

Jacques de Coutre has a scoop on intersectionality of diamond miners in early 17th century South India¹

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Jacques de Coutre was the son of a well to do broom maker living in Bruges in Flanders (Stols 1974). He was born around 1575. Shortly after his father's death, his mother, Anna van Houven, decided to send Jacques abroad, to Spain. He was then around sixteen years of age and at least one of his brothers lived on the Iberian Peninsula. Arriving in Lisbon in October 1591 he met his elder brother Joseph and after some hesitations the two travelled to the East, settling in Goa, in southwest India, in September 1592. But, not for long. 'It was against my character to remain in one place because I eagerly wished to see differences in the world' (*como era contra mi inclinación el estar quedo en un lugar por el deseo y gusto que tenía de ver variedades del mundo*) (Coutre, 1640, book 2, chapter 16). For three decades Jacques de Coutre incessantly travelled in South India and Southeast Asia. From September 1593 to March 1603 he acted as a diamond and textile trader and informal agent of the Portuguese governor of Melaka, Francisco de Silva de Meneses. In that capacity de Coutre visited, traded and negotiated in Singapore, Pahang, Siam, Cambodia, Manila, Brunei, Palawan, Mindoro, Patani and Johor (Borschberg 2014). In May 1603 he returned to Goa and married a Portuguese Old Christian and his sister-in-law Catarina do Couto (whose sister had previously married Jacques' brother Joseph). For two more decades Jacques continued as a diamond trader in South India, interspersed with two overland visits to Madrid to defend his interests. That was because since 1605 Portuguese royal legislation ordered the expulsion of foreigners from its overseas territories, mainly for fear of Dutch and English competition. This included the Flemish, subjects of the Spanish Crown, but not of the Portuguese, notwithstanding the Union of the Crowns (1580-1640) at the time. However, in Goa, the implementation of the law took nearly two decades to materialize. Several gem traders, among whom the brothers de Coutre, fiercely resisted expulsion. In the end, their resistance was in vain. On 1 April 1623 the governor of Goa ordered the arrest of Jacques de Coutre, his son and his brother and their deportation to Portugal along with several others. He spent about five years under house arrest in prisons in Lisbon and Madrid. By royal decree of 29 June 1632, the Council of Portugal in Madrid acquitted the brothers. For his service to the joint Spanish-Portuguese Crown in South Asia Jacques de Coutre ultimately was honored as a knight in the prestigious Order of Santiago. Jacques de Coutre died in June 1640 in Zaragoza, Spain. A voluminous manuscript of his life story as an ego-document was co-authored by his son Esteban (Coutre 1640; Verberckmoes, Stols 1988; Coutre 1991).

Notwithstanding his privileged status as Flemish-Iberian colonial agent, Jacques de Coutre identified intersectionality issues among diamond miners while in South India from 1603 to 1623. He was the first European to do so. De Coutre underlined the interweaving of their extreme poverty, miserable working conditions, spiritual desperation, gender issues,

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conditional payment and debt bondage to the private owners of the diamond mines on the Deccan plateau. Overall, he emphasized their intricate marginality in a sector of economic activity in which he prominently participated as a merchant. Intersectionality refers to the aggregation of discrimination factors (Duran, Jones 2020). Originally referring to the marginality of women (Crenshaw 1989, Yuval-Davis 2006), recent assessments on intersectionality point to the structures that accumulate inequalities among vulnerable workers (Bhattacharya 2017, Bohrer 2018), in particular in industries expanding in a global world (Mezzadri 2016). Diamonds were such a global industry and early modern Goa one of its centers in Asia (Cunha 2001). In that globalizing context Deccan workers extracting diamonds in underground mines faced social downgrading as a result of multiple discriminations (Plank 2014).

Two reasons stand out to explain de Coutre's sensitivity to intersectionality. First of all, since his time in Melaka he had become an accomplished international diamond trader with above all expertise in the field of endless negotiations with unwilling local rulers (Bycroft, Dupré 2019, 95). This pushed him to explore the sources of diamond extracting. During his visits to the diamond mines of Ramallakota south of Kurnool and the mines around Kollur, de Coutre came into close contact with miners and diggers (Winius 1988, 20-21). The dire circumstances of the manual laborers and excavators of a hugely promising product (the potential of which these workers were well aware), arguably attracted Jacques de Coutre to intimately explore the accumulating factors of their exploitation and even give evidence of their fight against intersectional discrimination. For they continued to dig nevertheless, just as he persisted in trading gems although gains were highly insecure. In his life story he tells how on more than one occasion he lost everything (e.g. Coutre 1640, book 1, chapters 2, 12 and 17, book 2, chapter 10, book 3, chapters 2 and 11). However, his social status as a colonial agent was never at risk. So, arguably not a sense of injustice pushed him to investigate the lives of the diamond workers, but a sense of high risk and structural social downgrading intimately connected to the volatile gem business (Siebenhüner 2018; Bycroft, Dupré 2019). Some exceptions notwithstanding (Hofmeester 2012, p. 23-29; Alam 2001, Mukund 1991), this aspect of de Coutre's rich descriptions of the diamond mines of Vellore, Bijapur and Golconda has not been properly analyzed in its own right. Historians have focused on trade (Disney 1978, Chaudhuri 1985, Maloni 2021), travel (Rubiés 2000) and religion (Županov 2005, Barreto Xavier 2022) as undergoing significant changes as a result of many intercultural exchanges in early modern India (Subrahmanyam 1990), but hardly on subaltern workers.

Second, driven by his curiosity – *por curiosidad* (Winius 1988, 24) – de Coutre travelled incessantly and thus gained huge experience (Subrahmanyam 2017, p. 27). His continuous travel among many different cultures in rapidly changing international political circumstances in South India and Southeast Asia consistently affected and undoubtedly altered the views Jacques de Coutre had on the world and its people. This turned him into a cultural broker and a go-between and pushed him to meet with people from all layers of society (Ares Queija, Gruzinski 1997). That is the zest of his memoirs, written down at the end of his life but never published. Presumably on the basis of his personal notes as well as his memory, Jacques de Coutre told his adventures to his son Esteban and he turned these into a manuscript, or they jointly did. It is labeled a *vida*, a life of Jacques, and told in the first person. In contrast to a traveller from a generation earlier, Jan Huygen van Linschoten from Enkhuizen, who also left home age sixteen, but on a sober mission of gathering useful information (Van Gelder 1998),

de Coutre often left the trodden path and eagerly embarked on new horizons. He gained local cultural experience, learned languages and acquired a sensitivity to human encounters. What gave his life and his travels urgency, however, and tested his go-betweenness, was the historical context, more specifically, the break-up of the Deccan during the early seventeenth century due to Christian - Hindu as well as Muslim - Hindu political and commercial tensions (Alam, Subrahmanyam 2011, p. 162-203). While de Coutre was definitely blind sighted on religious pluralism, he was not on commercial opportunity linked to political upheaval. In striking contrast to the extravagant luxury of the rulers of Bijapur and Golconda, which he documented with clarity, horror and fascination, the diamond extractors and transport workers operating in horribly poor conditions, somehow caught his sympathy.

Privilege and peril: the life of Jacques de Coutre

Although often living in perilous conditions Jacques de Coutre enjoyed many privileges of a Flemish citizen participating in Portuguese colonial ventures. However, his life started in uncertainty. In the 1590s Bruges still suffered from constant warfare during the Revolt of the Netherlands (Bauwens a.o. 1987). Mother van Houven feared her son Jacques was inclined to take service in the army. A future in the Iberian countries seemed more secure. In June 1591 Jacques went aboard the Red Lion in Vlissingen, Zeeland. For three months the ship was sailing and fishing in the North Atlantic and once fought with English ships in view of the Irish coast. At that occasion the ship's captain Gaspar Janssens lost both his legs when a cannon ball hit him and killed him. In October 1591 Jacques finally arrived in Lisbon. He was so shaken by his three months as an ordinary sailor that he collapsed and fell to the ground in the house of Herman Vermeire, the Flemish owner of the Red Lion who lived in Corpo Santo near the waterfront. There Jacques met with his older brother Joseph, who he had not seen for five years. Living a life of destitution in the Portuguese capital, Joseph and Jacques soon decided to sail to Asia (Coutre 1640, book 1, chapters 1 and 2). Before his Asian enterprise is explored, the exact status of de Coutre as a Flemish in the Portuguese-Spanish overseas empires under one Crown needs to be defined.

The most detailed source on de Coutre's life is his autobiography written in the Spanish language (Coutre 1640; Coutre 1991). The text was penned between 1623 and 1628 while Jacques de Coutre and his brother Joseph were under investigation from the Crown, first in Lisbon and from 1624 in Madrid. Seven memorials with advice for the Spanish king Philip IV on how to conduct trade in South and Southeast Asia and East Africa complemented the autobiography (Coutre 1991, p. 359-438). Whether the brothers de Coutre acted as willing or unwilling spies for the Dutch East India Company or were loyal citizens of the joint Portuguese-Spanish Crown is still open for discussion (Borschberg 2014, p. 21, 33). This was the period when the Portuguese *Estado da India*, its official empire in the East, was in fierce competition with the Dutch United Provinces, the latest newcomer in the highly competitive South and Southeast Asian markets. Since the 1590s the Dutch Republic was very active in the Indian Ocean and South Chinese Sea, culminating in the fusion of several existing companies into one East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC*) in 1602. Although Jacques de Coutre had occasional contacts with Dutch mariners in Manila and Melaka and evidently spoke their language, most evidence suggests Jacques de Coutre and his

brother never actively sought any involvement with the VOC. To the contrary, as Flemish they fully participated in the Portuguese *Estado da India* as their marriages to an Indo-Portuguese family do Couto of Old Christians in Goa and diplomatic interventions on behalf of Portuguese officials throughout South and Southeast Asia confirmed. Also, two centuries of intimate dynastic and commercial connections between Portugal and Flanders (Everaert, Stols, 1991) had paved the way for the Flemish, although subjects of the Spanish Crown, to be considered as also loyal to the Portuguese Crown. On the other hand, early modern imperialism was a mixture of public and private enterprise and distinctions blurred rapidly (Antunes 2017). The gem business in particular easily transcended cultural, social and legal barriers (Bycroft, Dupré 2019; Siebenhüner 2018; Vanneste 2011). As diamond traders, Jacques and Joseph de Coutre worked for their own pockets as well as for Portuguese officials and local rulers throughout Southeast Asia and India, including Jahangir, fourth Moghul Emperor.

Jacques de Coutre was a fixer, a go-between in empires (Subrahmanyam 2021) and a merchant mediating between cultures (Ares Queija, Gruzinski 1997). In 1592 he travelled to Goa on board of a Portuguese ship that consisted of a multinational crew. Although the Crowns of Portugal and Spain from 1580 to 1640 belonged to the same Spanish Habsburg king, colonial institutions of the two countries were not merged nor were their colonial laws, although Madrid had the last word. As Flanders was not subjected to the Portuguese Crown, de Coutre was technically a foreigner in Goa. However, to start off his career, he ignored his mother's advice and became a soldier, a *soldado* in service of the Portuguese to obtain the protection of local Portuguese officials in Melaka (Subrahmanyam 1999, p. 316). This was a rational choice, though, enlisting as a soldier was a legal way for the Flemish to participate in Portuguese ventures. On the other hand, arriving in Melaka in late September 1593, the ageing Venetian gem merchant Sequin Martinela took Jacques de Coutre under his protection (Coutre 1640, book 1, chapter 2). Sequin was a second father to Jacques. He learned the young man from Bruges all tricks of the trade in diamonds and other precious stones. As Venice was a crucial link in the diamond trade between Portuguese India and the Habsburg Netherlands (Everaert 2004), this made much sense also for Sequin Martinela. During his decade of service to the Portuguese in Southeast Asia, Jacques de Coutre undoubtedly raised his status as trustworthy subject (Borschberg 2014, p. 35).

Yet, Dutch-Portuguese tensions ran so high that on 18 March 1605 a law was declared in Portugal that ordered all foreigners to be driven out of the Portuguese settlements in the *Estado da India*, as well as the Atlantic islands, Brazil and the African coast (Subrahmanyam 1999, p. 297). On 28 November 1606 King Philip III of Spain ordered the viceroy in India, Dom Martin Afonso de Castro, to implement this law (Borschberg 2014, p. 15). As the informal capital of Portuguese Asia Goa teemed with strangers, Persians, Armenians, Jews, Germans, French, Italians, and Flemish. Although Habsburg subjects, according to Portuguese colonial law Flemish were also foreigners. That is why starting in 1606 Jacques de Coutre travelled over land via the Persian and Ottoman empires to Lisbon and Madrid to defend his actions (among other reasons because he had talked in Manila in Dutch to a Dutch ship captain of the VOC) and present the monarch with detailed petitions (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapters 5 to 12). For instance, he argued that he was not only loyal to the Portuguese crown, but had also carried letters by the viceroy of Goa on his overland journey (Borschberg 2014, p. 15). He then returned to Goa, apparently having satisfied authorities. Finally, it took a very long time before action was taken against gem traders such as de Coutre and the most

prestigious and rich among them all, the German Ferdinand Cron from Augsburg (Malekandathil 1999, p. 97-111). In the meantime, the brothers de Coutre confirmed their loyalty with donations to churches and hospitals in Goa (Borschberg 2014, p. 11). In 1620 Jacques de Coutre undertook a second voyage to the Iberian Peninsula to justify his doings to the Portuguese Crown, but got no further than Aleppo and returned to Goa (Coutre 1640, book 3, chapters 9 and 10). Perhaps accusations of collaborating with the Dutch VOC began to weigh. He even planned a third visit to Madrid in 1621, but that did not materialize, as he was taken prisoner by the Portuguese not far from Goa (Coutre 1640, book 3, chapters 11 and 12). Clearly, Portuguese patience was up, as the Dutch and the English became ever more fierce competitors and gem traders Jacques and Joseph de Coutre and Ferdinand Cron were all expelled. Finally, the arrest in and deportation from Goa of Jacques and Joseph de Coutre in the company of Jacques' son Esteban, on 1 April 1623, brought them first to Lisbon and then to Madrid for nearly a decade of legal battle (Coutre 1640 book 3, chapter 15). In 1632 they were acquitted of any charges of spying for the Dutch and acknowledged as loyal to the Crown.

Although under suspicion as foreigners with a possible double agenda, until 1623 the brothers de Coutre always enjoyed the privilege of working in total liberty in and from Goa. They earned significant wealth in the gem trade and vouched for others. As economic agents they belonged to a privileged social group of high-end traders working for rich buyers and took every opportunity and risk (Cunha 2001). In the light of this, the autobiography of Jacques de Coutre gains special significance. It has been suggested that it is written in the style of a picaresque novel (Winius and Chorba 1998). Humor and ironic self-deprecation, but also fury and indignation at the actions and words of others, fuel the narrative. The manuscript has a title page drawing with a coat of arms, an I-character telling a story of many adventures with numerous twists and turns and uses a Spanish language fused with Portuguese (Teensma 1989). This suggests a popular genre (Borschberg 2014, p. 31-33). As accomplished as more famous early modern travelers, Jacques de Coutre surged on a wave of authorship that demonstrated eagerness to know the world intimately (Subrahmanyam 2011). In that perspective, the examples that Jacques de Coutre gives of the destitution that he is living in and the hardship that he encounters cater to the popularity of the genre of travel narratives (Mancall 2007). For instance, on their first voyage, he and his brother are ill and are taken care off in a hospital in Mozambique. When the ship leaves, he hears that his brother has gone away and fears the worst, that he is dead. But, then he finds his brother and is overcome with joy, yet at the same time the tears stream from his eyes as he reflects on their extreme poverty. His brother has only trousers, a shirt and a woolen cap, but no stockings nor shoes (Coutre 1640, book 1, chapter 2). It is one of numerous examples in the *vida* of rapid social downgrading as a result of several factors, in this case disease, isolation and theft. Although inversely self-glorifying in the best picaresque fashion, the ultimate experience of his adventurous life was to assess structural dangers at every instance.

Throughout his autobiography, Jacques presents himself as a picaresque hero surfing on contradictory emotions. Yet, arguments about having lost everything, including every piece of clothing he carried with him, wear thin against the overall impression of his memoirs that he is a finely skilled negotiator who always finds a way out. That is exactly what a picaresque traveler does. He takes up an impossible assignment, gets into deep trouble but emerges triumphant, at least for the time being. A second function of the narrative is that it presents life as an ongoing affair with unexpected turns at every corner. This has the flavor of

storytelling for its own sake. The story gives very much an impression of having been dictated to his son Esteban (Rubiés 2000, p. 381). 'I go on with my story' and similar interventions suggest long sessions of storytelling. In contrast to most other European travel narratives, eagerly copying each other and plundering older narratives, de Coultre's life story is full of details little read elsewhere. Misspelt names of rulers and cities and inaccuracies suggest Jacques de Coultre was speaking from memory to his son while presumably also using notes, as the many attestations testify he presented to the Crown. The closest we come to de Coultre's mind is when he tells us he cannot stay at one place yet always wants to see something new. This sums up his boundless curiosity and charming passion.

Go-between in South India

From when his mother sent him in 1591 from Bruges on board a Spanish ship to his time in Madrid in the 1620s awaiting the final verdict of his case before the Council of Portugal and his death in 1640 and burial in the San Andrés Hospital of the Flemish in Madrid, Jacques de Coultre was a privileged subject of the Spanish-Habsburg monarch under whose protection he lived and to whom he was responsible. His upbringing in a family of burghers and artisans of Bruges had put him on that track. His personal achievement of being good with languages and as a clever and cunning go-between was an additional asset to consolidate his position and social status. Nevertheless, he always bumped into inconsistencies and that made him sharply aware of imminent social downgrading in adverse circumstances. Perhaps that was his motivation to resettle several times over during his lifespan. Structural discrimination was best avoided by starting all over again in a different place. This was also what diamond trade was all about. Throughout his career, gem trading secured him access to the highest rulers in any country. From these encounters he quickly learned that he was a mere pawn in their hands. It made him sensitive to labor relations.

Early modern global encounters implied the use of several languages. When he started off from Bruges and Vlissingen, Jacques de Coultre presumably only spoke Flemish/ Dutch. When he sailed from Lisbon to Goa in 1592, he spoke Portuguese nor Spanish. At the end of his life he wrote in Spanish advice for the king on policy matters in South and Southeast Asia. His autobiography was in Spanish with a vocabulary full of Portuguese twists that perhaps alluded to the conversations between father and son at the basis of the document. Portuguese was arguably his common language while in South Asia. Travelling on the Deccan plateau in South India, he learned Marathi, the language of communication in a region with numerous other languages. He also often relied on local interpreters as he travelled in so many countries and regions.

Jacques de Coultre lived in a time when merchants were still allowed to travel on their own to the diamond mines, a practice that disappeared later when the big companies had to use Indian go-betweens to get diamonds from the mines. Like other diamond traders in his days de Coultre was eagerly sought after by both Asian rulers and the Portuguese authorities in supplying them with diamonds, benzoin, and textiles. But, more than his contemporaries Jacques de Coultre wrote about how he explored all stages of the trade himself, the acquisition of rough stones from the mines, their transport and sale, selling gems to other traders and looking for new consumers. Early modern global trade networks hovered between official and

unofficial practice and encouraged individuals to cross borders, cultures and institutions (Antunes 2017). Jacques de Coutre fitted perfectly in this ecosystem. Yet, the dealings he had with the powerful also implied that he was in a position of inferiority to Portuguese authorities as to Indian and South Asian rulers and dependent on their goodwill and protection. It was the reverse side of the big gains that he made with the highly volatile diamond trade. Perhaps the fact that as a Flemish he was an outsider to the monarchs of the East as well as to the big empires of the West stimulated him to cross cultures at his ease.

De Coutre had learned to trade in rough precious stones from the Venetian Sequin Martinela in Melaka and others who had been in the business for a long time. The gem trade had been a motor of Eurasian exchange already before Vasco da Gama set sail to India. Italian, Jewish and Armenian traders used overland routes through Persia to connect to the rich gem trade networks in South and Southeast Asia. Yet, the tense political situation in the early years of the seventeenth century gave de Coutre's activities as a diamond merchant an extra twist. This was so in the 1590s, when Jacques de Coutre was in the front line of Portuguese-Dutch rivalry in Southeast Asia. In 1595 de Coutre was part of the embassy sent by the Portuguese Captain of Melaka, Francisco de Silva de Menezes, to the King of Siam to negotiate the release of Portuguese captives during the war of Siam with Cambodia in 1594 (Souza 1989). Two of these prisoners were the Flemish brothers Antonio and Miguel Ans. They were the sons of a Flemish man who had married in Melaka. The father and his sons had provided many services to king of Cambodia, Chey Chettha I, last of the Varman dynasty and the Lovek period of Cambodia, who had been defeated by the Siamese in 1594 and had fled the country. During the Portuguese embassy of 1595 to Siam, Antonio and Miguel Ans functioned as interpreters while they were also captives of Siamese king Somdet Phra Naresuan, the Great. Although de Coutre hoped to benefit from the luxury of the Ayutthaya court and get substantial benefit from royal gifts, nothing came of it. To the contrary, the Ans brothers apparently were loyal to king Naresuan and did not give in to attempts by de Coutre to get them on his side (Coutre 1640, book 1, chapters 7 to 11). Confrontations between the Portuguese and the Dutch in Manila and Patani in 1600-1602 alerted Jacques de Coutre that the trade in precious stones, bezoar and textiles was fraught with threats of captivity and worse. He decided in 1603 to take safer Goa as his base.

But also in South India political tensions ran high. In the 1590s the Mughals set their eyes on the Deccan (Alam, Subrahmanyam 2012, p. 162-203). By 1600 the Ahmadnagar Sultanate was subdued to Mughal rule. The frontier for the coming decades were two other Sultanates, Bijapur of the Adilshahis and Golconda of the Qutbshahis, both to the northeast of Goa. Precisely on the borders of these two Sultanates Jacques de Coutre acted as an indefatigable trader. He had close contacts with their rulers, but his relations with them always seemed precarious. Ibrahim Adil Shah II (r. 1580-1627) of Bijapur and Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (r. 1580-1612) and his nephew and son-in-law Muhammad Qutb Shah (1612-1625) ruled independently, although under Mughal threat. Their close connections with the Shi'i Safavid rulers of Persia, enemies of the Sunni Mughals, resulting in many Iranians at their courts, secured the Adilshahis and Qutbshahis of some autonomy. Jacques de Coutre alleged that Ibrahim Adi Shah II of Bijapur paid expensive gifts to the Mughal to soothe him (Alam, Subrahmanyam 2012, p. 193-194), but there was more political expediency in the tactics of the Sultan than mere flattery. As a result of Mughal pressure, Bijapur, and to a lesser extent, Golconda, befriended the Portuguese, while previously they had been rivals. This provided traders such as Jacques de Coutre with the excellent opportunity to undertake private trading

in gems and textiles in the Deccan. The profits were huge and de Coutre made his fortune. Jacques de Coutre happened to be the right man in the right place in this quarter century during which the Muslim Sultans of Bijapur and Golconda entertained accommodating relations with Portuguese. By the 1630s this was over. Goa declined, the Dutch East India Company settled in the region and Mughal expansion into the Deccan regained momentum. At that time, Jacques de Coutre was already in prison on the Iberian peninsula.

In 1604 and 1605 Jacques de Coutre spent much time in Bijapur. The farmers and ordinary people in the region were among the most destitute he had ever met, he noted, while the ruling elite were immensely wealthy (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 2). According to his own testimony, de Coutre was good friends with the Sultan and the crown prince, but on other occasions in his story the de Coutre derided Ibrahim Adil Shah as a perverted, arbitrary despot. Similar attitudes characterized his relationship to other rulers in the Deccan and beyond. Good personal relations were key to the survival of foreigners in the region, but were never guaranteed. Moreover, the region was multi-religious. The Sultanates of Bijapur and Golconda ruled over extensive populations of Hindu and Jain. Invariably, de Coutre rejected their rituals, temples, practitioners such as brahmins and yogis, and worship of cows and monkeys as superstitious (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 17). Nevertheless, he also indulged in extensive description of religious practice. More to the South large Christian communities added up to the diversity. Not surprisingly, local rulers tolerated Armenians, Jews, Italians, Portuguese, Flemish and Dutch in the region.

From 1604 de Coutre was very active in the gem trade and especially in the 1610s he became a successful and wealthy merchant. On his numerous journeys on the Deccan plateau and South India he found out that textiles and precious stones had created a country of innumerable riches. The cities were well built and protected and surpassed those of Flanders, he alleged (de Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 16). The contrast between the riches of the local rulers and the destitution of the local population continued to attract his attention. It had a faint echo of his own life story, or at least that is what he wanted to emphasize in the picaresque retelling of his life. Jacques de Coutre made several successful business deals, but on as many occasions he suffered great losses. A few times, he and his brother Joseph were totally ruined. Private trading was a risky business, especially in such goods as precious stones that always needed secrecy. The margins between official trade and mere smuggling were thin. In that sense, de Coutre was not different from what other gem merchants experienced. What is different in his case, is that he is so detailed about his dealings with local rulers and owners of diamond mines. Even more exceptional, and spectacularly, is that at the height of his experience as a gem trader he turned his attention to the diggers of the rough stones.

The first description of a diamond mine from Dutch East India Company officials dates from 1615. At that time Jacques de Coutre already had extensive experience of the diamond mines. He had visited several in 1611 and 1612, as will be explained more in detail in the next section. In 1616 he went on another tour, visiting no less than eight diamond mines in Bijapur, Golconda and other Sultanates in the Deccan on the edge of what remained of the Vijayanagara Empire (Coutre 1640 book 3, chapter 3). By then, his reputation was well established. A Jew from Istanbul who spoke excellent Spanish, joined him as de Coutre was by now more familiar with the region. Indeed, the Flemish diamond merchant amply demonstrated he was at home on the Deccan plateau and beyond in South India. There is no

trace in his *vida*, however, that he ever sided with the local population. He was not a man of cross-cultural understanding. What he offered was a micro-analysis of the stages of gem extraction, trade and sale because that was what he was doing. But in the process he discovered structural inequalities than ran deep in South Indian society.

Intersectionality in the Deccan diamond mines

Strikingly, de Coutre took note of those groups in early 17th century South Asian society that we now label the underpaid workers of globalization: food provisioners, miners, carriers. Discrimination of these people caught his attention. Their low social status, distressed physical appearance, extreme poverty, challenging manual labor, horrible labor conditions, reputation as thieves in the eyes of their employers, distressing social life and (in de Coutre's view) ill-defined religion concurred to single them out as discriminated against by the owners of the diamond mines and the rulers of the region. In particular in 1611 and 1612, after nearly twenty years of experience in South Asia, Jacques de Coutre provided an intelligent review of the working conditions of diamond miners in the Deccan plateau. No other European author before him had done so. French descriptions of the Indian diamond mines followed only half a century later (Subrahmanyam 2021), but were not as sophisticated as those of de Coutre (Hofmeester 2012). Most descriptions focused mainly if not exclusively on the trade in gems and not the mining (Ogden 2018, p. 243-255). William Methold, later deputy governor of the East India Company, was the first Englishman to visit the diamond mines of Golconda in 1622 and noted the miserable working conditions of the tens of thousands of workers digging rough stones in small pits for a very small wage while food was expensive, but added no further details (Methold 1707, p. 22-26). In striking contrast to this, Jacques de Coutre practiced mimesis. He went into the diamond mines to see for himself how the miners worked and even took up their tools to go alongside them. As a participating observer he explored in minute detail how diamond excavating was done. To report on this and as substantiated below, he relied on humor, indignation and cunningness to get a full understanding of the working process. In temporarily becoming an Indian he gained implicit understanding (Schwartz 1994) of the human toll of the gem culture. In 1611-12 the structural factors of intersectionality hit Jacques de Coutre in the face due to a mix of personal motivations and the tense political situation already referred to that actually allowed him to trade in the region under Portuguese protection. In descending in the Golconda diamond mines, Jacques de Coutre attested intersectionality.

During his many travels in Southeast Asia in his first decade in the East, Jacques de Coutre, as many authors before him, noted how closely related the opulence of despotic rulers was to the poverty of their population. Yet, unlike others, he applied an ethnological gaze. In the second year when he was in Asia, in 1594, in the Straits of Singapore, de Coutre singled out the orang laut fishers or *saletes*, as he called them, as precariously living (de Coutre 1640, book 1, chapter 3; Borschberg 2014, p. 39). He described them as very poor and living miserable lives with their families and house pets on tiny and narrow boats. They were very skillful fishers, the man sitting at the front with the harpoon and his wife and children peddling very fast. There were some very old men among them. De Coutre had met some who boasted to be a hundred years old. This is a typical European claim of longevity that emphasizes their

exceptional life. Moreover, the orang laut were crucial as guides for naval communication among the hundreds of islands in the Straits of Singapore, and few foreign observers had noted that before. Yet, little experienced, de Coutre also repeated prejudice. They were not to be trusted, de Coutre alleged, as their poisoned daggers or *krisses* were lethal. They came aboard ships in large numbers to attack and kill entire crews, under the pretense of selling fresh fish. Hesitating between blatant stereotype and a sensitivity to actually meet these people and see how they lived, de Coutre at least demonstrated an inclination to look at the poor. In this case, his observations on how their professional skills matched their precarious living conditions, suggested a discrimination of which these people would definitely suffer much later under colonial English rule.

In the early seventeenth century Jacques de Coutre was one among a good number of *frangi* (Franks) or Christians from the West to get acquainted with the Deccan plateau in South India. The exception is that he wrote about it. On 2 May 1603 Jacques de Coutre had returned to Goa and made diamond trading the core business of the brothers de Coutre. Jacques' older brother Joseph had settled in Goa since 1593 and always remained at home there while Jacques was on the road. Joseph made sure payments were made and transactions concluded, for the diamond trade from Goa had intersections to many parts of the then known world, including the Americas (Hofmeester 2013, Cunha 2001). Jacques travelled throughout the Deccan plateau. Apparently he felt very much at home there in this at that time disrupted region. To familiarize himself with the local people and customs he relied in first instance on an Armenian called Francisco Gonçalves, who acted as de Coutre's translator. Soon he learned Marathi. The Hindu principalities of Bijapur and Golconda, then under Muslim and Mogul influence and with Muslim rulers, were his two main destinations.

By the 1610s Jacques de Coutre had become accustomed to being transported in a palanquin (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 15). It served him as a mobile hotel. He even slept in it and travelled during the day. The Indian people that carried him provided him with rice and milk for food. But, one day, on arriving in a major city, the Indian carriers all ran away. This made him angry and he thought they were cowards. Moreover, in the city where he found himself, he did not speak the local language. He entered a food shop and gestured that he wanted to eat and paid the man a golden pagoda coin. He got food for two days. Then he encountered Gujarati gem merchants who spoke the Deccani language, Marathi. He told his name and they knew him. But, they found it hard to comprehend, as they saw him skinny and with worn out clothes. His reputation was that he was very rich. He persisted that he actually was Jacques de Coutre. The merchants provided him with food and sought a palanquin to bring him to the Ramallakota mines. They also tipped him that the Portuguese Fernão Jorge was waiting in the mines for de Coutre with lots of money to invest in the diamond trade. This little story shows Jacques de Coutre on the move. His *modus operandi* was to be alert to situations that switched easily and talk to everyone, rich and poor alike.

In the spring of 1611 Jacques de Coutre travelled from Goa to visit actual diamond mines (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapters 13, 14 and 15). Having gained sufficient experience of the region, its rulers and its commercial possibilities, he wanted to see with his own eyes how rough stones were extracted. Two Gujarat merchants showed him the road to the Ramallakota mines south of Kurnool (current state of Andhra Pradesh). The exact location of the mines de Coutre visited is hard to pin down as later in the seventeenth century new mines were also called Ramallakota (Winius 1988). De Coutre estimated that about fifty thousand people

labored in the Ramallakota mines (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 15). His description suggests a miner's existence of hardship that persisted but also changed in the course of the seventeenth century (Hofmeester 2012, p. 21-29). The miners were men, women and children, thus adding gender and age to poverty as structural factors of their existence. Each and every one of them was extremely poor, de Coutre noted. They hardly had any food. Families lived with their tools in tiny huts of two meters by two meters covered with straw. Poverty was so extreme there that it is hard to imagine, as de Coutre phrased it. The diamond workers went naked except for a loincloth. They looked dirty and were covered in mud from the mines below. They had no bed to sleep, but only a mat.

Yet, poverty making these men and women so vulnerable that they could not sustain themselves, as de Coutre alleged, was not an impossible road. The diamond workers had organized themselves in groups (*compagnies*), he noted (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 15). Some traders supported them in this by providing the workers with food and billy goats for offerings, on the condition that all the diamonds they extracted in a specific month were brought to the merchant. The trader was thus able to buy the stones cheaply and even subtracted the food and billygoats from the payment. This left quite a few workers in debt, but they survived on further loans from the merchant for the next month. De Coutre does not explicitly mention this, but the workers' companies seem to have functioned as a system of credit among the workers to be able to pay at least some sums back to the merchants and to guarantee that they were actually paid for the diamonds they found. In other words, the awareness of their discrimination had prompted solidarity among the workers. De Coutre provides no further context for this, nor does the literature on diamond trading in early modern India. It may be read as proof that de Coutre laid bare an accumulation of discriminations of social class and gender leading to social downgrading, but also to a desperate struggle of economic survival. He formulates the latter explicitly. 'They always live in miserable conditions and usually die during their work. No matter how many offers they offer to the devil, they are never rich and they do not enjoy from what they find' (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 15). Whether they had extracted diamonds or not, everyone had to pay half a pagoda each month to the owner of the mines, Gopal Raya, a nephew of the Hindu ruler of Vijayanagara, Venkatapati Deva Raya alias Venkati II. The reference to the devil alludes to a factor of discrimination that de Coutre formulated in prejudicial terms about Hindu religion, but it might also reflect his skepticism about such religious practice.

The Ramallakota mines were situated in Hindu territories of which, according to de Coutre, the population and their rulers were all bad and worse than the Muslims. This was a reminder that the Sultanates Bijapur of the Adilshahis and Golconda of the Qutbshahis ruled over mixed religious populations and were on a frontier with Hindu and Jain territories (de Coutre never distinguishes religious practices, only refers to heathens and Moors or Muslims). Yet, he explicitly linked religious ritual to digging practices in his description of the Ramallakota mines (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 15). When starting to dig in the ground, the workers first built a platform with a fence and a small temple on it with inside a marble block as statue that they smear with saffron. Once their worship was done they started digging with iron instruments. Wet earth was piled and formed a small hill, the height of a man. The earth was spread out to dry on the platform. Then seven or eight men sat on the platform. Each took a square hard stone the size of the palm of a hand and pulverized it to small pieces. They then carried the pieces in baskets to the edge of the platform and threw them on the ground. The wind took away the dust, so that only a small pile of little stones remained. In these the seven

men searched for diamonds and laid these apart. Usually they found only small stones. This is a typical description of digging practices in Southern India as noted by William Methold or in the early fifteenth century by Niccolò de' Conti (Poggio Bracciolini 2004, p. 156-157). De Coutre added many more details and his perception that the workers perceived their plight as endless. They sometimes worked for two or three months without finding any diamond. Yet, all the time they spied on each other to see if someone hid a big gem that ought to be given to the owner of the mine. Their exploitation was as certain as their solidarity among each other was feeble. Notwithstanding the social control among each other, the sifting miners did sell diamonds to strangers for half the price. On a very rainy day a mine collapsed and 150 people got killed. The next morning the crying in the village over this disaster 'engulfed the world' (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 15).

Although the narrative suggests emotional attachment Jacques de Coutre was not driven by sensitivity to discrimination out of solidarity or sympathy with the workers. The mere mechanics of social downgrading fascinated him. His views on local religion as yet another accumulating factor of discrimination endorse this. For de Coutre, economic hardship and barbarous religious custom were two sides of the same coin. For instance, de Coutre's economic explanation of the low wages of the diamond diggers is immediately followed by the comment in his autobiography that the region swarmed with magicians and that nearly everyone was a magician (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 15). He had witnessed four of them, elderly men, entering a house, singing and dancing, drawing circles and triangles on the floor with betel and betel nut in the center. This made the people present ecstatic and under the influence of the devil, as de Coutre saw it. He does not explicitly say that such behavior was a trap of poverty, but the juxtaposition in his autobiography of their low wages and the power of magicians suggested persistent structural dominance over them. On the other hand, Jacques de Coutre added to the prejudicial, exotic views of the *frangi* in picturing the Deccan workers as under the influence of magicians. In another one of his picaresque asides, in the same chapter, he tells a story of how a magician got him in his power. He wanted to eat and taste a tender and young billy goat and left the village in search of one among a large herd of goats. This one had white and black spots whereas all the other goats were simply black. He bought the albino version of the billy goat and took it home to the house where he then lived in the village of the diamond diggers. In the streets everyone laughed at him carrying the young billy goat in his arms. His servants killed, skinned and roasted the billy goat, but when it came on the table he saw that it was huge. It tasted horrible and he had it thrown on the dung heap. The magician had blinded me, de Coutre concluded. As a participant observer, yet tenaciously stereotyping Jacques de Coutre not only added barbarous religion to class and gender as factors of discrimination explaining the extreme poverty of the workers, but also demonstrated that strangers like him were not to take up their cause, but, to the contrary, with their stereotyped, Orientalizing views merely confirmed the fate of the workers.

In 1612 de Coutre visited the diamond mines of Poli, Gostoal and Marmur in Golconda, near Kollur. It is hard to attest where these were situated exactly. Poli was the eldest diamond mine of Vijayanagar. There were no large diamonds to be found in Poli, only small stones that were set in hard rock. This made the Bruggeling curious (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 16). From the diggers he bought some 160 stones that contained small diamonds and sent these to his brother Joseph in Goa with the message to expediate these further to their friends in Europe. He prided himself he was the first European to notice how the extraction of such small stones happened. To experience it for himself, he followed the diamond workers underground. Only

clothed in white pants and with a bare upper body he followed a digger who carried a lamp. They walked a distance of two musket shots underground along a very narrow and bumpy path where a man could barely pass. Finally, they entered an underground gallery that could contain a thousand people. The workers had carved the cave with their bare hands. Many people were at work with the light of lamps and used iron tools. They cut in the stone. The cave was steaming hot. Water dripped from the rock. Jacques de Coultre came out of this mine entirely soaked and full of clay, exactly like the diamond workers. This testimony of his personal visit endorses the view of de Coultre as an adventurous and enterprising man. In the cave he bought a 30-carat stone from a worker. But the owner of the mine found out and de Coultre had to return the stone. Yet, he also got his money back. That was taken from the poor worker, who got cane strokes until he was left for death. So, although showing an interest in the plight of the workers, at the end of the day Jacques de Coultre was the privileged merchant who only noted the discrimination but in no way suffered from it. To the contrary, the worker of whom he had bought the 30-carat stone, suffered abuse because of de Coultre's cunning deal and he was not shy to tell it outright.

During his visits to the Ramallakota mines in 1616 de Coultre employed 25 natives to carry his goods. Their number is surprising, but he insisted the freight was extensive and consisted of gold, pearls and emeralds. De Coultre hired them as acknowledged professionals as everyone did. In this region of much political rivalry their trade was to carry precious stones, gold and pearls from one state to another, without external witnesses and without knowing who they exactly were. 'They are so poor that they hardly have a rag to cover themselves. As to reliability, they are an example to the entire world' (Coultre 1640, book 3, chapter 3). In joining these two observations, de Coultre demonstrated that he understood very well how professional status was acquired. In this case their poor appearance was precisely the reason that they were trusted by carriers, even by the richest people in India. In other words, de Coultre named the exploitation of unnamed transport workers but in one breath also glorified it as a ruse. Yet again, he wanted to find out himself. First he explained their modus operandi. If they feared an encounter with thieves they buried their goods next to the road. Because the thieves saw people in the poorest clothing they did not give them any attention. And if they risked to be betrayed as diamond transport workers, according to de Coultre, they preferred to be killed over giving away the location of the goods they have hidden. Carriers always operated in large groups, so that there was always someone to finish the job. The ambiguity of de Coultre's comments is striking. He turned their exploitation into suggestions of self-sacrifice underpinning their absolute loyalty to those who employed them. Although undoubtedly keeping an eye on his self-interest and indulging in some exotic phantasy about loyalty of the poor, de Coultre arguably also displayed a sensitivity to the work ethic of low class workers. Firsthand experience confirmed for him the thorny issue of trust. To carry his large amount of diamonds and precious good, Jacques de Coultre sent the 25 carriers he had hired two days in advance of him to a village where he would meet them. He did this because all suspected that in the woods where they would pass thieves were hiding and waited for them. When he reached that village, however, he did not find his carriers. He feared they had been killed. But he found them in the next city. Nothing was missing from his precious luggage. They had taken an entirely different road. For Jacques de Coultre this was the best evidence that these very poor transport workers did an excellent job and he continued to employ them and was happy that they assisted him in every way. In other words, de Coultre endorsed the dangers the carriers faced as part of their working conditions.

Conclusion

Jacques de Coutre found his second home on the Deccan plateau rather than in Goa. As the years passed, dealings with local rulers and local workers attracted him more than Portuguese colonial society. We know next to nothing about his closest family, except that his wife must have died quite early and that he had at least one son, Esteban. His brother Joseph in Goa was his main link to the colony on the coast. In the 1610s Jacques preferred the Indian cities in the interior and countryside. As a privileged diamond trader de Coutre's curiosity extended to the diamond diggers, their families and diamond transport workers. Ridiculing their religion he was not sensitive of their culture nor, presumably of their misery. What he did comment upon in some detail was the accumulation of discrimination factors that put these workers at the bottom of Indian society in the Deccan. Perhaps the fact that as a trader he was always at the whims of rulers buying or refusing to buy diamonds explains some of his analytical views. As a Flemish in Portuguese-Indian society, he worked in the interstices of overlapping empires in the region and that vulnerability may have made him sensitive to potential social downgrading. After all, there were not that many Flemish in Asia (Everaert 2000). His deportation to Madrid and Lisbon in 1623, against which he had fought for a very long time, underlined his unstable position as a foreigner.

De Coutre himself had two explanations for the fragile social position of the diamond diggers. The first one is economic. 'Such hard work of these people to extract diamonds can only be paid for in the East', de Coutre explained, 'where the cost of living and services are very cheap. A mine worker can live on a daily allowance of eight maravedi and even then he can live well according to his position in society, which he would not be able to do in Spain with six real' (Coutre 1640, book 2, chapter 15; the maravedi was the thirty-fourth part of a real, both accounting units in use in Spain). Such economic reasoning about cutting wage costs suggests de Coutre was not much concerned with social inequality. Nevertheless, having descended in the horribly hot diamond mines himself, it struck him that the diamond workers were exploited and he investigated the different dimensions of this. His second explanation is intimately tied to this. De Coutre assessed religious ritual among them as barbarous. In his Christian vocabulary the devil misled them. To him this explained the vulnerability of the workers. On the other hand, throughout his memoir he acknowledged the intermingling of factors carrying the risk of social downgrading. Amidst all this complexity of early seventeenth century India, the diamond diggers and diamonds transport workers struck him as the lowest class at the intersection of precarious identities of class, gender, bodily appearance and religion.

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