ce soit et qu'elle nous demande encore des marchandises c'est nous demander l'impossible*” other mentions of this issue in *Procès-verbaux des délibérations*, 82.

⁷⁵⁵ ANOM C2 69 f° 9, letter of Hébert, 15 February 1710 and Council meeting minute, 22 December 1709 in *Procès-verbaux des délibérations*, 88..

⁷⁵⁶ ANOM C2 68 f° 319, letter of Hébert, 15 February 1715.

⁷⁵⁷ Council meeting minute, 22 of December 1709 in *Procès-verbaux des délibérations*, 87.

⁷⁵⁸ ANOM C2 69 f°5, letter of Hébert, 15 February 1709.

writing “*it smells furiously of bankruptcy, it is necessary to avoid to even show signs of it because these things provoke a lot of rumours.*”⁷⁵⁹ The bankruptcy rumours would affect the Company’s credit opportunities. In March 1712, Hébert sent his son to Madras to negotiate a loan with merchants. The widow of a Huguenot, Chardin, agreed to lend 4,000 pagodas under the condition that the loan would be made in Hébert’s name because she “*did not want to do business with the Company.*”⁷⁶⁰ The Company’s debts accrued while using the director’s creditworthiness as collateral. There is no evidence that it generated a lower interest rate, but rather that the loan would not have been possible without the personal engagement of the director. It was not an exceptional measure, as Company councillors in Pondicherry asked the director to provide this service for future loans. According to economic theory, transaction costs were reduced through the recognition of the responsibility of a principal for his agent. Credit was then granted to an agent based on the credit worthiness of his principal.⁷⁶¹ However, in the case of the French East India Company and its agent in Pondicherry, the exact opposite took place. Once the creditworthiness of the Company completely eroded, it was the director’s personal reputation that enabled the settlement to benefit from the necessary loans. Individual creditworthiness complemented the institution’s limits and contributed to its survival.

Despite the divergent strategy of Hébert regarding the military protection of the settlement, it appears that, in order to maintain a steady population growth, the other directors agreed that the amount of Topaz and Lascarins could not be lowered. Although under pressure from the Parisian directors to severely decrease the garrison’s budget, Martin and Dulivier refused to cut their pay for fear of desertion. The fortress and the garrison may not have had a military role against a potential Mughal attack, but nevertheless projected an appearance of power to neighbouring rulers. All directors were aware of the necessity of religious tolerance, while time and again, they all attempted to assert power through religious restrictions, and failed. To attract mercantile activities, the director had to oppose the orders of the French authorities, which were ill-suited to the context of the Company in India as the case of the passports illustrates. Finally, under the advice of the minister of the Navy, directors attempted

⁷⁵⁹ ANOM B//30 f°352, Pontchartrain to the East India Company directors, January 1709: “*cela sent furieusement la banqueroute et c’est ce qu’il faut toujours éviter surtout de la faire paroître se sont des choses qui font beaucoup de bruit et d’éclats dans un pays*”.

⁷⁶⁰ Council meeting minute, 23 February 1712: “*Ne voulant point avoir affaire à la compagnie*” in *Procès-verbaux des délibérations*, 109.

⁷⁶¹ Douglas C. North, ‘Institutions, Transaction Costs, and the Rise of Merchant Empires’, in *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires*, ed. James D. Tracy, Studies in Comparative Early Modern History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 31.

to keep up the appearance of solvency as a way to continue accessing credit. Aside from Armenian credit providers, the French resorted to asking for loans to their enemies in Europe, the English, and in order to pay back some of the loans, generated a chain of debts across imperial borders. Once the Company's creditworthiness was not enough, the Company used the director's personal reputation of solvency as collateral for the loans.

The agency of overseas directors in Pondicherry can be observed in their repetitive attempts at re-defining power dynamics with rulers and with the population they governed. Even more striking is how they exercised their agency towards their principals when they opposed metropolitan orders, although their agency should not be limited to those instances. Overseas directors frequently came up against unprecedented situations that made the metropolitan rules irrelevant. Consequently, an element of improvisation was necessary for the sake of the Company's interests. Even the opposition to metropolitan orders was, in most cases, not against the interests of the Company, but rather in its favour. The orders could and should have been negotiated by overseas directors, who were hired to carefully assess the risks and opportunities of each decision according to the context. The margin of manoeuvre given to overseas directors was the consequence of the Company's limits as an institution in terms of funds, connections and power.

4. Relations with rulers, access to credit and managing private traders in Ouidah

Contrary to Pondicherry, the trade in Ouidah was centralised in the hands of local rulers, particularly during the early Dahomian phase, but also to a lesser extent under the Hueda kings. The French fort's lack of sovereignty, coupled with the economic dependence on the authorities, made maintaining good relations with the Hueda and Dahomey kings essential to the director's position and the continued existence of the trading post in Ouidah. Due to the recurrent political conflicts and economic competition between the Hueda kingdom and its neighbour Allada, and later between the Dahomey and the Hueda kings, the overseas directors first needed to demonstrate their loyalty to the current authorities. At the same time, French directors had to maximise their trading relations in the Bight of Benin and open access to markets outside of Ouidah, where smaller trading posts existed, such as at the main port of Allada, Jakin. Ducoulombier engaged in diplomatic relations with the neighbouring kingdom of Allada. For instance, after the King of Allada died in 1715,

Ducoulombier sent the new King a “*present to renew their friendship.*”⁷⁶² Additionally, he sent his vice-director, Bouchel, to manage the trade in Jakin. When the commercial situation was not favourable in Ouidah, he advised many French captains to trade at Jakin.

Jealous of the commerce Ducoulombier was actively developing in Allada, King Huffon of Hueda decided, in a secret council, to force the French director to return to Europe on the next French ship.⁷⁶³ On 9 August 1715, the order was executed. King Huffon sent his army and gave Ducoulombier two hours to sort out his papers and Ducoulombier sailed back to France the next morning. Ducoulombier had underestimated the necessity to regularly demonstrate his loyalty to Huffon, and was unable to navigate the relations with both Allada and Hueda. The English factor stated that “*the King has sent off the French director for sending a ship to Jacquin and threatened to do the same by the Dutch chief,*” which demonstrates that Ducoulombier was hardly a unique case.⁷⁶⁴ Aware of this constant threat, Ducoulombier’s successor, Bouchel, took into account Huffon’s sensitivities, particularly regarding his sovereign rights such as tax collection or justice. When an *acquérat* caught a thief in the French lodge, Bouchel first warned Assou, who sent him to the King to demand justice. The King decided to let Bouchel be the judge of the thief’s sentence, telling Bouchel that this consideration increased his regard for Bouchel.⁷⁶⁵ Acknowledging Huffon’s sovereignty and right to adjudicate justice, even when it directly concerned the French factory, was part of Bouchel’s strategy to enhance his relationship with the King.

During the troubled times of the Dahomian conquest of Ouidah, the French trading lodge in the capital was destroyed and the fort became the only remaining building in which the Company employees were safe. The Hueda King and Captain Assou regularly claimed the fort until in 1733, when the Hueda conquered Ouidah for good. Since the beginning of the conflict, the overseas director of Ouidah’s first priority was to benefit from the protection of the new ruler. Dupetitval sent a diplomatic mission to King Agaja of Dahomey early on in the war, to enhance the good relations between the French director and Agaja, and the loyalty of the director. The commercial situation changed drastically after the Dahomian conquest, due to Agaja’s attempts to establish a monopoly over the slave trade.⁷⁶⁶ The stronger centralisation of the slave trade gave even more importance to the visits to King Agaja.

⁷⁶² ANOM C6 25, letter of Bouchel, 26 July 1717: “*Envoi d’un présent pour renouveler l’amitié*”.

⁷⁶³ ANOM E 145, personal file Ducoulombier, mémoire, 1717.

⁷⁶⁴ TNA T70/6 f°27, abstracts of letter received from Whydah by the Royal Africa Company, 14 September 1715.

⁷⁶⁵ ANOM C6 25, letter of Bouchel, 26 July 1717: “*cette déférence lui a attiré l’estime du roy*”.

⁷⁶⁶ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 26 August 1733.

Dupetitval's envoy, Delisle, reported that the Dahomian King attested to being his best friend.⁷⁶⁷ Similar to the relationship with the Mughal governor, the word friendship was utilitarian and did not imply any intimacy. King Agaja used the same term to qualify his relationship with the Portuguese in 1733: "*the King of Dahomey declares that he likes supremely the Portuguese nation and that he wants no other in his territories.*"⁷⁶⁸ The friendship meant that Dupetitval succeeded, at least momentarily, in benefitting from the King's protection.

However, the directors were aware of the volatility of these statements of friendship. After Tegbesu's accession to the throne in 1742, Levet came back to Ouidah as director and purposely encouraged French captains to come ashore to trade in Ouidah, to ostentatiously demonstrate to the Dahomian King that he was actively restoring commerce.⁷⁶⁹ Levet chose an interpreter, Jacques Cazimir, for the "*most important negotiations.*"⁷⁷⁰ However, despite his experience as vice-director and interim director, and the use of an interpreter he trusted, his visits to King Tegbesu remained uneasy. This was probably due to the fact that he brought up uncomfortable subjects, such as the dismissal of his predecessor, Levens, or the imprisonment of the director of the Portuguese fort, Basilio.⁷⁷¹ When the King promised him that he would never do any harm to the French fort, he remained sceptical, as he wrote "*they are like dinner friends who take their friendship back as soon as one removes the tablecloth.*"⁷⁷² The friendship relations with the Hueda and Dahomey kings had to be continuously renewed and, just as in Pondicherry, this renewal happened through gift-giving.

Even more than in Pondicherry, the boundary between tributes, taxes and gifts was particularly thin in the context of the West African contact zone.⁷⁷³ The metropolitan authorities attempted to make the distinction in their instructions to Bouchel: "*the council observes that, in this regard, he has to be careful that the presents made to the king of Ouidah should not be considered an increase of the Costumes of the Negros.*"⁷⁷⁴ However, this

⁷⁶⁷ ANOM C6 25, letter of Delisle visiting the Dahomey king to Dupetitval, 31 August 1728.

⁷⁶⁸ APB 27 doc. 79, letter of the Vice Roy to the Overseas Council in Brazil, 12 January 1733: "*le Roi de Daomé [...] qui déclare aimer suprêmement la nation portugaise, de telle sorte qu'il n'en veut pas d'autre dans ses possessions*" translated and cited in Verger, *Flux et reflux de la traite des nègres*, 156.

⁷⁶⁹ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 14 June 1743.

⁷⁷⁰ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 25 February 1744: "*Intreprete aux palabres les plus importantes*".

⁷⁷¹ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 14 June 1743.

⁷⁷² ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 25 February 1744: "*ils sont comme les amys de la table, qui retirent leur amitié sitot qu'on lève la nappe*".

⁷⁷³ Brauner, 'Connecting Things', 416.

⁷⁷⁴ ANOM E 43, personnel file of Bouchel: "*le conseil luy observa sur ce sujet qu'il doit bien prendre en garde que les presents qui pourront estre faits au Roy de Juda ne soient pris pour une augmentation de Coutumes les Negres ayant intérests de l'insinuer afin d'augmenter les droits qu'ils reçoivent*".

distinction appears to have been difficult to apply in practice, as the gift-giving in West Africa was mostly one-sided.⁷⁷⁵ The Company directly depended on gift-giving sessions with local rulers to enjoy their protection and to build commercial ties. These sessions took place on special occasions, such as when the ruler or the director changed, recent victories or royal funerals. When Ducoulombier arrived in Ouidah in 1712, he started by restoring French credibility, “*doing unimaginable solicitations to the King and great men of the Kingdom, sparing no presents*” which was, according to him, the only way to preserve the privileges they had acquired.⁷⁷⁶ As for Bouchel, he was in Allada when Ducoulombier returned to France; Bouchel had to give great gifts to the Hueda King in order to be allowed to come back to take over authority of French fort.⁷⁷⁷ In 1733, when the father of the Dahomian King Agaja died, the King’s administration persistently asked Levet, the interim director, to come to the funerals. The French director brought gunpowder as a present for Agaja and Alligny, the captain for the French, as well as alcohol for the King’s commerce official.⁷⁷⁸

As in Pondicherry, local rulers played Europeans against one another during gift-giving transactions, taking advantage of the competition between countries.⁷⁷⁹ European representatives would not only compete over the value of the gifts but also on when they would offer their gifts. For instance, King Agaja also invited the Portuguese and English to the funeral of his father; Levet had to leave immediately for the ceremony “*since English and Portuguese directors were always so punctual to go every time the king asks them.*”⁷⁸⁰ The king did not necessarily need a special event and used any pretext to ask European representatives to visit him, bearing gifts. Levet remarked that King Tegbesu used the pretext of trade negotiations to summon the directors, when it was obviously out of “*pure caprice.*”⁷⁸¹ These forced and competitive gift offerings were close to tributes, just as they were in Pondicherry. However, the difference was the specificity of the Dahomey ruler’s demands.

When he arrived in Ouidah in November 1733, Director Du Bellay undertook his mandatory visit to King Agaja. He began by complimenting the King of Dahomey and asking for his protection. As a reply, King Agaja held Du Bellay’s hand multiple times to confirm his

⁷⁷⁵ Brauner, ‘Connecting Things’, 416.

⁷⁷⁶ ANOM E 145, personnel file Ducoulombier, mémoire, 1717: “*faire toutes les sollicitations imaginables auprès du roy et des grands du royaume n’épargnant point les presents*”.

⁷⁷⁷ ANOM E 145, personnel file Ducoulombier, mémoire, 1717.

⁷⁷⁸ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 26 August 1733.

⁷⁷⁹ Brauner, ‘Connecting Things’, 415.

⁷⁸⁰ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 26 August 1733.

⁷⁸¹ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 25 February 1744: “*sous prétexte de quelques paroles touchant le commerce et réellement par pur caprice*”.

protection.⁷⁸² In exchange for his protection, the King required the overseas director to offer specific gifts from the Company. Among these gifts, King Agaja only wanted guns and provided Du Bellay with an extremely detailed list of gifts.⁷⁸³ The specificity of the demands testifies to the limited agency of the overseas director in these gift-giving sessions. Indeed, before Du Bellay, the interim director, Levet, attempted to oppose the demands of Agaja. The King had asked Levet to exchange all of the French fort's gunpowder for enslaved Africans. Levet refused and, on the order of King Agaja, sailed back to France in January 1734.⁷⁸⁴ Du Bellay was aware of the consequences of opposition, as he was the one who had to communicate Agaja's expulsion order to Levet. Levet's failed opposition put a final limit to the agency of Du Bellay.

Within the source material, mentions of physical reciprocity in gift-giving relations take the form of payments. For instance, King Agaja asked for a table and cups for tea, as well as a Portuguese bed, for which he sent enslaved Africans to Dupetitval. Agaja controlled the transaction; he decided on the commodity and set the price. Other signs of reciprocity appear in the negotiations initiated by the overseas director. The latter brought presents to the king to ask for a favour or a deal, and the counter gift sent by the king would seal that deal. Because of its voluntary nature, this type of gift exchange implied that the overseas director had a greater latitude, in both the value of the gift and the interpretation of the counter gift. The director's agency in these negotiations is evident in an example of when negotiations failed. When Levet negotiated the replacement of the Portuguese director with King Tegbesu, Levet used the familiar form of addressing the King and spoke in an aggressive tone. Nevertheless, Levet and Tegbesu reached an agreement. Levet offered many valuable presents and received a female enslaved African in return. However, Levet overestimated the symbolic value of the gift-giving exchange.⁷⁸⁵ If the transaction sealed the deal between the overseas director and the King of Dahomey regarding the Portuguese director, it did not prove that Tegbesu was "*happy about the truth that he always found in what I [Levet] told him,*" as Levet wrote to

⁷⁸² ANOM C6 25, letter of Du Bellay, 21 November 1733.

⁷⁸³ ANOM C6 25, letter of Du Bellay, 21 November 1733. The king demanded a golden jacket with bulletproof bracelets and helmet lined with red satin, four pieces of velvet, one bleu, one white and the last one of such specific colour that the King gave a sample to Du Bellay. The list continued with the presents to be given to the King's four main wives, generals, captains and councilors. Other examples of detailed demands can be found in ANOM C6 25, letter of Delisle visiting the Dahomey king to Dupetitval, 13 September 1728. Agaja asked to Deslile, Dupetitval's envoy, a bottle of hard liquor or all the hats with golden and silver edges.

⁷⁸⁴ Verger, *Flux et reflux de la traite des nègres*, 167.

⁷⁸⁵ Verger, 184–85.

France.⁷⁸⁶ Soon after, Tegbesu had Levet killed and Guestard succeeded him as director. Levet did not underestimate the value of the gifts, but rather chose the wrong strategy during negotiations, which had fatal consequences. This wrong choice illustrates the limited, but existing, agency of the French directors in Ouidah.

Like in Pondicherry, the director's position not only depended on his ability to conduct negotiations and to provide frequent gifts to the authorities, but also on access to credit. The trading station lacked basic funds during the whole period under study, but particularly during the directorships of Ducoulombier and Bouchel. Their mandates correspond to the administration of the Asiento Company and the Council of the Navy, as well as the first years of the Company of the Indies. The lack of funds was due, in part, to the fact that the administration of the Navy opened the trade in the Bight of Benin to merchants from French port cities. The merchants were not held accountable for the maintenance of the fort and therefore did not necessarily contribute to the administration costs.⁷⁸⁷ The most common strategy utilised by overseas directors was to borrow cowry shells and foodstuff from the King of Dahomey or another European representative in Ouidah. When Ducoulombier arrived in Ouidah in 1712, he found starved Company employees and had to ask for supplies and loans from the English and Dutch.⁷⁸⁸ Three years later, he wrote to the Council of the Navy that "*this fort survives on cowry shells from the English and on loans.*"⁷⁸⁹ The extreme need for cowry shells led Ducoulombier to make unprofitable deals with the King, selling 214 ounces of gold at a value of fifty *livres* per ounce, instead of the seventy-five *livres* as valued in France. According to him, it provoked a loss of more than 3,000 *livres*.⁷⁹⁰

When Bouchel became overseas director, he sent employees to get cowry shells from the Danish in Accra because he worried that the Parisian directors would not send any much-needed supplies before his first letters arrived.⁷⁹¹ In 1717, Bouchel resorted to borrowing cowry shells from the Hueda King, Huffon. As long as the overseas directors appeared able to repay their debt to the King, the latter continued to loan them cowry shells. If the creditworthiness of the overseas director and the French came into question, however, it could endanger the director's position. Two years later, King Huffon had not been reimbursed and

⁷⁸⁶ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 13 October 1746: "*Pour me montrer combien il était content de la vérité qu'il avait toujours trouvée dans tout ce que je lui avais dit*".

⁷⁸⁷ ANOM B//36 f°207, letter of the minister of the Navy to Ducoulombier, 29 June 1714: "*au sujet de la liberté du commerce de Guinée*".

⁷⁸⁸ ANOM E 145, personel file Ducoulombier, mémoire, 1717.

⁷⁸⁹ ANOM C25, 6 April 1715: "*il fait subsister le fort par des Bouges qu'il a des anglois et des emprunts*".

⁷⁹⁰ ANOM E 145, personel file Ducoulombier, mémoire, 1717.

⁷⁹¹ ANOM C6 25, letter of Bouchel, 26 July 1717.

did not press Bouchel to pay him back yet. But by 1720, he realised that none of the many French ships anchoring in Ouidah had paid back the loan and “*that Bouchel was already indebted to the English and Dutch governors as well as to the Portuguese Francisco Pereira Mendez, and that he indebted himself daily to the Dutch.*”⁷⁹² The King doubted about Bouchel’s ability to repay his debts, and demanded that French captains warned the French King of the situation. He made it clear that if France did not send funds to Ouidah, something would happen to Bouchel and to the French ships. The open trade period only partly explains Bouchel’s extreme levels of debt, and his case will be further analysed in later chapters. The administration of the Company of the Indies did not solve the problem of funds. Especially during the Dahomian Wars, French dependence on fellow European representatives, particularly the English, for cowry shells remained heavy.

A last option for the directors would be to ask for credit to private traders that had a vested interest in the “Guinea trade”. While private traders sometimes sold overpriced supplies to French directors in Ouidah, one should not assume that the French private merchants and directors had disparate interests.⁷⁹³ Indeed, the French port city traders had no use for a fort that was deeply in debt; they therefore would at times advance money for its maintenance. In December 1721, the vice-director of Ouidah stayed in Nantes, where Montaudouin offered him a small loan of 6,000 *livres* for the maintenance of the trading post.⁷⁹⁴ This sum would be taken from what Montaudouin owed, or would owe to the Company of the Indies, which had taken over the administration of the fort in 1720. In February 1722, Bigot de la Mothe, the administrator of the Navy in Nantes, reported that “*in conformity with the orders, I made a deal with M. Montaudouin for a loan of 12,000 livres of goods for the trading post of Ouidah.*”⁷⁹⁵ The fact that the Navy administrator referred to this loan while the Company of the Indies was, technically, in charge is due to the administration’s transition period. This transition period could also explain why the trading fort in Ouidah lacked funds during these specific years. Given that the annual budget for the fort’s maintenance was between 25,000 and 42,000 *livres*, the loan from Montaudouin was a relatively important contribution. It amounted to something between one-half and one-fourth

⁷⁹² AN MAR/B/3/264, Council of the Navy, 1720: “*et qu’il say que le dit sieur est endetté avec les directeurs anglois et hollandoir, et le Sr Francisque Perere Mendez portugais, et qu’il s’endette tous les jours avec le directeur hollandois*”.

⁷⁹³ ANOM C6 25, letter of Bouchel, 6 June 1717.

⁷⁹⁴ ANOM E 285, personnel file Levesque, 6 December 1721.

⁷⁹⁵ AN MAR/B/3/280, Bigot de la Mothe to the Council of the Navy, 19 February 1722: “*en conformité de ses ordres je passeray un marché avec Mr Montaudouin pour les 12000 livres d’effets qu’il avance pour le comptoir de Juda*”.

of the yearly budget. Montaudouin's financial help was strategic. If the Company of the Indies changed the policy regarding the access of private traders to the Bight of Benin, Montaudouin would have leverage as creditor of the Company.

In contrast to the directors in Pondicherry, directors in Ouidah did not make money from taxes gained by attracting inhabitants and merchants. However, the way they managed private merchants, be they African or European, affected the director's position. During Bouchel's directorship, African merchants were not a uniform group of official merchants. Huffon's power was challenged by his high officials and "*merchants did what they wanted.*"⁷⁹⁶ Managing both private French captains ready to pay a high price for a short journey on the coast, and private African traders who increased prices as long as they found buyers, was a difficult task. In order to keep prices as low as possible for the French merchants who traded through him, Bouchel had a strategy to keep the private African traders in line with French interests. He paid extra attention to private traders and would occasionally lend them money or goods, which he would normally not do, to commit them to providing enslaved Africans to French ships.⁷⁹⁷ In doing so, the French director attempted to use debts to bind private traders to his interests and those of the French captains.

On the other hand, the large number of French private traders, both during the open trade phase and after, led French captains to outbid each other and increase the price of the enslaved Africans by one-third, according to the director.⁷⁹⁸ Bouchel anticipated the negative impact of such a price increase on the French trade and did his best to force them to pay the prevailing price. As a result, the French captains that arrived in Ouidah would avoid him, and trade with representatives who did not necessarily have lower prices but would make their stay on the coast considerably shorter than if they complied to Bouchel's price control. However, Bouchel was most concerned with his reputation among the African merchants and authorities. Indeed, if private traders started the negotiations without him, they asked him to finish them as soon as a problem appeared. This caused concerns for him and reduced his credibility with the Hueda kings and administration. Additionally, the Council of the Navy summarized his demand as follow: "*It would be more appropriate if ship-owners ordered their captains to refer directly to him for the payment of duties, presents, favours towards the great men of the country because the King and his officials want the consideration between*

⁷⁹⁶ ANOM C6 25, Mémoire Bouchel, 1716: "*les marchands font ce qu'ils veulent*".

⁷⁹⁷ ANOM C6 25, Mémoire Bouchel, 1716.

⁷⁹⁸ ANOM C6 25, Mémoire Bouchel, 1716.

them and the Europeans to be reciprocal.”⁷⁹⁹ The Navy’s answer is unknown. Bouchel explicitly placed himself as intermediary between the French captains and African authorities and traders, based on his understanding of Hueda society and his experience in trading transactions with African actors.

Under the Company of the Indies’ administration, the director had the extra difficulty of negotiating good deals for Company ships, in comparison to all private ships and other European ships on the coast. As a solution to the problem of increased prices, Levet let the private ships finish their trade first until he was “*alone to control the prices,*” to take care of the Company ship.⁸⁰⁰ If it took too long and the prices were not attractive enough, Levet kept the Company ship’s merchandise and sent the ship back to France. The overseas director was not preoccupied with the reaction of the directors in Paris, but with that of King Tegbesu. Returning an empty ship without engaging in any trade could be terrible for Levet’s reputation, and had partly cost his predecessor his position.⁸⁰¹ To limit the damage, Levet paid the customs and offered gifts as if the trade would take place.

Unlike his predecessors, Levet saw an opportunity for the French trade in the great number of French private traders. Dahomian authorities and merchants made a distinction between French Company ships and private ships: “*This country is not able to give any profit to the Company, I say the Company because I think that if a French ship came, as long as it was not from the Company, it would make a good commerce because Africans see us as their milking cows and we will always be their fools if we stay in this position.*”⁸⁰² According to Levet’s views, the only way to make the trade in Ouidah profitable was to leave it to private traders, who would not be held accountable by the King of Dahomey. The director advocated in favour of private traders replacing the Company in the Bight of Benin, despite the fact that the Company employed him.

In Ouidah, the Hueda and particularly the Dahomey administration had a strong political and commercial role. They were both sovereign and creditor, and sometimes trading

⁷⁹⁹ AN MAR/B/1/19, Council of the Navy, 1717: “*Il seroit à propos que les propriétaires des navires ordonnassent à leurs capitaines de referer directement à ses avis pour le payement des droits pour les présents, pour les complaisances à l’égard des principaux du pays et pour leur commerce, le roy et les grands prétendants que la considération entr’eux et les Européens soit réciproque*”.

⁸⁰⁰ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 25 February 1744: “*suspendre la traite jusqu’à ce que les deux autres navires eussent fini la leur afin qu’estant seul je puisse estre maitre du prix*”.

⁸⁰¹ ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 25 February 1744.

⁸⁰² ANOM C6 25, letter of Levet, 1 February 1746: “*ce pays [...] incapable par luy mesme d’aucune ressource pour la compagnie, je dis pour la compagnie, par ce que je crois que s’il venoit un navire françois, pourvu qu’il ne luy appartint pas, quil feroit un bon commerce, car les negres nous regardent comme leurs vaches à lait et nous serons toujours leurs duppes [...] tant que nous serons dans la position ou nous sommes*”.

partners of the French and other Europeans. Regular visits and giving gifts to the king, as well as the maintenance of creditworthiness and management of French private traders, were all necessary to maintain the director's reputation with the political authorities. To exert their power over the directors, the Hueda and Dahomey kings made them responsible and accountable not only for Company affairs but for all French private traders. The latitude of directors was therefore narrow and exercising agency frequently led to the loss of the director's position, be it through exile or death. As a consequence, overseas directors in Ouidah were less afraid to disregard metropolitan orders than those of Hueda and Dahomey kings.

5. Conclusion

To enable their agency, directors had to secure the political and economic viability of the factories. Maintaining their position as directors not only meant complying with the demands of rulers, merchants, workers and metropolitan directors, but testing the limits of these demands and orders by exercising agency. In Pondicherry, directors adapted to power dynamics when engaging with rulers. When possible, they entered into interpersonal relationships stimulated by an exchange of services, or they attempted to strengthen the mutual dependency that already characterised their relationship with the rulers. The latter strategy could only be sustained in the long run if the overseas directors could keep their commitment to provide financial support to the ruler. When power dynamics were asymmetrical, particularly, but not exclusively, in the case of the *faujdar* or *nawab*, the director engaged in gift-giving transactions to acquire the Mughal governor's protection and "friendship." These offerings were one-sided and forced in a competitive environment, leaving little space for agency.

The director's agency can be observed when the gift-giving had a relatively voluntary aspect, for instance with neighbouring rulers. In these cases, directors could delay their gifts or decide not to send any. These decisions depended on the power dynamics and were instrumental in affirming the director's latitude. However, neighbouring rulers could use military threats and forced reciprocity to re-assert their power over the director. This situation generated a constant tug of war, which influenced the director's position. Even in forced gift-giving sessions, directors kept a certain amount of agency in their choice of intermediary, who could maximise the chances of success and minimise the cost of negotiations. For instance, Director Martin relied on personal connections and recommendations to engage with the *nawab*. If visits to the ruler could be forced upon the overseas director, the latter had the choice to refuse a proposition if he thought it detrimental to the Company, provided he was in

position to do so. A second way to exercise agency in forced gift-giving was through the value of the gifts. Offering a present of a lesser value could cause negotiations to fail but if it succeeded, the director could re-determine power relations. Gift-giving was imposed on directors, but at the same time it served as a tool to access connections, power and authority as the primary representative of the Company.

In Ouidah, French directors faced a similar asymmetrical power dynamic with the Hueda and Dahomey kings. Additionally, political and economic competition between neighbouring African kingdoms made the directors' demonstration of loyalty necessary to the safekeeping of their position. Ducoulombier's strategy to develop trade in Hueda, as well as in Allada, while being aware of the Hueda King's jealousy was not successful. His successors took special care to avoid any confusion regarding his loyalty, particularly during the Dahomian conquest (1727-1733). This chapter recognises the same use of the term "*friendship*" to characterise the relationship of the Dahomey and the overseas directors. This utilitarian friendship consisted of a reciprocal understanding: the French were under the protection of the Dahomey, in exchange for tribute-like gifts. Directors were aware that the king's friendship was volatile and had to be constantly renewed through gift-giving. Just as in Pondicherry, the offering of gifts was frequently one-sided and forced, and took place in a competitive context. However, in contrast to Pondicherry, the extreme specificity of the demands left the director with little latitude regarding the value of the gift. Furthermore, refusing royal demands, if it demonstrated the director's agency, led to the loss of his position. In negotiations initiated by overseas directors, where gift-giving entailed a voluntary aspect, some agency is visible. In the example of Levet's failed negotiations, his strategy's downfall came not from the gifts, but from his tone and behaviour. It had been a conscious decision to address King Agaja in this way and to challenge his authority.

To enable their agency, directors first tested the limits of their relationship with rulers and second, with the population they governed. In Pondicherry, most directors understood that the settlement had to become a safe environment to stimulate demographic growth. They contributed to the protection of the settlement by hiring local soldiers and avoiding desertion. However, the strong-arm tactic is most apparent in the directors' religious policies. The interplay of pragmatic religious tolerance and recurrent ceremony restrictions, demonstrates the directors' governance strategy and their attempt to assert authority over the predominantly Hindu population. Third, directors at times opposed the Company orders from France to secure their position. Dulivier made this particularly clear in his refusal to comply with the

instructions of the Company that forbade the sale of passports to merchants who were commercial partners of France's enemies. Instead, the director went further into a chain of debt with other Europeans, including with the enemies of France. In these moments of direct or indirect opposition, directors' agency was striking but should not be seen as opposing the Company's interests. Refusing orders and exercising agency was frequently done for the sake of the Company's development. In many ways, the director's situation was new to the Company, and the metropolitan administration could not predict the challenges he faced. The director's agency then appeared in his ability to improvise solutions to protect the interests of the Company. For instance, when the creditworthiness of the Company in India was in jeopardy, the director decided to engage his own personal credit for the Company's loans. This illustrates how individuals and institutions complemented each other.

In the fort in Ouidah, directors similarly relied on France's economic competitors, other Europeans and the African kings, for loans. Regarding trade, Levet's strategy encouraged French private merchants and sent a Company ship back to France empty. These decisions could be perceived, at first, as contrary to the interests of the Company. The directors in Ouidah were in a unique position, in that they feared the reaction of the African authorities rather than their own employers. However, similar to Pondicherry, the directors improvised some of the strategies to protect the interests of the metropolitan authorities and secure their position. Faced with a high number of private traders, both African and European, Bouchel created a bond of loyalty with African merchants by lending them goods on credit, and attempted to centralise the French private traders in a bid to keep the price as low as possible. No instructions from the Council of the Navy corresponded to these issues.

Despite the overseas directors' narrow range of latitude in their interactions with rulers, merchants and inhabitants under their governance or outside of it, they found ways to negotiate and to attempt to re-define power relations. The role of overseas directors was to carefully assess the risks and opportunities when making decisions about the political and economic survival of the factories, even if it went against some metropolitan orders. Metropolitan institutions were aware that overseas directors needed to improvise in order to best protect the Company or the Council of the Navy's interests. Could the goal of the Company, as an institution, have been to provide an arena for directors to exercise their agency? The next chapters will explore this question further by assessing different mechanisms of overseas directors' agency in Pondicherry and Ouidah.