

‘Kind words from a distant friend
are the most precious of all gifts’:
manifesting colonial power under
the guise of ‘gift’, from India to Iraq

*NESMA
SHUBBER*

Beyond mere expressions of sentimentality or altruism, gifts are mechanisms of exchange providing sociological and anthropological insights into systems of power and governance, as well as highlighting the role that material culture may play in manifesting that power. Intercultural gifts exchanged under colonial rule were invested with financial, political and cultural significance. This article analyses two colonial artefacts that represent the act of gifting from either side of this hierarchical divide: an image of gift-giving between an Indian Maharajah and Queen Victoria (c. 1884-90) and a gold watch given by a British General to an Iraqi tribal leader in 1922. Analysing the artefacts in conjunction permits an exploration of the relationship between the roles of giver/receiver and those of the coloniser/colonised.



Figure 1. Attributed to Madho Prasad, *Queen Victoria is presented with a book*, c. 1884-90, hand-coloured albumen print, 16.6 x 23.1 cm. RCIN 2907350, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021

'Impossible' is the word that best describes the gift. This is according to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004), for whom '[a] gift must not be bound, in its purity, nor even binding, obligatory or obliging'.¹ The philosophical paradox at the centre of this assessment is predicated upon the assertion that gift-giving is inevitably motivated by personal gain and never unconditional. Accordingly, gifts form part of a cyclical chain of exchange galvanised by expectation or indebtedness. This article builds upon this theory by analysing two artefacts that illustrate the gift as a mechanism of manipulation in opposing ways, yet with the same outcome: the construction of empire through material manifestations of colonial power.

The first artefact is a hand-painted albumen print (c. 1884–90) (Figure 1), attributed to the Indian artist Madho Prasad, which depicts Queen Victoria (1819 – 1901) receiving the gift of a bound photo album from the Maharajah of Benares (1855 – 1931). The Queen is depicted in a black dress with white trim, a symbol of her widowhood and the prolonged mourning she observed after the passing of her husband Prince Albert in 1861 until her own death forty years later. In her seated pose, the inky, voluminous skirt drapes over her bent knees and chair and, in conjunction with the cascading white chiffon veil, configures the

Queen into a visually striking monochromatic pyramid. This figural geometry is echoed through the body of the Maharajah, whose outstretched arms also create a pyramidal shape, reinforced by the slight tilt of his head and upper body, which in turn causes his *sherwani* to slope diagonally outwards and downwards. The print is striking in the simplicity and symmetry of its composition: in addition to the triangular echoes, each of the two figures occupies one side of the rectangular image and each is framed to one side, on the outer edge, by a singular, cropped vertical shape in the form of an item of domestic decor. Queen Victoria, seated at the left of the image, is flanked by a red curtain, while the Maharajah of Benares appears beside a fluted columnar plinth topped by a decorative urn. In this tableau, the curtain and the column serve to bracket the figures within the intimacy of an interior setting, yet at the compositional centre of the image there is nothing but blank wall, so that between the giver and the receiver there is a gulf of emptiness.

Void of objects, figures or decorative embellishment, the space at the centre of the image is instead filled with dark blotches and faint green swirls that give abstract substance to absence, imbuing the air with a sense of static. The blotches and swirls that define the surface of the image here expose its very medium; they expose

the craft of photography and the art of painting and serve as evidence of the image as artefact. This heralding of the medium, most specifically in the composite nature of the hand-painted albumen print, is exacerbated through the treatment of colour. For the Maharajah, it is illustrated through the vibrancy of his gold embroidery, his striking purple turban and his bright emerald sleeve studs. For Queen Victoria, it is in the pop of pastel blue through her sash, the luminous green of her chair, the rubies adorning her gold jewellery and the exaggerated flush of blush across her cheeks. The saturated tones of these chromatic elements serve as testimony of artistic manipulation and of photography as art. There is a synergy here between the gift represented in the image, the Maharajah's photo album, and the photographic representation itself: photography as noun constructed by photography as verb.

There is another double meaning embedded within the image: the central static is both literally an inanimate, inanimate body of atmospheric particles and also, metaphorically, a quiet quiescence that reflects the role of 'giver' ascribed to the gift-presenting Maharajah. The albumen print depicting the gift exchange scene serves as evidence of a ritual that structured the relationship between

Empress of India and Indian. Here, the roles of giver and receiver illuminate a hierarchical power play between the two figures. According to the visual syntax of the scene, the Queen-as-recipient is the superior, depicted in repose and with a facial expression of indifference. The Maharajah, the giver, is the subordinate.² The asymmetry of this dynamic therefore fixes the role of giver to that of colonised and receiver to coloniser, prompting the assertion that the act of giving is one of subjection. Such fixity of roles, however, is not omnipresent beyond this particular frame; other instances of colonial gift exchanges, whereby the roles of giver/colonised and receiver/coloniser are subverted, demonstrate that the act of giving is not always one of subjection. A gift exchange between the British General Sir James Aylmer Lowthorpe Haldane (1862 – 1950) (Figure 5) and an Iraqi Arab tribal leader, Sayyid Muhsin Abu Tabikh (1876 – 1961) (Figure 6), is an example of one such instance. Haldane became the General Officer Commanding Mesopotamia from 1920 until 1922. During this time, he oversaw the suppression of the 1920 Iraqi Revolt, led by a group of southern notables including Abu Tabikh. In quashing the revolt, the British government spent forty million pounds – more than double their annual budget for affairs in Iraq – and lost five hundred soldiers,³ which –

² L. V. Aragon, 'Twisting the Gift: Translating Precolonial into Colonial Exchanges in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia', *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1996, p. 50.

³ A. Vinogradov, 'The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1972), pp. 138–139.

¹ Jacques Derrida quoted in Charles Champetier, 'PHILOSOPHY OF THE GIFT: Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger', *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2001), 15 – 22, p. 15

much like the aftermath of the Indian Uprising of 1857, whereby violence effected policy change within that colony – precipitated an end to direct British rule in the newly-named Iraq.⁴

The gift from General Haldane, given in 1922, is an eighteen-carat gold double hunter pocket watch (Figure 2), handmade in Switzerland around 1897–99 by master watchmaker brothers Ditisheim. Upon opening the back case, their brand name ‘Volta’ can be seen stamped into the *cuvette* alongside eight decorative coins (Figure 3). The top case hinges open to reveal a white clock face with black Arabic numerals and two additional miniature dials. As a gift, the pocket watch is both the medium and the message. With its notable material expense and engineering ingenuity, the pocket watch was imbued with symbolism, representing modernity through inventiveness and refinement through skill. In deploying this symbolism, portable personal timepieces of this era expose a society in which material objects could play a part in the construction of a particular social identity. The rise in popularity of the pocket watch in England from the seventeenth century onwards established the culture of timekeeping

itself as ‘a major stimulus to the individualism which was an ever more salient aspect of Western civilisation’.⁵ The pocket watch was part of the tangible construction of these ‘individualist’ social identities, a visible performance of status to be worn on the body and exhibited at each reading of the time. The pocket-watch-as-gift compounds this performative element with the fostering of interpersonal relationships, which were mediated through the gift exchange. Writing about imperial gifts in Atlantic Africa in the nineteenth century, Julia Binter correspondingly notes the integral role played by material goods, and consequently gifts, in ‘cosmopolitan self-fashioning’⁶ and how the ‘unpredictable, fluctuating and competitive world of individual self-creation’ provided fertile ground for mediating colonial exploits through gift-giving.⁷

The gift of the gold pocket watch features in General Haldane’s memoir, *A Soldier’s Saga* (1948), involving a different recipient, not Abu Tabikh, which reveals that General Haldane used the device of gold-watch-as-gift on more than one occasion. According to the account, the British General had once pardoned a southern sheikh,

⁴ The official name of the country was changed from ‘Mesopotamia’ to ‘Iraq’ with the enthroning of the British-sanctioned monarch, King Faysal, on 23 August 1921.

⁵ David Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Belknap Press, 2000), pp. 89.

⁶ Julia T.S. Binter, ‘Becoming Imperial: the Politicisation of the Gift in Atlantic Africa.’, in *Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond*, edited by Philipp Schorch et al. (London: UCL Press, 2020), 53–71, p. 62.

⁷ Karin Barber quoted in Binter, p. 62.



Figure 2. Ditisheim, Volta double hunter pocket watch, photographed from two angles, c. 1897–99, 18 ct. gold, 6cm diameter. Photograph author’s own.

Abdul Wahid, from the death penalty and so, at a later meeting of the two men, in 1922, Haldane suggests to the Iraqi that ‘he would doubtless like to celebrate the occasion of our meeting by making some return for what I had done.’⁸ Haldane’s recounting of the narrative continues:

Before I left Iraq it came to my knowledge that the debt had been paid. I thereupon directed [an associate] to purchase, by means of a fund at my disposal, a gold repeater watch and have engraved inside it in Arabic, “A man of his word,” and in English characters by whom the gift was made.

The gift to Abdul Wahid is therefore directly linked to the Iraqi’s compliance; the watch served to reward a reward. As Haldane’s anecdote unfolds further, he notes that the sheikh accepted the watch ‘in the customary unemotional way of Easterns’ – a description that is reminiscent of Queen Victoria’s passive expression when receiving the Maharajah’s gift in the albumen print. It is also a description ‘based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and [...] “the Occident”’, a distinction that forms the basis of Edward Said’s second definition of Orientalism.⁹

The entanglement of selfhood, ‘othering’ and power (re)structuring inherent to the enactment of ‘colonial encroachment’¹⁰ is represented through the gift in the series of gestures, prejudices and meanings embedded within it.

General Haldane’s commission of the engraving within the pocket watch is integral to this discussion, most notably through its bilingualism and the inclusion of his own name on the artefact. Tied to the notion that material objects were integral to the creation of self-fashioned social identities is the idea that gifts become ‘containers for the being of the donor who gives a portion of that being to the recipient’,¹¹ which the personal engraving intrinsically expresses verbatim. According to Haldane, Abdul Wahid’s ‘eyes glistened with pride and pleasure as he deciphered the inscription’.¹² While the Arabic note serves to flatter the receiver in his own language, the English note serves as testament to the generosity of the giver. The engraving literally and indelibly marks General Haldane as the benefactor within a territorial act of giving, upholding Derrida’s philosophical assertion that: ‘The simple consciousness of the gift right

away sends itself back the gratifying image of goodness or generosity, of the giving-being [...] in a sort of auto-recognition, self-approval, and narcissistic gratitude.’¹³

By commemorating the act of giving within the gift itself, the Maharajah of Benares similarly partakes in this act of auto-recognition within the Queen Victoria albumen print. For Abu Tabikh, General Haldane’s engraving unmistakably represented this iconography of ‘narcissism’: according to the Iraqi’s son, Jamil, his gift bore a similar engraving to Abdul Wahid’s, and the distinct patch of scratched surface inside the front case of Abu Tabikh’s watch (Figure 4) – an insular part of its anatomy that is unlikely to suffer such precise, substantial damage through wear and tear alone – represents the deliberate effacement of the engraving and General Haldane’s name.¹⁴ In its original state, it is also said to have read ‘A noble fighter’, a reference to Abu Tabikh’s presence on the battlefield during the Revolt of 1920, and earlier at another battle against the British at Shu’ayba in 1915.¹⁵

On the one hand, the gifting of the pocket watch may be seen as a microcosmic performance in the

greater ceremony of peace-making; on the other, it may be argued that it forms part of a power play in which the exchange intrinsically casts giver and receiver into parallel roles of ‘meritorious benefactor’¹⁶ and blessed recipient. This raises further questions on the intent of the gesture, such as to what extent is the gift-giving based on reciprocity? Haldane’s account of the exchange with Abdul Wahid continues:

A little later [Abdul Wahid] [...] intimated that he wished, as was the custom, to make me a return gift, and drew from a finger a silver ring set with a large turquoise which he urged me to accept. I thanked him, but shook my head, saying that on such an occasion I preferred not to follow the usual custom of the East and accept a return gift.

In his seminal book *The Gift* (1925), the French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1872 – 1950) writes extensively about ‘the cycle of obligations’ that the gift ‘triggers’: ‘the gift would always be the anticipation of the counter-gift, a deferred expectation of restitution, which is the ruse of calculating reason.’¹⁷ In refusing the return gift from Abdul Wahid, General Haldane not only claims the final say in this sequence of indebteding acts (the cycle of obligations), but also, he does this by

8 J. Aylmer Lowthorpe Haldane, *A Soldier’s Saga: the autobiography of General Sir Aylmer Haldane* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1948), p. 385.

9 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 3.

10 Binter, p. 62.

11 John. F. Sherry Jr., ‘Gift Giving in Anthropological Perspective’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1983), p. 161.

12 Haldane, p. 385.

13 Derrida quoted in Champetier, p. 15.

14 Author’s interview with Jamil Abu Tabikh, 19 February 2021.

15 Rutledge, p. 132.

16 Caroline Hughes, ‘The Politics of Gifts: Tradition and Regimentation in Contemporary Cambodia’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2006), p. 470.

17 Champetier, p. 6–7.



Figure 3. (above) cuvette showing Volta brand name; Figure 4.(below) inside front case showing scratched surface/effaced engraving. Photographs author's own.

dictating the rules of the gift exchange according to his preference. By suspending the cycle of this exchange after the presentation of the pocket watch, General Haldane monopolises the tangible act of gifting indefinitely; an act that, in this instance, invests the giver with hierarchical superiority. Shunning the offer of the turquoise and silver ring – contrary to local custom – is further assertion of such hierarchical superiority as it ‘twist[s] the reciprocal activity of [the] gift exchange such that only the European [is] capable of giving anything desirable that could be categorised as a gift.’¹⁸ This not only reinforces the established colonial binary view of English civilisation versus Arab primitiveness (galvanised by the ideology of the ‘civilising mission’ and reiterated by the pocket watch as a symbol of modernity), but it also shows that General Haldane is not interested in reciprocity represented by material goods. Declining the ring does not negate Haldane’s expectation for a return gift; it merely suggests that what is sought after is both intangible and more valuable: loyalty. The guise of gift does not belie the strategy to bribe, which was a strategy implemented more candidly before the Revolt of 1920: in April 1917 British officials, including Sir Percy Cox and Miss Gertrude Bell, had offered

numerous Iraqi notables “presents” [...] in the form of large sums of Indian rupees’.¹⁹ Abu Tabikh, being one of the many sheikhs and *sada*²⁰ to receive such an offer, declined the money. At a subsequent meeting with Miss Bell, in May 1917 at her office in Baghdad, Abu Tabikh noted that she had become ‘angry’ with his non-collusion, eliciting the following note of advice from him: ‘if you English want to consider me a friend, as his Excellency the Civil Commissioner put it in his letter, I tell you, a friendship only of individuals will not suffice: instead you must be friends with all the Iraqi people.’²¹

The stance of declining gifts from a colonial counterpart was similarly taken by Queen Victoria in 1861. After the dissolution of the East India Company, and with the Crown assuming control of the colony, the Queen received numerous presents from her Indian subjects in the form of dresses, shawls, furniture and other ornate artefacts, prompting her to write to Governor-General Lord Canning with a new policy on gifts: ‘Her majesty ... desires it to be understood by your Political Officers that it will be their duty to discourage such manifestations of loyalty in the part of the princes and chiefs of

¹⁸ Aragon, p. 50.

¹⁹ Rutledge, p. 132.

²⁰ The Arabic word ‘sada’ is the plural of ‘sayyid’, an honorific title denoting male descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. ‘Master’ or ‘lord’ are the closest English equivalents.

²¹ Muhsin Abu Tabikh quoted in *Memoirs of Sayyid Muhsin Abu Tabikh, 1910–1960: Fifty Years of Iraq’s Modern Political History*, Jamil Abu Tabikh (ed.) (Beirut: Mu’saa al-‘Arabiyya, 2001), p. 52.

India.’²² Elaborating this point, the Queen demanded the dispensation ‘of anything beyond verbal expressions of loyalty’, encouraging letters from her subjects instead, from which she would ‘not feel less sensible of the sincerity of the sentiment of devotion to the Throne’. She expressed this policy in another letter to the Maharajah of Jammu and Kashmir, Ranbir Singh, with a singular diplomatic statement: ‘Kind words from a distant friend are the most precious of all gifts.’²³

As with the case of the silver and turquoise ring, Queen Victoria’s declining of material gifts equates to a suspension within the tripartite cycle of giving, receiving and returning. It is a move that indicates that ‘higher status individuals are the ones better able to define the nature of the exchange’.²⁴ In defining this nature similarly, both the Queen and the General also demonstrate that negation of the gift, or declining to receive material goods, is as equally power-sensitive and power-generating as any attempt to gift can seek to be. This leads to the conclusion that it is not the material artefact itself that wields the power within the exchange – it is within the act of giving or receiving, under the guise of gift, that the potential for dominion can be executed.

By substituting material goods for ‘verbal expressions’ or ‘kind words’, Queen Victoria – and later General Haldane – converts ‘manifestations of loyalty’ into manifestations of power. After refusing the reciprocal gift of the ring, General Haldane’s encounter with Abdul Wahid reaches its conclusion:

This seemed to distress him, and he wailed in Arabic, “But you will forget me!” [...] I replied that that need cause him no concern, for to forget him after the trouble he had given earlier would be impossible [...] So the scene ended as he broke into laughter at my words, and before we parted he promised never again to give the British trouble. Indeed, he went further, and undertook that if at any time we were threatened by a disturbance he would come to whoever succeeded me as Commander-in-Chief and give him warning.²⁵

The gift-giving scene culminates in Haldane winning over the Sheikh’s allegiance. A transaction has taken place: a gold watch in exchange for loyalty. It is a transaction that exposes the myth that the General neither requires nor desires anything in return for the ‘gift’. The account is therefore illuminating as it reveals the mechanism of intent and the camouflaged reciprocity at the heart of the colonial gift exchange.

²² Letter from Queen Victoria to Lord Canning (1861), quoted in Emily Hannam, ‘Queen Victoria and the Raj: Gifts for the Queen Empress’ in *Eastern Encounters: Four Centuries of Paintings and Manuscripts from the Indian Subcontinent* (London: Royal Collection Trust, 2018).
<<https://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/publications/eastern-encounters/chapter-3>> [accessed February 2021]

²³ Letter from Queen Victoria to the Maharajah of Kashmir, quoted in Hannam.

²⁴ Aragon, p. 51.

²⁵ Haldane, pp. 385–6.



Figure 5. (left) Bassano Ltd, General Sir J. Aylmer L. Haldane, whole-plate glass negative, 19 May 1922.

© National Portrait Gallery, London;

Figure 6. (right) Photographer unknown, Sayyid Muhsin Abu Tabikh, c. 1954. Photograph courtesy of Jamil Abu Tabikh.

In the case of General Haldane and Abu Tabikh, two men of influence on either side of the coloniser/colonised divide, the pocket watch as an object was conceived of as a token of political and social leverage, while the act of its exchange functioned as a strategic manoeuvre representing the cultural dynamics of geopolitical domination. The inscription inside the front case reinforces 'the processual notion of contract' enacted by the gift through its very literal reminder of the roles of giver and receiver, which in turn are bound to the roles of coloniser and colonised; roles that are ordained through the exchange.²⁶

Both the albumen print and the pocket watch represent receiving and giving from different sides of the coloniser/colonised divide, but both exchanges illustrate the same point. Instead of fixed roles according to giver/receiver, the hierarchy of the power exchange takes place between coloniser and colonised, and in this dynamic it is the coloniser who possesses the power. These artefacts are not only evidence of the exchange of goods between coloniser and colonised, but also illustrations of the significance that these exchanges held in enacting dominion and how they played into a network of political strategy. As such, they exist as pieces of evidence citing the role material artefacts played in colonial governance. They suggest that empire was carved out not only

through military prowess, but also through an intricate nexus of personal relationships forged both along and against traditional political, martial and racial lines. The colonial agent emerges as an individual who was immersed in an exchange of signifying artefacts, which traversed imperially constructed divisions; public and private, war and peace, giver and receiver, coloniser and colonised. In the contexts of both Queen Victoria and the Maharajah of Benares, and General Haldane and Abu Tabikh, the giving and the receiving become strategic exchanges in which gifts facilitated the forging of bonds between giver and receiver, and sought to manoeuvre these relationships into polarising state of subjugation.

Both the albumen print and the pocket watch serve as examples of the creation, or preservation, of empire through the material object. As such, they enrich our understanding of the ways in which the British conceptualised and exercised power in the colonies. Assessing these artefacts as agents in shaping the environment in which they operated offers a timely insight into the complexity of British overseas relations and, more specifically, the significance of colonial relationships in a post-colonial world.

²⁶ Binter, p. 62.