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Finding Common Ground Between Europe and Asia: Understanding and Conflict During the Persian Embassy to France in 1715

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Abstract

In 1715, Louis XIV received Mohammad Reza Beg, an ambassador from distant Persia in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. The aging monarch greeted the ambassador in a suit encrusted with diamonds, a costume worthy of an Oriental potentate. The Beg and his entourage were no less splendid and the similarity between the Frenchmen and the Persian must have struck some viewers. King and ambassador played roles in a common drama—the ambassadorial visit—and they had more in common than one might expect. Thanks to the memoirs in manuscript of the *introduceur des ambassadeurs*, Baron de Breteuil, we know that the French worked hard to cooperate with the Beg despite cultural differences. After all, Breteuil and the Beg shared the goal of projecting the grandeur of their respective monarchies. This common ambition resulted in clashes of precedence between the French and Persian representatives, similar to those that occurred between European powers. This article suggests that “Orientalism” and cultural conflict did not necessarily shape the French response to the Persians. Rather, common diplomatic interests that transcended cultural differences underlay the encounter between West and East.

Keywords

France, French-Persian Relations, Diplomatic History, Louis XIV, Mohammad Reza Beg, Baron de Breteuil

Introduction

In 1715, the final year of Louis XIV’s reign, the French court welcomed an “exotic” visitor, the Persian ambassador representing the Safavid Empire, Mohammad Reza Beg.¹ Visits from representatives of “Oriental” monarchs

¹ Mohammad Reza Beg is his Persian name. However, Mehemet Riza Beg is the spelling used in all contemporary French sources. Although Mohammad Reza Beg may not have

were spectacular affairs and staged with great pomp.² Frenchmen flocked to catch a glimpse of the exotic visitors and their unusual clothing, strange possessions, and magnificent gifts for the king. This interest in the foreign guests offered Louis XIV the chance to celebrate his status on a world stage. The difficulty, however, was handling these visits within the confines of French ceremony that staged Louis XIV's power. The Baron de Breteuil, who served as Louis XIV's official *introduceur des ambassadeurs* (the office in charge of organizing court receptions) from 1699-1715, vividly describes the conflict over ceremony between the French court and the Safavid embassy of 1715 in his memoirs.³ Breteuil found it difficult to mold the ambassador to meet French diplomatic and court rituals and, ultimately, blamed his exoticism for the missteps in ceremony. However, an analysis of Breteuil's memoirs reveals that common explanations for early-modern conflict between East and West, such as "Orientalism" and cultural conflict, did not shape the disagreements between Breteuil and the Beg. Instead, Breteuil's memoirs attest to French and Safavid cooperation over

been an ethnic Persian speaker, this article will refer to him as Persian as he is described in French sources. Further, this article will refer to the Safavid Empire as Persia according to the French literature.

² French courtiers and journals labeled a vast geographic area from Siam to Morocco to Muscovy under the category of "Oriental" although they were geographically and culturally distinct.

³ The post of *introduceur des ambassadeurs* dated back to Henri III, who created the office in January 1585 as part of the reorganization of the royal household. At first, a single man held the office, but, like many other royal offices that the king sold for money, the post was divided into two parts so that the king had more to sell. The office was shared, and each officer served for alternating six-month periods called semesters. One person would hold the position from January to June and another from June through December. Several *introduceurs*, such as Anne de Brulon, Nicolas de Berlize, the Baron de Breteuil, and Dufort de Cheverny, wrote memoirs that described their court duties. See Jean-Nicolas Dufort de Cheverny, *Mémoires sur les règnes de Louis XV et Louis XVI et sur la Révolution*, ed. Robert de Crèvecœur, (Paris, 1886); Anne de Brulon and Nicolas de Brulon, *Réception des ambassadeurs*, Bnf ms. français 18520; Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, ed. Evelyne Lever (Paris, 1992). The Baron de Breteuil began writing his *Mémoires* in January 1699, when he took the post of *introduceur des ambassadeurs*, and continued to write until the death of Louis XIV in September 1715. He recorded every detail of the ambassadorial visits he planned during his tenure, including both those from the "Orient" and from Europe. His journal, consisting of 2,600 pages of manuscripts in seven volumes was never published, but relates intricate details of the planning of ambassadorial stays in Paris and associated spectacles in the city and at Versailles. See Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, ed. Evelyne Lever (Paris, 1992), 43.

cultural differences and a common interest in projecting the grandeur of their respective monarchies. This similar ambition resulted in clashes of precedence between the French and Persian representatives, comparable to those that occurred between European powers. In the end, commensurable ideas of spectacle and royal preeminence motivated the encounter between France and the Safavid Empire.

A study of Breteuil's meetings with the Persian ambassador will help define the contours of an emerging field within early modern studies, one that promises to move beyond traditional diplomatic studies, namely the New Diplomatic History.⁴ Until recently, the conservative use of diplomatic sources to describe the history of events, pioneered by Leopold von Ranke and followed by historians at the Ecole des Chartes and others, had left an entire arsenal of diplomatic sources untouched by the new developments in historiography since the cultural turn. Since the millennium, scholars have begun to bridge diplomatic history with methodologies from intellectual, cultural, social, military, and art history to examine the conditions that produced diplomatic contacts and their effects.⁵ The following examination of Breteuil's descriptions of the Safavid embassy contributes to this burgeoning subfield of early modern studies and amplifies the innovative use of diplomatic sources by using a diplomatic event, the Safavid embassy of 1715, to understand interactions between European and Asian diplomats and their political and cultural ramifications.

Breteuil's memoirs, the basis for analysis of the Safavid visit, are an important and overlooked source for the study of an ignored branch of diplomatic history: early-modern confrontations between European and Asian ambassadors. Historians such as Garrett Mattingly and Lucien Bely have focused on the rise and function of diplomacy within the European

⁴ John Watkins discusses the rise of New Diplomatic History in "Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 1-14. Also, see Catherine Fletcher and Jennifer Mara DeSilva, "Italian Ambassadorial Networks in Early Modern Europe—An Introduction," *Journal of Early Modern History* 14 (2010): 505-512.

⁵ John Watkins in "Toward a New Diplomatic History" cites some important early examples of works that intersect diplomatic history with other methodologies. For an example of diplomatic and military history, see Daniela Frigo, *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450-1800* (Cambridge, 2000). Watkins credits Denis Crouzet and Abbey Zanger for merging diplomatic studies with literary and gender approaches. See Denis Crouzet, *Le Haut Coeur de Catherine de Médicis* (Paris, 2005) and Abbey Zanger, *Scenes from the Marriage of Louis XIV: Nuptial Fictions and the Making of Absolutist Power* (Stanford, 1997).

context, but they have overlooked contacts between “Oriental” ambassadors and their European hosts.⁶ Scholars interested in European relations with the wider world, such as Lucette Valensi, have examined diplomatic texts similar to that of Breteuil for their affect on representations of the “Orient,” but have not focused on the actual diplomatic meeting.⁷ Another novel approach is that of Nabil Matar, who has examined Britain’s relations with the Islamic world, especially Morocco. However, these scholars have not yet investigated how an actual diplomatic encounter between a western and eastern power unfolded.⁸ Historians have yet to describe how European and Asian ambassadors confronted one another and, more broadly, how international relations arose.

An analysis of the Safavid embassy of 1715 illuminates how “Oriental” visits to Europe functioned in light of cultural differences. The dominance of Edward Said’s theory of “Orientalism” has led scholars to stress hostility between Asia and the West. Generally, encounters between Europe and other places in the globe have emphasized cultural conflict and, thereby, ignored the complex issues of power behind the discord.⁹ Recently, Sanjay Subrahmanyam has reevaluated the notion of “cultural incommensurability”

⁶ See Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (New York, 2008), Lucien Bely, *Espions et ambassadeurs au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1990). For specific examples of works that deal with Safavid and French diplomacy but ignore the actual proceedings of diplomatic events, see Anne Kroell, *Louis XIV, La Perse et Mascate* (Paris, 1977); Anne-Marie Touzard, *Le Drogman Paderby: émissaire de France en Perse (1719-1725)* (Paris, 2005).

⁷ Lucette Valensi, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca, 1993). Other works that deal specifically with French representations of the Middle East include: Ronald S. Love, “Rituals of Majesty: France, Siam, and Court Spectacle in Royal Image-Building at Versailles in 1685 and 1686,” *Canadian Journal of History* 31, no. 2 (August 1996): 171-197; Thomas Kaiser, “The Evil Empire? The Debate on Turkish Despotism in Eighteenth-Century French Political Culture,” *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (March 2000): 6-34; Julia Anne Landweber, “French Delight in Turkey: The Impact of Turkey on the Construction of French Identity, 1660-1789,” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate School, New Brunswick, Rutgers, The State of New Jersey, 2001).

⁸ See Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge, 1998); *Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York, 1999); *Britain and Barbary, 1589-1689* (Gainesville, 2006).

⁹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam outlines the theories of cultural incommensurability in “Par-delà l’incommensurabilité: pour une histoire connectée des empires aux temps modernes,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 5, no. 54-5 (2007): 34-53. Also see Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism*, (New Haven, 1993), 180, and Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: Perceiving the Other*, trans. Richard Howard, (Oklahoma City, 1999).

and determined its futurity for the future of understanding early modern encounters.¹⁰ He suggests that disparate empires shared some common objectives. An analysis of Breteuil's conflict with the Persian ambassador in 1715 shows how early-modern encounters could be shaped by commensurability and not necessarily marked by enmity. The visit of Mohammad Reza Beg, an event that seems to embody hostility between France and the Safavid Empire, actually highlights similarity and understanding between the two monarchies.

When Breteuil and the French court greeted Mohammad Reza Beg, they presumed that he would perform French rituals that honored Louis XIV. Jacques Derrida suggests that diplomacy stems from hospitality, in that one country (in this case France) acts as a host to a foreign guest. Hospitality is never an even exchange, but one in which the host imposes certain rules and restrictions over its guest.¹¹ In 1715, the diplomatic encounter enacted on French soil meant that, as Derrida suggests, French diplomatic practices prevailed over Safavid ones. Yet, despite Breteuil's efforts to convince Mohammad Reza Beg to follow French ceremonial rules, the Beg resisted and failed to participate in the performance of the Sun King's power.

The following will show that the French and the Safavids both desired the same effect from the visit—grandeur—and only came into conflict because of this common goal. Their shared interest resulted in arguments over precedence. The ambassador's struggle to include Safavid diplomatic practices during the course of the visit signaled an effort to maintain the dignity of the Persian monarchy and its superiority to the French equivalent. Breteuil, for his part, understood the Beg's acts correctly as challenges to the King's power but ultimately disagreed. Breteuil could allow the Beg to dispute the precedence of France over the Safavid Empire in private moments but certainly could not tolerate it during the public performances of French rituals. The spectacular nature of the visit raised the stakes and resulted in political conflict; for neither the ambassador nor the French court could compromise or they would lose status in front of the audience. Breteuil had no choice but to cover up the struggle for power by emphasizing cultural difference and the exoticism of the Persian ambassador.

¹⁰ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Par-delà l'incommensurabilité: pour une histoire connectée des empires aux temps modernes."

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (New York, 2001).

The conflict between the Beg and the French court also suggests a similarity between early-modern European and Asian monarchies: both valued projections of royal power. The diplomatic visits between East and West operated much like visits between European countries—as manifestations of royal power. The Beg's behavior is comparable to defiant acts of European ambassadors. Skirmishes over matters of precedence and ceremony played a central role in the assertion of the relative status of rulers and countries. For example, when a fight broke out in London in 1661 over the issue of whose coach—that of the Spanish or French diplomat—would hold precedence in the parade, the young French king threatened Philip IV with war if he refused to acknowledge that the French monarch and those representing him held higher honors at courts throughout Europe.¹² The Beg's resistance to French procedure also reminds us of similar acts committed by French diplomats abroad. The French ambassador, Chaumont, refused to abide by Siamese ceremony, not due to lack of knowledge of the foreign protocol, but out of defiance for rituals that praised the Siamese King over all others, including Louis XIV.¹³ However, unlike in these occasions, the French court chose to explain the Beg's behavior in terms of cultural difference to hide his challenge to Louis XIV's preeminence. Breteuil's deliberate emphasis on the exotic obscured mutual ideas of spectacles of power— notions shared by most monarchies from Europe to Asia in the early modern world.

The Persian Visit: The Struggle for Prestige

Mohammad Reza Beg's visit marked the last magnificent show staged at Versailles to celebrate the aged monarch. Before the Safavid visit, France had hosted ambassadors from Siam, Morocco, the Ottoman Empire, Muscovy, and other places beyond Western Europe. The Persian visit, like all prior "Oriental" visits, shared a similar goal with European visits: to display the monarchy's power through rituals of diplomatic precedence. However, they diverged from European visits and standard diplomatic practice in their emphasis on spectacle. For "Oriental" visits, spectacle trumped political negotiations. Accounts by Louis XIV's courtiers and journals, including the *Mercure galant* and the *Gazette de France*, show that

¹² William Roosen, "Early Modern Diplomatic Ceremonial: A Systems Approach," *The Journal of Modern History* 52, no. 3 (Sep., 1980): 452-476.

¹³ See Ronald Love, "Rituals of Majesty."

“Oriental” visits to France were far more theatrical than their European equivalents, which in fact were not ceremonial events at all.¹⁴ While all visits from “Oriental” diplomats generated great interest, most European visitors did not. Generally, ambassadorial visits from France’s neighbors tended to be routine, since they served the needs of everyday diplomacy. For example, the 1612 and 1679 Spanish embassies to arrange French marriages or the extraordinary 1644 French embassy to renew the English alliance following the death of Louis XIII all seem quite commonplace, given their specific but recurrent tasks of arranging marriages, treaties, and alliances. European ambassadors did generate interest within the court, and their visits were reported in the popular *Mercure galant*, a journal that related entertaining court news and stories. However, the frequency of their visits was so great that details of the ceremony became repetitive. In fact, for a visit of a Venetian ambassador in May of 1689, the *Mercure galant* declares, “I will not repeat to you the ceremonies that are performed at these types of audiences because they are always the same.”¹⁵ By contrast, “Oriental” embassies focused on spectacle over mundane political or commercial negotiations. The court bestowed extra privileges on non-European diplomats to enhance the display of their visits. One courtier noted, “All the Oriental ambassadors, and even the envoys, have extraordinary honors in the villages along their route, even though we do not give [these honors] to ambassadors of crowned heads, it is an established custom in France [to do this for Oriental ambassadors] and to pay their costs during their entire stay.”¹⁶ However, the political results of the visits to Versailles did not

¹⁴ Descriptions and comparisons of European and “Oriental” diplomatic visits to France are found in Nicolas de Saintot, *Mémoires*, 2 vols., bnf ms. français 14117. Nicolas de Saintot served as *introduceur* from 1691-1709. He had bought the post for 50,000 écus and upon his death in 1709, the position passed to his son, the Chevalier de Saintot, who held it until 1752. See *Les Introduceurs des ambassadeurs* (Paris, 1901), 51-52. Further descriptions of diplomatic and ceremonial events can be found in Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*.

¹⁵ See *Mercure galant*, May 1689, 275-276. Again, for the visit of Milord Jersey, the extraordinary ambassador from England in 1699, the journal notes, “I have already given more than fifty similar descriptions... everything passed as usual,” see *Mercure galant*, January 1699, 250.

¹⁶ Nicolas de Saintot, *Mémoires*, II:180. “Tous les ambassadeurs Orientaux, et même les envoyés ont des honneurs extraordinaires dans les villes de leur passage, quoiqu’on ne les rende point aux ambassadeurs des Testes Couronnées de l’Europe; c’est un usage établi en France, et de les defraier pendant tout leur séjour.”

match the grandeur: official treaties between France and distant “Oriental” Empires failed to materialize.¹⁷

For the visit of Mohammad Reza Beg in 1715, the staging of Bourbon power through a fantastic spectacle trumped the particular military and commercial interests that motivated the embassy from the Safavid Empire. Persian and French officials, residing in the Safavid Empire, organized the embassy to Louis XIV to request French military aid to rid the Safavids of its enemies, especially the Arab pirates from Oman, who were trying to take control of the ports.¹⁸ In exchange, the Safavids offered the French special commercial privileges and protection for its missionaries. The Safavid Empire had already presented this proposal in 1708, but at that time, France was already embroiled in the War of the Spanish Succession while facing financial difficulties and famines in the country; it was in no position to support the Safavids militarily. However, Louis XIV and his minister agreed to review the treaty once the war in Europe had ended. In 1715, the Safavid monarchy decided to follow up on the negotiations of 1708. The Shah left the arrangement of the visit to Jean Richard, a French Lazariste missionary, who had accompanied the coadjutor of the Bishop of Babylone, Gatien de Galliczon, to the Shah’s court; the Bishop hoped to secure missionary privileges.¹⁹ The Shah charged Richard with the delivery of the presents destined for Louis XIV and gave the instructions for the embassy to the Khan of Erivan, who had the task of selecting an ambassador. The Khan chose Mohammad Reza Beg, who held the position of *kalantar*, or mayor, of Erivan.²⁰ The Khan of Erivan and

¹⁷ Treaties or negotiations between “Oriental” countries and France usually arose outside of France. For example, French diplomats stationed in the Ottoman Empire conducted commercial and political business with the Ottomans. For a general account of European and French negotiations in the Ottoman Empire, see Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2002) and Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism, and the Ancien Régime* (New York, 2008).

¹⁸ Anne Kroell, *Louis XIV, La Perse et Mascate*, 37-38.

¹⁹ Anne Kroell, *Louis XIV, La Perse et Mascate*, 43 and Laurence Lockhart, *The Fall of the Safavid Dynasty and the Afghan Occupation of Persia* (Cambridge, 1958), 454.

²⁰ Anne Kroell, *Louis XIV, La Perse et Mascate*, 53. According to the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, a “Khan” is a title higher than a “Beg.” The title of “Beg” was equivalent to lord, chief, or prince and “kalantar” was the mayor in charge of town administration. “Kalantars” were usually notables chosen by the King. See A. Lambton, “The Office of Kalantar under the Safavids and Afshars,” in *Mélanges d’Orientalisme offerts à Henri Massé à l’occasion de son 75^{ème} anniversaire* (Tehran, 1963), 209-18. For more on Safavid titles and government posts, see Willem Floor, *Safavid Government Institutions* (Costa Mesa, CA, 2001).

Richard communicated with Louis XIV's ministers, Jérôme de Pontchartrain, Secretary of State for the Navy and Commerce, and the Marquis de Torcy, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, about the impending Safavid diplomatic visit.²¹

In 1715, the French crown was still in no position to honor the Safavid military request, but nevertheless took advantage of the opportunity to spin the embassy's exotic appeal into a celebration of the monarchy. Visits from "Oriental" diplomats, like the Beg, were rare occasions and, as a result, these embassies naturally ignited French curiosity about exotic places and peoples. The average European visit could not compete with ceremony that incorporated "Oriental" figures, fashion, and habits—never before seen by the majority of Frenchmen. "Oriental" ambassadors became instant celebrities, and their appearance prompted keen public interest in their cultures.²² In 1669, Suleiman Aga, the Turkish visitor drew crowds of curious onlookers.²³ Seventeen years later, the visit of the three Siamese ambassadors created another sensation.²⁴ Mohammad Reza Beg's visit, the first by a Persian ambassador to the French court, sparked a wave of curiosity about Persia in all ranks of Frenchmen, who gathered in large crowds to catch a glimpse of the ambassador.²⁵ Engravers profited from the French

²¹ Anne Kroell, *Louis XIV, La Perse et Mascate*, 48-49. The correspondence between Richard and Pontchartrain and the Khan of Erivan and Torcy can be found in *Affaires Étrangères, Correspondence Politique, Perse* vol. 3. For more on the political role of the Khan of Erivan, Mohammad Qoli Khan, see Vladimir Minorsky, *Tadbkirat al-Muluk: A Manual of Safavid Administration* (London, 1943).

²² The *Mercure galant* devoted two volumes in September 1686 to descriptions of the audience and the exotic habits of the Siamese, and it continued to include descriptions of "Oriental" visits right to the end of Louis XIV's reign.

²³ Nicolas de Saintot wrote, "since the mores and customs of the Turks are so different from our own, the people ran in crowds, either to see them eat on their rugs spread out on the ground, or to watch them pray." Nicolas de Saintot, *Mémoires*, II:88. "... comme les moeurs et les coûtumes des Turcs sont assez differentes des nôtres, les peuples y couroient en foule, soit pour les voir manger sur leurs tapis étendus sur la terre, soit pour leur voir faire leurs prieres."

²⁴ Nicolas de Saintot noted, "The ambassadors had Swiss [guards] from the Company of the hundred Swiss body guards of the King to prevent the great crowd that came from entering their quarters. They kept [the guards] with them during their entire stay in Paris." Nicolas de Saintot, *Mémoires*, II:137. "Les ambassadeurs eurent des Suisses de la Compagnie des cent Suisses de la Garde du Corps du Roy pour empêcher aux portes la trop grande foule de monde qui venoit les voir. Ils les eurent toujours pendant tout leur sejour à Paris."

²⁵ The Baron de Breteuil described the public interest in the embassy. For example, he wrote, "Yet, it was not just the common people who hurried to see him in Paris: the ladies . . .

public's desire to see visual depictions of the Beg's entry parades, his audience with the king, and his Persian habits and clothing.²⁶ The monarchy took advantage of the interest generated by the embassy to celebrate the honor such a far away and rare diplomatic visitor bestowed upon the crown.²⁷ The combination of stunning diplomatic displays and exotic attraction ensured a large audience for the Safavid visit and intense public scrutiny of the Beg's actions during ceremonial events.

Once the ambassador embarked in Marseille, the job of managing the ceremonial aspects of the visit fell to Louis Nicolas le Tonnelier, known as the Baron de Breteuil. Before he attained the post of *introduceur des ambassadeurs* in 1698, Breteuil had inherited his father's position at court and became the *lecteur du roi*—an office that granted him access to the prestigious *petit-lever*, or waking ceremony, of the King.²⁸ In 1682, the court selected him as ambassador to the Duke of Mantua, a position of great honor that offered him diplomatic experience.²⁹ For the Safavid visit, the King entrusted him to arrange the grand spectacle for Mohammad Reza Beg's visit to Versailles and the other smaller events, such as the

and many men of the highest ranking were also curious, and I witnessed such huge crowds where he lived that he had more than forty women at a time in his bedroom and as many who waited outside to enter." See Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 122-123. "... mais ce n'est pas seulement le peuple qui s'est empressé pour le voir à Paris: les dames... et plusieurs hommes de la première qualité ont eu la même curiosité, et j'y ai vu la foule si grande qu'il y avait souvent plus de quarante femmes dans sa chambre et autant qui attendaient pour entrer."

²⁶ The Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes has many engravings of Mohammad Reza Beg's processions into Paris and Versailles, his audience with Louis XIV, and his personal habits, such as bathing, smoking, and exercising.

²⁷ The visit of three Siamese ambassadors in 1686 also generated great excitement and curiosity, which Louis XIV used to his advantage. For example, Nicolas de Saintot cited the French King's reputation for military victories as a reason behind the Siamese embassy. "Le roy de Siam surpris de la grande reputation du Roy, et de ce que publioit la renommée des signalées victoires qu'il remportoit continuellement sur ses ennemis luy envoya trois ambassadeurs pour luy demander son amitié et faire alliance avec luy." For more on the Siamese embassies to France and the French relationship with Siam in the 1680s, see Dirk Van der Cruyssen, *Louis XIV et le Siam* (Paris, 1991), 388-389, and Ronald Love, "Rituals of Majesty: France, Siam, and Court Spectacle in Royal Image-Building at Versailles in 1685 and 1686," *Canadian Journal of History* 31, no. 2 (August 1996): 171-197.

²⁸ The *petit-lever* was the ceremony of the waking of the king, a prestigious event at court. Norbert Elias analyses the *petit-lever* in his celebrated work, *The Court Society* (New York, 1983).

²⁹ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 10-11.

foreigner's entry into Paris. The success of the events, measured by the glory it bestowed on Louis XIV, depended on the proper execution of French ceremony that acted out the King's power and included performances by the King, the court, and the spectators; the Beg's role was no exception.³⁰ Breteuil observed, "The actions of an ambassador on the days of ceremony are serious, as each step is counted and measured. [The steps] cannot be added to or subtracted from without the direct order of the king."³¹ The Safavid diplomat's participation in French pageantry was key—the ambassador became a tool in Louis XIV's propaganda scheme. The Beg had to be made to follow French etiquette for the spectacle to effectively praise Louis XIV. The best way to negotiate with the foreigner was to understand his needs and accommodate them whenever possible without compromising the show.³² Therefore, Breteuil's understanding of Safavid culture was crucial to the success of the diplomatic events.

Breteuil's *Mémoires* depict the ambassador as resistant to French codes of behavior from the moment he arrived in Marseille on January 26, 1715.³³ Breteuil worked hard to understand Persian customs to avoid misunderstandings with the foreigner. During the period prior to the ambassador's arrival, he studied Persian culture, religion, and foreign affairs. He read the writings of Jean Chardin, a Protestant jeweler whose several long journeys through Persia resulted in *Les Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, first published in 1686 and then reprinted in 1711. Breteuil also read another popular work, describing the ambassadorial visit of the Spaniard Don Garcia de Silva y Figueroa to Persia.³⁴ In addition to his own research, the *introduceur* had people around him familiar with

³⁰ See Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*. Elias' work is still the basis for anyone studying the rituals of court life. Also see Jean-Marie Apostolides, *Le Roi-machine: Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1981) and Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, 1992).

³¹ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 61. "[L]es démarches d'un ambassadeur, les jours de cérémonie, sont des démarches graves, dont les pas sont comptés et mesurés et auxquels il n'est pas permis d'ajouter ou de retrancher, sans l'ordre exprès du roi."

³² See François de Callières, *L'Art de négocier sous Louis XIV* (Paris, 2006).

³³ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 43.

³⁴ See Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 107. See Don Garcia de Silva y Figueroa, *L'Ambassade de D. Garcias de Silva Figueroa en Perse, contenant la politique de ce grand Empire, les moeurs du roy schach Abbas et une relation exacte de tous les lieux de Perse et des Indes où cet ambassadeur a esté l'espace de huit années qu'il y a demeuré*, trans. from Spanish by M. de Wicquefort (Paris, 1667) and Jean Chardin, *Voyage du Chevalier Chardin en Perse et aux Indes Orientales par la Mer Noire & par la Colchide* (London, 1686).

Safavid traditions, and it was normal to have a specialist in his entourage to advise him. Breteuil could rely on the expertise of Padery, the current Persian language interpreter, and Jean Richard, the French Lazariste missionary who had arranged the Safavid visit on behalf of the Shah.³⁵ Breteuil's knowledge allowed him to interpret the Beg's resistance as a politically motivated attempt to avoid deference to French protocol that honored France above all.

Jean Chardin's work especially shows that the Safavids, like the French, exhibited royal power through diplomatic events. Chardin describes the visit of the French envoy to the Safavid capital, Isfahan, which occurred during his visit to Persia in the 1670s. After the French envoy made his entry into the city, the Safavid equivalent to the French *introducteur des ambassadeurs*, accompanied by twenty Persian horses and men of high status, received the Frenchmen with great pomp. The Safavids entertained the envoy and his retinue in a sumptuous fashion that mirrored the manner in which the French treated foreign dignitaries. They lodged the envoy in a house prepared especially for him, and officers of the King attended him and served sumptuous dinners served on gold brocade to impress their French guests.³⁶ Chardin's description shows an affinity between Safavid and French ambassadorial custom: both valued spectacle. Like the Bourbon monarchy, the Safavids staged visits from foreigners to tout their prestige on a global scale. Chardin noted, "I have observ'd elsewhere, that the Oriental People give the Title of ambassador to every person that is sent to another, tho' his Commission were only to deliver a letter, and the reason thereof is, in my opinion to make people believe, that their king is reverenc'd throughout the universe, and that from all parts, homage is pay'd him, by ambassadors and presents."³⁷ Breteuil could expect that the Safavid ambassador understood the meaning inherent in French protocol and might challenge it in favor of codes of behavior that granted precedence to the Safavid monarchy.

Instruction also came from prior "Oriental" visits, in which foreign diplomats had challenged French protocol and taught the French court the consequences of negotiations over ceremony. During the visit of the

³⁵ Anne Kroell, *La Perse et la Mascate*, 43. The Baron de Breteuil corresponded with Gaudereau. See *Affaires Étrangères, Correspondence politique, Perse* vol. 3, folio 386a-389a. For more on the interpreter, Padery, see Anne-Marie Touzard, *Le Drogman Padery: émissaire de France en Perse (1719-1725)* (Paris, 2005).

³⁶ Sir John Chardin, *Travels in Persia* (London, 1927), 55.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

Ottoman envoy, the *muteferrika* Suleiman Aga, in 1669, a clash occurred over the *lettre de créance*—his credentials—during the foreigner's audience with Louis XIV.³⁸ The Ottoman dignitary wished to hand the letter directly to the king. However, this conflicted with French protocol. "Suleiman said to His Majesty that the *Grand Seigneur* [the Sultan], his master, commanded him to place the letter only in the hands of His Majesty. He pleaded with him to perform this honor and His Majesty granted him that."³⁹ While the king agreed to accept the letter by his own hand, the foreign diplomat requested another alteration of French ceremony. "Suleiman went up the steps of the throne while holding the letter. At the last step, seeing that His Majesty did not rise to receive it, he said that when the *Grand Seigneur*, his master, gave him the letter, he stood up in a sign of respect and friendship for His Majesty to whom he appealed to accept it in the same manner by which it had been given to him."⁴⁰ Suleiman Aga understood that French protocol honored Louis XIV and desired an alteration that allowed the French king to defer to the Ottomans.

³⁸ Abraham de Wicquefort explained in his seventeenth-century work on diplomacy that *lettres de créance* served as credentials identified the diplomat's ranking. Abraham de Wicquefort, *L'Ambassadeur et ses fonctions*, 3 vols. (Cologne, 1690), I:169. "Les lettres de créance sont nécessaires à l'ambassadeur; tant parce qu'elles lui donnent le caractère, & le font connoître au Prince à qui on l'envoie; que parce que sans elles il n'est pas capable de négocier." In the Ottoman Empire, the *muteferrika* was a special corps made up of the sons and brothers of the highest-ranking officials who served in palace service. They performed the outside service for the palace, which included positions such as palace gatekeepers, officers of the stables, messengers for the sultan and envoys to outside provinces or to foreign countries. See I. Metin Kunt, *The Sultan's Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550-1650* (New York, 1983). The office of *muteferrika* was described in French sources. Yet, these French texts were unclear on the prestige of the office in the Ottoman Empire. Further, the French court did not understand what would correspond to it in the French hierarchical system. Nicolas Le Dran and Charles, Comte de Ferriol both described the office of *muteferrika*. See Nicolas-Louis Le Dran "Memoires sur le ceremonial observe en France en 1669," *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Mémoires et Documents*, vol. 10, and Charles, Comte de Ferriol, "Abrégé de l'état présent de l'Empire ottoman, 1710," *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Mémoires et Documents, Turquie*, vol. 10. Also see Julia Landweber who cites both Le Dran and the Comte de Ferriol. However, she does not compare the French idea of *muteferrika* with the actual rank it held in the Ottoman Empire; thereby, she concludes it was a lowly rank and Suleiman Aga was wrong to call himself an ambassador, referring to it as his "first error." See Landweber, 29-31.

³⁹ Sainctot, II:92

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The French King, in turn, desired to reciprocate the respect shown to French letters. “[T]he King, in that moment, turned toward the Sieur de Guित्रy . . . who at an earlier time was in the Ottoman Empire at the audience of M. de la Haye, and asked him if the *Grand Seigneur* [Sultan] had stood when his ambassador had given him his letter. The Sieur de Guित्रy replied, no; the King said aloud that since the *Grand Seigneur* does not stand upon receiving his letters from the hands of his ambassadors, he would not stand either.”⁴¹ Suleiman proceeded to bow and hand the letter to the king who took it and handed it off to Hughes de Lionne, the acting French secretary of foreign affairs. “Suleiman descended the steps at the bottom of the throne after having made a bow, where he shook his head and said out loud that the *Grand Seigneur* [Sultan] would not be satisfied by the manner in which the king received his letter; His Majesty perceived this angry act and asked what he had said, and after someone explained it to him, he [the king] announced in a serious tone that he would look at the letter and give a response.”⁴² Suleiman went even further in his insolence by turning his back on Louis XIV upon leaving. Later, the Ottoman visitor regretted his disrespect, and he declared that he “was in such a state of despair of having displeased His Majesty that he was in a position to ask his forgiveness publicly, but the King responded that satisfaction would not augment nor diminish his glory after the act was done.”⁴³ The fight over the King’s reception of the letter signified a battle for prominence between the two monarchies, both equally intent on demonstrating their power and prestige, over a small ceremonial act.

During the 1715 Persian visit, the Beg and his hosts shared an understanding that French protocol signified the precedence of the Bourbon monarch and his courtiers over foreign guests. However, the two parties did not agree on the observance of the ceremonies. Breteuil described the first quarrel over ceremony in his memoirs. The financier and court figure

⁴¹ Ibid., 93-94.

⁴² Ibid., 94. “Soliman descendit au bas du Trône après avoir fait une reverence, ou estant Il branla la teste, et dit tout haut que le Grand Seigneur ne seroit pas satisfait de la maniere que le Roy recevoit sa Lettre; Sa Majesté s’aperceut de ce mouvement de colere, demanda ce qu’il avoit dit, et luy aiant esté expliqué, Elle dit tout haut, et d’un ton serieux qu’Elle verroit la Lettre, et qu’elle feroit réponse.”

⁴³ Ibid., 95. “. . . estoit dans un tel desespoir d’avoir depleu à Sa Majesté qu’il estoit dans la disposition de luy en demander pardon publiquement, mais le Roy dit que satisfaction n’augmenteroit ni ne diminueroit sa gloire, qu’après l’avoir faite, Il pourroit dire dans son país qu’il y auroit esté obligé pour avoir la permission de sortir des Estats du Roy de France.”

François Pidou de Saint-Olon, was charged with the task of greeting and accompanying the Safavid diplomat to Paris, and this *Gentilhomme ordinaire de la chambre du roi* was the first to get to know the Beg. Saint-Olon clashed with the foreigner. His own experience as ambassador to Genoa from 1682 to 1684 and envoy *extraordinaire* to Morocco in 1693 had provided him with a background in diplomatic affairs and experience dealing with Muslim foreigners.⁴⁴ Yet, Saint-Olon was unable to persuade the ambassador to behave according to French protocol.

Saint-Olon's stories of the Beg's confrontational conduct reached Breteuil's ears. In one incident, the ambassador was outraged when he learned that the customs officials in Marseilles had tampered with the presents that he intended for Louis XIV and had sent six months in advance of his arrival under the care of Hagopdjan de Deritchan, an Armenian merchant.⁴⁵ It is unclear who opened the presents—Hagopdjan or the Marseille customs officials—as both parties were targets of accusations.⁴⁶ Of course, the French blamed the Armenian. Either way, the incident revealed the Beg's feisty character, his hot temper, and his willingness to defend his country's interests by any means. Breteuil, describing himself as an adept negotiator, intensified his efforts to negotiate with the Beg over matters of ceremony.

When Breteuil finally arrived to meet the Beg, he found the ambassador unwilling to extend any of the usual civilities. The French court expected the Beg to stand upon receiving high-ranking Frenchmen. However, he had already refused on the basis that his religion forbade him from standing to welcome a Christian.⁴⁷ Breteuil considered himself as a skilled diplomat,

⁴⁴ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 101. François Pidou de Saint-Olon wrote about his experience in Morocco. See François Pidou de Saint-Olon, *État présent de l'empire de Maroc* (Paris, 2002).

⁴⁵ Armenians often played an important role in Safavid trade and politics as intermediaries between Sunni Ottomans and the Shi'ite Safavids as well as between Muslims and their Christian neighbors in Russia. On the role of Armenians see Cosroe Chaqueri, ed. *The Armenians of Iran: The Paradoxical role of a Minority in a Dominant Culture: Articles and Documents* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Aptin Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star and the Cross: Minority Religions in Medieval and Early Modern Iran* (London, 2006); Edmund M. Herzig, "The Rise of the Julfa Merchants in the Late Sixteenth Century" in *Safavid Persia*, ed. Charles Melville (London, 1996).

⁴⁶ Anne-Marie Touzard, *Le Drogman Padery*, 91. Also see AN, AE-B/III/139, fol. 193v, Arnoul à Pontchartrain, Marseille, 26 Octobre 1714.

⁴⁷ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 102. "Scrupuleusement attaché à sa religion et superstitieux à l'excès, il prétendait qu'il ne lui était pas seulement permis de se lever sur ses pieds pour recevoir un chrétien."

who, with the assistance of interpreters, endeavored to persuade the ambassador to greet him according to French proper etiquette. The interpreters, intimidated by the Beg's temper, advised Breteuil to compromise, and in the end, the ambassador feigned a fever that permitted him to receive the *introducteur* lying down. The Beg's evasion of courtesy mirrored that of French courtiers, who commonly pretended to be ill to avoid civilities when receiving people. The Duc de Saint Simon describes in his court memoirs the example of the Prince de Vaudémont, who used the excuse of his illness and bad legs to avoid paying civilities to high-ranking court members.⁴⁸ Breteuil, fully aware of the ruse, nevertheless agreed to meet with the prone ambassador.⁴⁹ The Beg avoided paying respects that indicted the preeminence of French courtiers over Safavid dignitaries. Breteuil understood that the meaning behind his resistance was not cultural but a political matter: the ambassador wished to maintain the precedence of the Safavid Empire, which he would lose if he followed French protocol.

Indeed, Breteuil tried to separate cultural matters from political challenges to the King's authority. He made alterations that honored the ambassador's culture whenever affairs of state, such as precedence, were not involved. For example, Breteuil took into account Islamic traditions even before the Beg's arrival when he decorated the *hôtel des ambassadeurs*, where the ambassador would live during his stay in Paris. "The Persian religion," he wrote in his journal, "does allow painted images of men and women in a palace . . . and the ambassador's residence was decorated with beautiful tapestries . . . but I had placed in the room where the ambassador prayed a green velvet tapestry with golden embroidery."⁵⁰

Breteuil and the court met the Beg's demands when out of the public eye. In private meetings and settings, staging lost importance and changes in French etiquette did not harm the image of the monarchy. For example,

⁴⁸ Louis de Rouvroy, Duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires de Saint-Simon* (Paris, 1901?), XI: 31-62.

⁴⁹ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 103. "Ils me dirent que l'ambassadeur me faisait des excuses d'être obligé de me recevoir couché parce qu'il avait la fièvre, je ne fus pas fâché de me servir de ce prétexte pour n'exiger aucune réception de lui . . ."

⁵⁰ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 101. "La religion des Persans ne leur défend point d'avoir des figures d'hommes et de femmes peintes dans son palais. Aussi l'hôtel des ambassadeurs fut meublé de tapisseries à personnages des plus belles du garde-meuble, après celles qui ne servent qu'au roi. Je fis seulement observer de mettre dans la chambre où l'ambassadeur devait faire ses prières une tapisserie sans personnages, de velours vert à bandes en broderie d'or aussi bien que le lit qui est magnifique."

the French crown showed a willingness to make adjustments to suit the ambassador's trepidations about the February moon. When the *introduc-teur* related to the ambassador that the audience at Versailles would take place on February 13, the Beg announced his displeasure at having the reception during an unfavorable astrological period. Breteuil explained that he had no authority to change the date of the audience with the King, but he would ask Louis XIV to do so. The Beg did not wait for Breteuil to meet with the King and sent his interpreters, along with his *mullah*, to present the problem to the Marquis de Torcy, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs. Torcy then came with Breteuil to meet with the Beg.⁵¹ The Beg revealed he had some appreciation for French court hierarchy and procedure when he brought his problem directly to Torcy, Breteuil's superior. The Marquis de Torcy and Louis XIV, in turn, exhibited consideration for Persian culture when they moved the day of the audience to accommodate the ambassador's request. Torcy wrote to Breteuil describing how "[His Majesty] was touched by the grief [the ambassador] suffered over the bad influence of the moon" and "[the King] himself decided to change the date of the audience to the Tuesday of the following week."⁵² The French officials and the Safavid embassy understood one another and could agree on a new date. The Beg's request was not interpreted as a political challenge: a change in date of the audience would not affect the King's image and was a matter handled in private without the pressures of spectacle.

The importance of precedence and ambassadorial ceremony meant that any changes to French protocol could be interpreted as a slight toward the French monarchy and diminish the grandeur of a public event that was supposed to augment the status of Louis XIV. Breteuil respected the Beg's wishes but he could not honor them when they involved disparities over ceremony that threatened the monarchy's reputation and ultimately, the crown's projection of power. He feared that the Beg's resistance to French codes of conduct would continue to pose a problem throughout his stay, and threaten the public performance of French power. Breteuil needed a pretext to hide the Beg's potential challenges to Louis XIV's authority, which he would fail to prevent. He warned, "[P]eople naturally

⁵¹ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 120-121.

⁵² Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 121-122. "Elle a été touchée de la peine qu'il témoignait sur les malheureuses influences de la lune et, pour récompenser en même temps sa docilité, Sa Majesté s'est portée d'Elle-même à remettre l'audience au mardi de la semaine prochaine."

hot-tempered easily relapse into violence” and proceeded to prepare his readers for the Beg’s alteration of French custom by giving him an unflattering description as temperamental.⁵³

He is a man of esteem in his country, magnificent and vain to excess, but polite and gracious when he wishes to please. He has all the wit that one could have, and a temper beyond what one can describe: once his head begins to heat up, he quickly passes to incensed anger. Nature has given him the tone of voice of a bull that makes his anger even more terrifying in such a way that during the journey from Marseille to Paris, when he fell into fits of anger, he caused everyone around him to tremble.⁵⁴

Breteuil’s description of the Beg’s volatile nature corresponds to seventeenth-century travelers’ accounts describing Persians as both violent yet more civilized than other peoples in Asia. Persians, despite their *politesse*, still retained the passionate and despotic nature that marked all “Orientals” in the European imagination.⁵⁵ Travelers, including the famed Jean Tavernier and Jean Chardin, told tales of brutal force and cruel punishments that the Safavid government inflicted on its subjects. Breteuil’s stories of the ambassador’s temper would not have shocked French readers, and provided a reasonable excuse for any breach of French ritual. Breteuil’s construction of the ambassador’s “exotic” temperament dismissed the Beg’s concerns as politically invalid. Throughout the remainder of the visit, Breteuil emphasized the ambassador’s “exotic” disposition whenever French protocol was at stake.

Before they embarked for Paris, the issue of standing to greet a Frenchmen reappeared, as Breteuil and the Beg disagreed over the welcoming ritual—a small, but crucial matter of French ceremony that the ambassador had already tried to avoid upon their first meeting. The explosive issue

⁵³ Ibid., 105. “[M]ais les gens naturellement emportés retombent aisement dans la violence et, quand elle est secondée du pouvoir que la superstition a sur les hommes ou du prétexte qu’ils en prennent, elle devient fureur pour peu qu’on y résiste comme vous le verrez bientôt au jour de son entrée.”

⁵⁴ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 113. “Il est homme de considération dans son pays, glorieux et vain à l’excès, mais poli et gracieux quand il veut plaire. Il a tout l’esprit qu’on peut avoir, et de l’humeur au-delà de ce que l’on peut dire: dès que sa tête commence à s’échauffer, il passe en un moment jusques à la colère outrée. La nature lui a donné un ton de voix de taureau qui rend encore sa colère plus effrayante en sorte que, pendant le chemin de Marseille à Paris, quand il tombait dans ses emportements, il avait fait trembler tout ce qui l’environnait.”

⁵⁵ See Michael Harrigan, *Veiled Encounters: Representing the Orient in Seventeenth-Century French Travel Literature* (New York, 2008), 153-157.

was whether the ambassador must stand to greet Breteuil and the Maréchal de Matignon (who joined the *introducteur* to escort the ambassador to Paris) when they arrived in his room to take him into the city according to French procedure. The Beg had claimed to be ill the first time he received Breteuil, but this time the Frenchmen insisted upon a proper reception. The ambassador disappointed Breteuil's wishes by insisting that his Islamic religious beliefs did not allow him to stand to receive Christians. Breteuil would not concede once again to the ambassador on the issue of standing, especially since by this time he had conferred with Gaudereau, who had spent a great deal of time in the Safavid Empire and had seen Muslims indeed customarily stand to greet Christians.⁵⁶ The ambassador used his religion to avoid giving precedence to French codes and thereby, to the Frenchmen. Despite Breteuil's understanding of the Beg's motives, he could not agree with them. The ambassador's religious excuses masked a political standoff: his refusal to participate in any ceremony that suggested French primacy.

Breteuil both comprehended and rejected the Beg's alleged reasons for refusing to stand, but he still needed to negotiate with the ambassador and offer him a respectable way out of the situation—conflict had to be avoided. He exhibited consideration for the Beg's right of precedence by offering him ways of following French codes that would also maintain Safavid honor. He proposed that the Beg could avert the problem of ceremony by meeting the Maréchal and himself at the carriage. Breteuil writes, "I told him that if he wished to avoid all ceremony, he could descend the stairs by himself to the carriage where the Maréchal and I would be waiting. . . . He [the ambassador] refused to do that and related to me how he had been informed that the Maréchal and I must go upstairs and sit in his room, where he would serve us coffee and tea" according to Safavid protocol.⁵⁷ Breteuil responded that they would be happy to join him upon the condition that he stood upon their arrival in his room.⁵⁸ Again, the Beg rejected

⁵⁶ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 114.

⁵⁷ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 114. "Je lui dis que, s'il voulait éviter toute cérémonie, il pouvait descendre seul jusqu'au carrosse auprès duquel le maréchal de Matignon et moi l'attendrions; qu'en l'abordant nous le mettrions entre nous deux et que le maréchal lui ferait les honneurs du carrosse; que cette manière se pratiquait avec les nonces du pape lorsqu'on va les prendre dans le carrosse du roi pour l'entrée. Il refusa de le faire et me dit qu'il était informé que M. de Matignon et moi devions monter et nous asseoir dans sa chambre et qu'il nous y ferait donner du café et du thé."

⁵⁸ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 114.

the idea. "He flatly refused to do it under the same pretext that his faith forbade it."⁵⁹

Breteuil, in an attempt to reach a compromise, suggested that the ambassador stand just before they enter and take a few steps in his room toward the carriage. That way, he would be truly standing to leave for the carriage and not for receiving his Christian guests. Breteuil once again reminded his readers of the Beg's temper—a potential excuse for the Beg's opposition to rituals of French power. He stressed the ambassador's vehement and repeated refusals to all of his suggestions, which were pronounced "with a tone of such anger and rage."⁶⁰ At this point, the stakes were high for both Breteuil and the Beg—neither wished to reduce their own reputations and the status of their countries by foregoing their own codes of protocol in favor of foreign ones. The language of power inherent in ceremonial customs rang true for the Safavid ambassador as well as for Breteuil.

Under no circumstances could Breteuil yield to the ambassador's demands. He needed the ambassador to perform French ceremony in front of the courtiers waiting outside or risk tarnishing his image and that of the French monarchy. Breteuil decided to threaten the ambassador into agreeing to his terms. "I was obliged to tell him that if he did not want to perform the courtesy that [we] requested of him, which was certainly the least that [we] could have expected of him, he would not make the entry into Paris. If he did not perform the entry, there would be no audience with the King, and he could not present the letter from the Safavid Shah."⁶¹ Breteuil knew that the ambassador had to meet with Louis XIV or risk his own position in the Safavid Empire; therefore, Breteuil assumed that the ambassador would agree to the compromise. However, the Beg held his ground. At this point, Breteuil, emphasizing ethnic assumptions regarding Persians, described him as "far from listening to reason, his rage and stubbornness to comply increasing," reminding his readers of the Beg's exotic temperament. This forced him to devise a strategy with the Maréchal de Matignon,

⁵⁹ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 114. "Il refusa absolument de le faire sous le prétexte déjà cité que sa loi lui défendait."

⁶⁰ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 114-115. "Il refusa encore cet expédient et quelques autres semblables que je lui proposai et cela avec un ton de colère et tant d'emportement que je fus enfin obligé de lui dire que, s'il ne voulait pas faire la civilité que je lui demandais, qui était certainement la moindre qu'on pouvait exiger de lui, il ne ferait point d'entrée à Paris, et que, s'il ne faisait point d'entrée, il n'aurait point d'audience du roi et ne rendrait point à Sa Majesté la lettre du roi de Perse."

⁶¹ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 114-115.

who was waiting by the carriage.⁶² They decided to trick the ambassador by pretending to leave without him. “Convinced that the ambassador, who no longer had even a pot or a bowl in Charenton because he had sent everything in the morning ahead to Paris, would rather die of hunger than eat something that had been prepared by Christians... would beg us to come back once he had seen us leave.”⁶³

According to Breteuil’s story, the ambassador had become so unmanageable that he was forced to resort to trickery to win the battle over acts of power. He had to try everything possible to avoid the embarrassment of having to concede French ceremony and embarrass himself, and, ultimately, the King in front of the royal princes and princesses present. But his plan had no time to materialize, as the Safavid diplomat moved to jump on a horse as soon as Breteuil had left his room. Forewarned, Breteuil “seized the bridle of [the ambassador’s] horse and told him that [he, Breteuil,] would certainly make him dismount.”⁶⁴ The episode reached a heated pinnacle when, “incensed by rage, he [the ambassador] asked... for his sword from the page who had carried it and had already been near him by the horse.”⁶⁵ Breteuil “coolly watched [him] attach his sword to his side and place his hand on the hilt” and prepare to ride off.⁶⁶ “Fortunately,” wrote Breteuil, “in that moment, I found at my side two guards of the provost of the marine, who had accompanied the ambassador from Marseille.”⁶⁷ Next, Breteuil “ordered them to close the doors to the garden and prevent the ambassador and any of his men from leaving. He [the ambassador]... thinking that [Breteuil] wanted to hold him prisoner,

⁶² Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 114-115. “Et comme, loin d’écouter la raison, son emportement et son obstination à refuser augmentaient, je le quittai pour aller concerter avec le maréchal de Matignon qui m’attendait en bas, de monter en carrosse sans l’ambassadeur et de feindre de nous en aller, persuadé que l’ambassadeur, qui n’avait plus ni pot ni écuelle à Charenton parce qu’il avait tout envoyé dès le matin à Paris, se laisserait plutôt mourir de faim que de manger de ce qui serait apprêté par des chrétiens, reviendrait à lui dès qu’il nous verrait partir, et nous enverrait prier de revenir.”

⁶³ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 114-115.

⁶⁴ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 115. “Je remontai avec précipitation et, le trouvant encore dans le jardin auprès de la porte de la salle où il faisait accommoder son étrier, je saisis la bride de son cheval et lui dis que certainement je l’en ferais descendre.”

⁶⁵ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 114-115. “Outré de fureur, il demanda dans le moment son sabre au page qui le porte et qui était déjà à côté de lui.”

⁶⁶ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 115. “Je le regardai de sang-froid attacher son sabre à son côté et mettre la main sur la poignée.”

⁶⁷ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 115.

threw himself with great fury off the horse and ran to place himself in the armchair where [Breteuil] had first seen him upon arriving.”⁶⁸

Breteuil characterized himself as quick-thinking, unintimidated, resolute, and mindful of the reputation of his own monarch. Cornering the ambassador in his room, he repeated his threat that the meeting with the King would be called off. At these words, the Beg became so excited that “he summoned six of his riflemen who entered the room and surrounded [Breteuil], guns fastened.”⁶⁹ Again, Breteuil resisted intimidation and held his ground, returning the ambassador’s threats with greater ones: “I told [the Beg] through the interpreter that, with one whistle blow, I could summon six hundred and six thousand if it was needed, and finally I forced him to conform with the orders that I had from the King. Since I was becoming excited as well, he did not have a means to back out. And, finally, I seized him by his jacket buttons and made him stand up despite himself.” Breteuil then summoned the Maréchal, and the scene ended with the Beg running into the carriage, where his two French escorts soon joined him. All the way to Paris, the ambassador remained stubbornly and insolently silent.⁷⁰

The heated confrontation over standing shows that conflict was not based on cultural misunderstanding but on similar yet conflicting political goals: both wanted to maximize the prestige of their monarch. Breteuil construed the actions of the ambassador as a defiance of the French monarchy. The refusal of the Beg to accept French etiquette and his insistence on Safavid customs validate Breteuil’s interpretation. The Beg may not have understood the details of French protocol but he did understand that giving up his own diplomatic traditions in favor of a foreign system meant yielding power. In the end, both Breteuil and the Beg understood the performance of power inherent in ceremony. However, the *introduceur* required an excuse to cover up the Beg’s challenge to French supremacy

⁶⁸ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 115. “Je trouvai heureusement sous ma main dans ce moment deux des gardes du prévôt de la marine, qui l’ont accompagné depuis Marseille. Je leur commandai d’aller fermer les portes du jardin et d’empêcher que l’ambassadeur ni aucun de ses gens n’en sortissent. Il entendait déjà assez de français pour avoir compris ce que je disais et, croyant que je voulais le faire prisonnier, il se jeta encore avec plus de fureur en bas de son cheval et courut se remettre dans le fauteuil où je l’avais trouvé en arrivant.”

⁶⁹ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 115. “À ces paroles, sa tête s’échauffa au point qu’à un clin d’œil qu’il fit à ses gens six de ses fusiliers entrèrent dans la chambre et me vinrent environner, le fusil bandé.”

⁷⁰ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 116.

and the ambassador's exotic temperament served this purpose. Breteuil's description of the Beg seems "Orientalist," but, instead, it was a device consciously employed by Breteuil to win the competition for grandeur between the two countries.

Despite the feud over ceremony, reconciliation was in the best interest of both Breteuil and the Beg. The failure of the mission would have undermined the diplomatic goals of each country and damaged the individual reputations of Breteuil and the Beg at their home courts. In order to show that there were no ill feelings toward Breteuil after the quarrel, the Beg made a sign of friendship in accordance with Safavid tradition. "The ambassador made up with me, touched me on the hand in his [Torcy's] presence and gave me an orange as a symbol of peace."⁷¹ Breteuil interpreted the hospitable gesture correctly. Breteuil stated that "since that time, not only were we the best friends in the world, but I was [the Beg's] only source of comfort during the troubles he subsequently had."⁷² In the end, both wished to avoid conflict and accomplish the goals both the French and Safavid governments expected from the visit.

Competition for Grandeur between France and the Safavid Empire

Breteuil's story of the Safavid embassy not only points to an understanding over the mutual goal of preeminence, but also suggests a comparison between the two monarchies. Frenchmen had to regard Persians as comparable to themselves for their precedence over Safavid officials to have any significance, since popularly they considered Persia as civilized as France. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Catholic literature portrayed Persia as a Muslim country that was tolerant toward Christians, and even imagined the conversion of the Safavid Empire and its Shah.⁷³ The image

⁷¹ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 121. "L'ambassadeur se raccommoda avec moi, me toucha dans la main en sa présence et me donna une orange pour signe de paix."

⁷² Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 121. "[E]t, depuis ce temps, non seulement nous avons été les meilleurs amis du monde, mais j'ai été son recours et son unique consolation."

⁷³ French devout Catholics did not necessarily agree with the French state's alliance with the Ottoman Empire and pushed for a pro-Catholic foreign policy that would look to the Safavid Empire for support against the Ottomans. Catholic pamphlets from the early seventeenth century spread propaganda about Persia, depicting it as friendly to Christianity and more like Christian Europe than the Ottoman Empire. For more on Catholic representations of Persia and the Ottoman Empire, see Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism, and the Ancien Régime* (New York, 2008),

of Persia as open to Christianity attracted European visitors to the Safavid Empire, such as Pietro della Valle, who wrote a positive appraisal of Shah Abbas in which he was depicted as a courtly figure.⁷⁴ In the reign of Louis XIV, the crown's commercial plans and royal propaganda schemes encouraged travels to the Safavid Empire, prompting a surge of writings and information on the country that portrayed Persia as more civil than the Ottomans and more akin to the French.⁷⁵ This tendency to view Persia as a mirror of France was further developed in adaptations of Persian texts that flowed into the royal library thanks to the efforts of French travelers and missionaries. André du Ryer, the first to translate a Persian text into French in 1634, chose the most famous handbook on behavior in the Persian language, *The Rose Garden*.⁷⁶ Du Ryer's version of the Persian classic suggested to French readers that Persia, like France, stood out in civility and courteous behavior. This book resembled the guides on civility or *honnêteté* that were popular in seventeenth-century France and portrayed Persia as a courteous rather than religious world, which could serve as a mirror of French polite society.⁷⁷

85-86. Alastair Hamilton and Francis Richard, *André du Ryer and Oriental Studies in Seventeenth-Century France* (London, 2004), 78. Anthony Levi, *Cardinal Richelieu and the Making of France* (London, 2000).

⁷⁴ Pietro della Valle, *Histoire Apologetique d'Abbas, Roy de Perse...* trans. Jean Baudoin (Paris, 1631).

⁷⁵ For a good but short summary on the positive and negative views of various travelers regarding Persia, see Harrigan, *Veiled Encounters*, 153-157. Also see Olivier Bonnerot, *La Perse dans la littérature et la pensée française au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1988). Tavernier, for example, wrote: "La civilité des Persans est grande..." in Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les Six voyages de Jean-Baptiste Tavernier... en Turquie, en Perse, et aux Indes...*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1676), I:188. François de la Boullaye likened Persians to the French and noted their civility: "I think that the Ottomans have a connection to the Spanish, the Persians with the French, and the Italians with the Arabs." He noted that like the French, Persians are "better riders than pedestrians; light-hearted, curious, and desirous to be considered the bravest in Asia; superb in dress, belts, turbans, and weapons; courteous and civil, but more to strangers than to their fellow countrymen..." See François de la Boullaye Le Gouz [1623-1668], *Les Voyages et observations du Sieur La Boullaye Le Gouz* (Paris, 1653) and Harrigan, 154. For more on Colbert's policies, see Harrigan, 12; Friedrich Wolfzettel, *Le Discours du voyageur* (Paris, 1996); Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford, 2009).

⁷⁶ Sadi, *Gulistan, ou L'empire des roses*, trans. André du Ryer (Paris, 1634). Alastair Hamilton and Francis Richard, *André du Ryer and Oriental Studies in Seventeenth-Century France* (London, 2004).

⁷⁷ For more on the French notion of civility and *honnêteté*, see Antonie de Nervèze, *La Guide des Courtisans* (Paris, 1606); Nicolas Pasquier, *Le Gentilhomme* (Paris, 1611); Jacques de Caillères, *Traicté de la fortune des gens de qualité...* (Paris, 1658). See M. Magendie,

Breteuil relied on texts on Persia that represented it as a land of “civility” and more sympathetic to Christianity than the Ottoman Empire.⁷⁸ Therefore, it is not surprising that Breteuil believed the Safavid Empire out-ranked other Asian monarchies, and warranted changes to standard practices. He wrote, “The King of Persia is a significant enough monarch that we would increase rather than reduce the honors paid to his ambassadors, especially because not since Charlemagne has an emperor of Persia sent an embassy to the kings of France.”⁷⁹ Since this was the first Safavid visit to France during Louis XIV’s reign, Breteuil argued for a luxurious atmosphere for the ambassador’s reception at Versailles: “I... pointed out to His Majesty that this ambassador came on behalf of the most magnificent monarch of the ‘Orient,’ the emperor of the oldest empire in the world.”⁸⁰

French respect for the Safavid Empire generated a comparison. The French monarchy had revealed its desire to compare itself with “Oriental” empires generally, and not just Persia, during the preparations and décor for audiences of “Oriental” diplomats at Versailles. The French court often resorted to garish displays of luxury and pomp in order to outdo its eastern visitors when it came to ceremony and material excess. In 1669, for example, during the entry parade of Suleiman Aga, the Turkish diplomat, courtiers noted elements of Turkish tradition. One observer noted, “Suleiman found a double line of soldiers in the street along his route and marched to the sound of a canon, which started the moment that he passed under the door to imitate the custom of the Turks in the reception that they put on for ambassadors.”⁸¹ Later, in 1686, the French King received the Siamese

introduction to *L'Honneste homme ou l'art de plaire a la court* by Nicolas Faret (Geneva, 1970). For more on the literature on courtly conduct, see Emmanuel Bury, *Littérature et politesse: L'Invention de l'honnête homme 1580-1750* (Paris, 1996), and Jean-Marc Chate-lain, *La Bibliothèque de l'honnête homme: Livres, lecture et collections en France à l'âge clas-sique* (Paris, 2003).

⁷⁸ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 107.

⁷⁹ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 121. “Le roi de Perse est un souverain assez considérable pour qu'on augmente plutôt que diminuer les honneurs de ses ambassadeurs, d'autant plus que depuis Charlemagne aucun empereur de Perse n'a envoyé d'ambassadeur aux rois de France...”

⁸⁰ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 121. “Je pris aussi son ordre pour l'audience et représen-tai à Sa Majesté que cet ambassadeur venant de la part du plus magnifique souverain de l'Orient, l'Empereur du plus ancien empire du monde...”

⁸¹ Nicolas de Saintcot, *Mémoires*, II:83. “Soliman trouva une double haye de soldats dans les rues de son passage, et marcha au bruit de canon, qui commença dans le moment

ambassadors on a silver throne, situated on a high platform covered with a floral carpet, mimicking the lofty throne of the Siamese monarch Phra Narai and the floral pattern of his reception hall in Siam and donned a diamond-encrusted outfit.⁸² During the Siamese embassy, an observer described how the entry of the three diplomats through the rooms of Versailles was accompanied by “the sound of trumpets and drums, imitating the custom of the King of Siam, who never descended to an audience hall without this music.”⁸³

Similar to previous “Oriental” visits, Louis XIV, Breteuil, and the other court officials designed the details of the Beg’s visit to display Louis XIV as a powerful monarch who mirrored or even surpassed his Asian equivalents. For this occasion, Louis XIV again made use of Asian props, such as a throne placed at the end of the Hall of Mirrors, and also wore an outfit trimmed with diamonds, comparable to the famous diamond suit he had worn for the Siamese embassy in 1686.⁸⁴ To match his glittering costume, Louis XIV also commanded his courtiers to dress magnificently to compete with the finery of the Safavid court. He ordered the women to wear their best dresses of a certain style, *robe de chambre*, and to place many decorative stones in their hair.⁸⁵ The imitation present in receptions of

qu’il passa sous la porte pour imiter en cela l’usage des turcs dans la reception qu’ils font aux ambassadeurs.” Again, during his reception with Louis XIV at Saint Germain, the gallery replicated the staging of Asian rulers. “The gallery was adorned with several beautiful tapestries of the crown; the entire floor was covered with rugs, and two sides of the gallery were filled with large vases elevated on two pedestals also in silver; at the end of the gallery was a throne elevated on eight steps decorated with the same vases, and boxes of silver which cost more than twenty million.” See Nicolas de Saintot, II:91. “La gallerie estoit parée des plusieurs belles tapisseries de la courone; tout le parterre estoit couvert de tapis de pied, et les deux costés de la gallerie estoient remplis de grands vases d’argent elevés sur des pedestaux aussi d’argent; au bout de la gallerie estoit un Trône elevé sur huit marches ornées de pareils vases, et de caisses d’argent, dont le prix estoit de plus de vingt millions.” Tapestries, rugs, and vases were common elements of “Oriental” settings.

⁸² Love, 171-197.

⁸³ See Dirk Van der Cruysse, *Louis XIV et le Siam* (Paris, 1991), 388-389.

⁸⁴ The Duc de Saint-Simon, who was present at the Beg’s reception, described the King’s outfit in much greater detail than the *introducteur*. “He wore a coat of black and gold cloth, with the Order outside, and so did those few knights who usually wore it under their coats. His coat was trimmed with the finest diamonds of the crown jewels, to the tune of twelve and half million livres.” Duc de Saint-Simon, *Memoirs*, ed. and trans. Lucy Norton (London, 1968), 405.

⁸⁵ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 133. Breteuil wrote that the magnificence of the men and women at the audience was executed with the utmost expense and *éclat* (ostentatious display) of the most magnificent court in the world. Breteuil, 119, 126.

“Oriental” visitors suggests French efforts to compete. The Safavid Empire’s particular reputation as one of the most highly regarded of all “Oriental” empires meant that the French could improve their status by having a Safavid guest bend to their monarch; France could claim superiority over a powerful and civilized empire like Persia by taking precedence in ceremonial performances.

Conclusion

During the Safavid embassy’s audience at Versailles that was the high point of the visit, Breteuil, once again, could not prevent the Beg’s affronts to French ceremony. Contrary to French custom, the ambassador approached the monarch and handed the letter directly to Louis XIV himself.⁸⁶ To make matters worse, the ambassador remained silent instead of starting the meeting with the usual speech in praise of Louis XIV. Breteuil related that an ambassador had never before started the discourse by silently handing the letter, and it was highly unusual not to compliment the King in a speech. These minor slips in protocol did not go unnoticed by courtiers who were used to observing ceremony, as they lived their daily lives by it. The Duc de Saint-Simon recorded in his diary of the court all the improprieties of the ambassador at the audience and notes in a negative way that the Beg, “appeared completely bewildered by the magnificence, and . . . lost his temper with the interpreter.” Saint-Simon further wrote that the ambassador’s “behavior was as disgraceful as his wretched suite and miserable presents.”⁸⁷ The ambassador risked insulting the French court by failing to participate in French rites of power. Breteuil had to provide a good reason for the ambassador’s errors or show that the blunders were out of his control. Breteuil, trying to excuse the ambassador’s slips in terms of cultural differences, explained to the King, on behalf of the ambassador, that it was the custom in the Safavid Empire for the monarch always to speak first. This explained the Beg’s initial silence while passing the letter.⁸⁸

The Beg’s acts, explained in terms of cultural disparity, conceal the similarity of goals between the Safavids and the French that resulted in the

⁸⁶ Another clash between French and Ottoman diplomatic custom occurred over the *lettre de créance* during Suleiman Aga’s audience with Louis XIV. The Turkish dignitary wished to hand the letter directly to the king. However, this conflicted with French protocol. See Nicolas de Sainctot, *Mémoires*, II:92.

⁸⁷ Duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, 404-405.

⁸⁸ Baron de Breteuil, *Mémoires*, 132.

clashes described above. Breteuil's story reminds us that comparable ideas of court ceremony triggered conflicts between the Safavid Empire and France akin to fights over precedence between European states. However, instead of admitting that the Beg's behavior was comparable to defiant acts of European ambassadors and recognizing his challenge to French power, Breteuil excused his conduct based on his differences—the Beg's exotic codes of behavior and temperament. Cultural misunderstanding did not cause the disagreements but served as a perfect excuse for the Beg's actions and distraction from political conflict. Careful study of diplomatic confrontations reveals that commensurability did exist between early-modern European and Asian countries, and at times, similarity and not hostility actually triggered conflicts.

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