

“Concerning the Trade of Pearls in India” and How to Value Them: An Early Modern Armenian Gem Merchant’s View on the Accounting of Pearls

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The shared history of Indo-Armenian relations in the early modern period is complex and stretches beyond cultural, political, legal, and strictly commercial realms. New Julfan Armenian merchants had started settling in India beginning in the sixteenth century, where later in the seventeenth century they established trade settlements in cities such as Madras, Surat, Calcutta, Chinsura and others. During the early modern period, Armenian merchants were heavily involved in the lucrative trade of saltwater pearls between the Gulf of Mannar, the Bay of Bengal, the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean. As a result of their involvement, these gem merchants became producers and brokers of pearl knowledge that connected the different “microworlds” of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Despite the importance of their involvement in this trade, the available scholarly literature on that history is scarce. This paper analyzes an early eighteenth-century unpublished manuscript titled “Concerning the Trade of Pearls in India” (Called Chevey Khsep by Merchants in India), written by Aghamal Khwāja Minasian, as an early example of a shared commercial knowledge production in the Indian Ocean world. It argues that Armenian merchants were imbedded in the commercial fabric of knowledge production and circulation in the Indian Ocean, thus transcending both local and global, oftentimes completely distinctive geographies of India, Iran, and the Mediterranean. Aghamal was the head of the New Julfan Minasian family firm of gem merchants in 1740s. His pearl manuscript belongs to a broader set of texts, called “Book of Pearls” or “chau” manuals widely published in the beginning of the twentieth century in Mumbai in both Gujarati and Arabic. It contains detailed information on the intricate calculations of the value of pearls called chau based on different weights, which is still widely used in India and the Persian Gulf by pearl dealers and merchants. Despite the widespread tradition of using chau in modern times, the history of the origins and significance of this value system for the trade are lost. Written in the obscure Julfan mercantile dialect, Aghamal’s detailed chau weight conversion charts predate the other “chau” manuals by over 150 years, thus contributing to our knowledge of similar Indo-Arabic sources from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Bio: *Sona Tajiryan is a postdoctoral research associate at the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) in Carlsbad, California. She completed her PhD at the UCLA History Department in 2020 under the supervision of Dr. Sebouh Aslanian focusing on early modern world histories of New Julfan Armenian merchants in the long-distance trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Her dissertation, entitled The Early Modern Global Trade of Diamonds and Gems: An Armenian Family Firm on the Crossroads of Caravan and Maritime Trade (ca. 1670-1730) analyzes the early modern global luxury commodity trade of gems conducted between South and Southeast Asia and European port cities during the 1670s and 1730s. As a researcher at GIA, Dr. Tajiryan is currently working on her first book project based on her dissertation, as well as various smaller projects focusing on the history of pearl trade in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Mannar in the early modern period.*