

"The Shroff" by Michael E. Marotta

In Arabic lands, the shroff was a money-changer, a banker. Into the 20th century, the shroff was also known to Europeans who traded in China and India. According to The Anglo-Indian Dictionary.....

by Yule and Jobson, the word shroff referred to "the experts who are employed by banks and mercantile firms to check the quality of the dollars." The word shroff also meant the shroff's commission, his fee for testing coins.

In Hebrew, the word appears in the Biblical book of Malachi as soref. It says, "He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; and he shall purify the sons of Levi." In modern Arabic, the word "sherif" has come to refer to

direct descendents of Mohammed through his daughter, Fatima. However, wealthy people often backdate their lineage, and this is a claim shared as well by those who lead the Shiites and Druse.

Some numismatists cite shroff as the origin for the word "chop," the banker's marks found on large silver coins that circulated in Chinese finance. Chopmarks are often found on American Trade Dollars (1873-1878), as well as Spanish 8-reales, and other coins. Another etymology for that word points to the Chinese "chop" meaning "fast" or "quick" as in "chopsticks." It is true that chopmarks are seldom true Chinese characters but rather a shorthand. A third origin is in the Hindi word "chap" meaning a stamp, seal, or brand. Ultimately, that word may itself be a dialect pronunciation of "shroff."

Like many foreign words adopted into English, there are variations in spelling including sharif and sheriff. Sharif is the stage name of Michael Sharoub, known as Omar Sharif, the star of the movie Dr. Zhivago. Other variants include sherif and sheriff. (The latter is not related to the name of the English and American county law officer, which comes from shire-reeve.) Shroff also appears as xeraf.

Interestingly, this led to the plural xerafin, meaning the coins of the xeraf or shroff. The word became a pun, since the xerafin or serafine was also the name of "angel" gold coins of Portugal's Indian colonies. These xerafine were known to and happily welcomed by colonial American merchants.

In Portuguese commerce of the colonial days, the "xaraffo" was a customs officer whose job it was to "see to the money." Another reference speaks of "... very wealthy carafos who change money." The fee, the shroff or shroffage, appears in a colonial report from Goa, the Portuguese colony in India, in 1585. "This present year, because only two ships came to Goa, the reales have sold at 12 per cent of Xarafaggio (shroffage), as this commission is called from the word Xaraffo, which is the title of the banker."

In a 1750 report to the home office of the East India Company, a merchant in Madras wrote: "...the Irruption of the Morattoes into Carnatica, was another event that brought several eminent Shroffs and wealthy Merchants into our Town..." The word appeared in many such letters through the 1800s. In an 1878 digest: "Shroffing schools are common in Canton, where teachers of the art keep bad dollars for the purpose of exercising their pupils; and several works on the subject have been published there, with numerous illustrations of dollars and other foreign coins, the methods of scooping out silver and filling up with copper or lead, comparisons between genuine and counterfeit dollars, the difference between native and foreign milling, etc., etc."

During the American colonial era new money and new commodities would not have been transported but for the distant attractive force of the shroffs. Chili, tomatos, potatoes, and tobacco moved both East and West. According to David Ludden of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Arts and Sciences: "Europeans in the Indian Ocean system relied on this system and on the value of money in circulation -- even as they introduced more precious metals from their new

world territories -- from which the Spanish imported huge quantities of silver into China via the Philippines, and from which money coming to Spain and Portugal then travelled east along the old routes of trade from the western Mediterranean through the Ottoman territories into the Asian trading system."

Americans who smoke tobacco may recall that Camel cigarettes advertise their fine Turkish tobacco. Tobacco, of course, did not originate in Turkey, any more than tomato sauce and noodles originated in Italy. We see England as the most powerful force in the global commerce of the American colonial period. England pulled the tides of our shipping, but the true course of our commerce was defined by the distant yet powerful attraction of the shroffs.

This is supported by Bill Swoger's June 23, 1997, Coin World article about the circulation of gold "chequins" in colonial America. The chequin (sekkah in Arabic) was first a Venetian coin in the 1200s. Trade with Arabs introduced the coin into their currencies. The coin was well-known in the 1600s. It appears in Ben Johnson's play Volpone (1606): "... every word your worship but lets fall is a chequin." According to Swoger, for most of the 17th century, these gold coins came to America along with the slave trade and as a result of our easy virtue with pirates. They are known to have circulated in New York and Virginia. They are cited as colonial currencies in Sylvester Crosby's 1875 book, The Early Coins of America.

It is important to note that two relevant references do not cite this Arabian money. America's Foreign Coins by Schilke and Solomon and Money and Exchange in Europe and America 1600-1775 by John M. McCusker are both mute. It might be that these omissions come from eurocentricism. Of course, Schilke and Solomon focus specifically on the Federal period 1793-1857 and on the coins that had legal tender status. Swoger's underlying thesis is that the chequin was a coin of illicit trade. Even though slavery was legal, the procedure was supposed to be "rum for molasses for slaves" rather than the purchase of American goods by ships of foreign flags via gold coins of heathen pirates. Yet, undeniably, such trade took place.

Shroffs were clearing houses for the purchase, transport, and sale of imports and exports. For over 300 years, European merchants of all nationalities doing business in southern Asia even looked to local shroffs to provide venture capital. By 1850, the British world economy based on the industrial revolution and laissez faire economics ultimately eclipsed the Asian networks of shroffs in China, India, and the Islamic lands. Even so, the shroffs did not simply evaporate. Writing about life in Shanghai in the 1930s, Canadian aviator Pat Patterson makes several references to "shroffs" some of whom were merely bill collectors for bordellos. You can still find bankers on Shroff Lane in Colaba, near Bombay, India. As late as 2004, The Far Eastern Economic Review of Hong Kong had a regular "Shroff" column about mergers, acquisitions, and other financial transactions.