

THE BOOK OF INSIGHT INTO COMMERCE

KITĀB AL-TABAṢṢUR BI AL-TIJĀRAH

by

ABŪ 'UTHMĀN 'AMR IBN BAḤR AL-JĀHIZ AL-BAṢRĪ

TRANSLATED WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

ADI SETIA



Dihodohkan kepada
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✓
21/01/14

This is a new, fully annotated English translation of al-Jahiz's *Kitab al-Tabassur bi al-Tijarah* (The Book of Insight into Commerce). The translator has also added three appendices consisting of his translated excerpts from three important classical Islamic authors, al-Shaybani, al-Dimashqi and al-Lubudi in order to provide readers with an insightful overview of the business and commercial ethos of classical Islamic economic thought.

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FOREWORD

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

This little merchant's manual on commercial commodities by the famous 'Abbāsīd polymath, al-Jāhīz, provides a clear snapshot of world trade during the period of Pax Islamica, arguably the first world-wide wave of globalization.

Readers will find this translation to complement nicely Dr. Adi Setia's earlier translation of Ja'far al-Dimashqī's *al-Ishārah ilā Maḥasin al-Tijārah* as the *Indicator to the Virtues of Commerce* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2011).

I would like to congratulate Dr. Adi Setia for bringing this important translation to a timely and fruitful completion.

*Then, when the prayer is concluded,
disperse through the land, and seek the bounty of Allāh,
and remember Allāh much, that you may be successful.*

(al-Qur'ān, *al-Jumu'ah*: 10)



Dato' Adnan Alias
Chief Executive Officer
IBFIM



ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



Dr. Adi Setia is currently a Lecturer and Assistant Professor of History and Philosophy of Science at the Department of General Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM); a founding Coordinator & Member of the Mu‘āmalah Research Group (MRG) of IIUM; and the founding Chief Executive Advisor of ViA Advisory Group (ViA). He was a postgraduate student, junior research fellow and then research fellow at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) from 1996 to 2004 during the directorship of its founder Professor Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, before joining IIUM’s Faculty of Science and later its Department of General Studies.

Before embarking on formal academic work, he spent some years learning at the traditional Islamic madrasahs (*pondoks*) of Kedah, Patani and Kelantan, especially under Al-Marḥūm Tuan Guru Ḥaji ‘Umar Zuhdī of Madrasah Misbāḥul Falāḥ, Baling, Kedah; and Almarḥūm Tuan Guru Ḥaji Hāshim Abū Bakr of Madrasah Dīniyyah Bakriyyah, Pasir Tumboh, Kelantan. His research interests are in the areas of History and Philosophy of Science, Islāmic Science, the Islāmic Gift Economy (IGE), and in the operative Islāmization of both the natural and social sciences according to the conceptual framework outlined in Professor al-Attas’s *The Positive Aspects of Tasawwuf: Preliminary Thoughts on an Islamic Philosophy of Science* (Kuala Lumpur: ASASI, 1981) and *Islam and the Philosophy of Science* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1989).

Recently he has published a lightly annotated English translation of Shaykh Abū al-Faḍl Jaḥ'ar ibn 'Alī al-Dimashqī's *al-Ishārah ilā Maḥāsīn al-Tijārah* = *The Indicator to the Virtues of Commerce* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2011); Imām Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī's *Kitāb al-Kasb* = *The Book of Earning a Livelihood* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2011); 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī ibn al-Lubūdī's *Faḍl al-Iktisāb* = *The Virtue of Working for a Living* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2012); and Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Bahr al-Jāhiz al-Baṣrī's *Kitāb al-Tabuṣṣur bi al-Tijārah* = *The Book of Insight into Commerce* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2012).

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION¹

Much of the discourse on so-called 'globalization' have focussed on the modern period—from the period of European colonial expansion into West and East, to the post World War II readjustment, and to the current phase in the twilight of neoliberal capitalism.²

But perhaps the first truly global wave of globalization was set into motion by the rapid expansion of Islam into the world and the consequent Pax Islamica³ it ushered in its wake.⁴

Reading al-Jāhīz's little manual for merchant, *Book of Insight into Commerce*, shows an operative aspect of this globalizing process in the world-wide flow of many diverse kinds of merchandise from the four corners of the known world to Baghdād, the seat of the 'Abbasid caliphate, the center of global learning and of civilization, and perhaps the most populous city in the world at the time.⁵

In the midst of all this heady flow of riches from far-flung countries and peoples to Baghdād, the center of world trade at the time, there was always the humane concern for those who, for one reason or another, found themselves left out from all the opulence. Thus al-Jāhīz says towards the end of his slim treatise:

¹ Largely based on al-Tūnisi's introduction to his edition, pp. 3—8. For full documentation of references given in the footnotes, please refer to the Bibliography.

² Robert Thomas Robertson, *The Three Waves of Globalization* (Fernwood Publications, 2003).

³ Heck, *Islam Inc.*: pp. ix ff.

⁴ Janet L. Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250—1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁵ An overview of 'Abbāsīd economy is in Gene W. Heck, *Islam, Inc.: An Early Business History*, pp. 158 ff, 435 ff.

The fortunes of people (*al-duwal*) change and the provisions are apportioned; so do your best in the seeking, be kind to the poor, and be giving to the weak, and you shall be recompensed for it and rewarded.⁶

Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ al-Baṣrī (776—869/160—255) was born in Baṣrah, flourished and died there.⁷ It was in Baṣrah too that he wrote most of his works. He lived at a time when “Iraq was the eye of the world, and Baṣrah the eye of Iraq.”⁸ Baṣrah, at the confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris, was the door into Baghdād through which flows the goods of world trade. It's importance was underlined when 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭab, may Allāh be pleased with him, called it the Dome of Islam (*qubbat al-Islām*).⁹

With his keen sense of observation, and given the commercial context of his city as being among the foremost hubs of world trade, it comes as no surprise that he would write a work, or rather, a practical manual for merchants. He can even be considered to be among the pioneers of the discipline of geo-economics, geographical economics or economic geography, among whom we can include Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī, Ibn Rustah al-Iṣbahānī, Abū Zayd al-Balkhī, al-Istakhri, Ibn Ḥawqal, Ibn al-Bishārī al-Maqdisī, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, Ja'far al-Dimashqī and many others.

Doubts have been raised regarding the accuracy of the attribution of *Kitāb al-Tabaṣṣur bi al-Tijārah* to al-Jāḥiẓ, but as

⁶ *Kitāb al-Tabaṣṣur bi al-Tijārah*, ed. al-Tūnisī, p. 37.

⁷ A biography is Jāmil Jabr, *al-Jāḥiẓ fī Ḥayātihī wa Adabihī wa Fikrihī* (Beirut: Dār Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1959); al-Tūnisī, pp. 3—8.

⁸ Cited in al-Tūnisī, p. 3.

⁹ Cited in al-Tūnisī, p. 3.

far as al-Tūnisī, its editor, is concerned, there is no doubt of it being among the many works of al-Jāḥiẓ. This is because Abū Manšūr al-Tha‘ālibī (350—429/961—1039)¹⁰ and al-‘Allāmah al-Nuwayrī¹¹ cite from it often and are explicit in attributing it to al-Jāḥiẓ.

This translation is based on al-Tūnisī’s edition of the manuscript he found in al-Maktabat al-‘Umūmiyyah (Public Library) or the Maktabat Sūq al-‘Aṭṭārīn (Library of the Perfumers’ Market) in Tunis. In his edition al-Tūnisī has appended a relevant and interesting five-page excerpt from the *Kitāb al-Buldān* of Ibn al-Faḥīh al-Hamadhānī dealing with the diverse trade commodities of the different countries to complement the corresponding discussion in Section Five of al-Jāḥiẓ’s treatise. Due to time constraints and other pressing commitments I have not been able to translate this tract to be incorporated in this translation of al-Jāḥiẓ’s text, but perhaps on another occasion, *in shā’ Allāh*.

I am so far aware of at least two English translations of al-Jāḥiẓ’s manual, that of Bernard Lewis¹² and that of Robert Sabatino Lopez¹³—and I have benefitted somewhat from them¹⁴—but those were sections hidden in books now not that well known to, or difficult to access, for many people.

¹⁰ in his *Thimār al-Qulūb* (al-Tūnisī, p. 6 n. 2).

¹¹ al-Tūnisī, p. 6 n. 3.

¹² *Islam: From the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople*, 2 vols.; vol. 2: *Religion and Society*, pp. 148-157. It is a complete translation from the Arabic without annotations.

¹³ Robert Sabatino Lopez and Robert Irving Woodworth, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World: Illustrative Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 28—29; partial translation based on a French translation by J. Sauvaget.

¹⁴ but at some places, I found myself having to give alternative renderings.

The main distinction between those and this translation is that this one is (i) lightly yet sufficiently annotated for readers to follow the text with some degree of context and accessibility; (ii) it cross-refers to some studies for readers to look up further on some aspects of the text if they want to; and (iii) it is a stand alone book and part of an informal series of translations of early and late classical texts in Islamic economic thought for hopefully giving English readers some degree of direct access to the underlying meta-economic vision of *mu'āmalah* (economic exchange in Islam).¹⁵ I recommend readers to read it as a complement to Ja'far al-Dimashqī's more comprehensive manual for merchants, *al-Ishārah ilā Maḥasin al-Tijārah*.¹⁶

Because the book itself is only about thirty pages long in the original edited text, I have appended to my translation three translated excerpts from the economic works of three other classical Muslim authors in order to render the whole translation substantial enough to be a stand alone book. These excerpts are from Imām Muḥammad al-Shaybānī's *Kitāb al-Kasb*,¹⁷ Shaykh Ja'far 'Alī al-Dimashqī's *al-Ishārah ilā*

¹⁵ I find this direct access to the classical source texts to be very important for getting an accurate view of the Islamic economic ethos uncoloured by tacit modern capitalist interpretation so glaringly obvious in such secondary sources as the otherwise useful Ahmed el-Ashker and Rodney Wilson, *Islamic Economics: A Short History* (Boston: Leiden, 2006), for instance, pp. 41-42, 70, where the authors discuss *isrāf* (extravagance) and *tabzīr* (squandering) within the modern neoliberal conceptual framework of 'scarcity' by taking that concept of 'scarcity' for granted.

¹⁶ trans. Adi Setia, *The Indicator to the Virtues of Commerce* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2012)

¹⁷ trans. Adi Setia, *The Book of Earning a Livelihood* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2011).

Maḥāsīn al-Tijārah and Imām al-Lubūdī's *Faḍl al-Iktisāb*.¹⁸ I hope that these excerpts will also provide readers with some access to the wider intellectual and socio-cultural milieu in which al-Jāḥiẓ was embedded.

This is the fourth translation of classical Islamic economic texts I have published with IBFIM over a period of less than two years to substantiate and promote the vision of the Islamic Gift Economy,¹⁹ or Common-Good Economics.²⁰ Again I must thank Dato' Dr Adnan Alias, IBFIM's Chief Executive Officer, and Mohd Zain Abd Rahman, IBFIM's Publication Manager for providing the necessary institutional support for this fruitful collaboration.

And a special expression of gratitude to Sidi Nicholas Mahdi Lock for his encouragement, spontaneity of spirit, critical comments and meticulous proofreading.

Those who do not thank people, do not thank God.

(Ḥadīth)

¹⁸ trans. Adi Setia and Nicholas Mahdi Lock, *The Virtue of Working for a Living* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2012).

¹⁹ see the three appendices to my translation of Imām al-Shaybānī's *Kitāb al-Kasb*.

²⁰ Adi Setia, "Reviving an Economics for the Common Good," in *Islam & Science* (Winter 2011).



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ABŪ ‘UTHMĀN ‘AMR IBN BAḤR
AL-JĀḤIZ AL-BAŞRĪ
(776-869/160-255)





IN THE NAME OF ALLĀH, MOST BENEVOLENT, MOST MERCIFUL

PREAMBLE

Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ al-Baṣrī writes:

You—may Allāh honour you—ask me about the descriptions of the opulent commodities and costly goods (*al-amti‘ah al-rafi‘ah*), luxurious ornaments (*al-a‘lāq al-nafisah*), and expensive, valuable precious gemstones (*al-jawāhir al-thamīnah al-murtafi‘ah al-qayyimah*) that can be found in all the (different) countries (*buldān*); in order that these (descriptions of mine) may constitute material (*māddah*) of experience for those who are wise in the ways of the world, and be a helpful guide for those who find their security in all manners of working for a living and seeking a livelihood (*wujūh al-makāsib wa al-matālib*). And I entitle this (set of descriptions) *The Book of Insight into Commerce*. And Allāh alone is the Grantor of all success.

Some of the ancient collectors¹ (*al-muḥaṣṣilūn min al-awā’il*) believed that everything that is available is cheap because of its availability, but expensive because of its inaccessibility and absence (*fiqdān*) when there is an envisaged need for it.²

The Byzantines (al-Rūm) say, “If you cannot find your sustenance in a land then move away to another land.”

¹ or producers.

² i.e., things are cheap when they are in abundance, but expensive when they become rare yet needed.

The Indians (al-Hind) say, “Anything plentiful is cheap, except intelligence, for the more plentiful it is the more valuable it becomes.”³

The Barbarians (al-‘Ajam⁴) say, “If you fail to find profit in a business (*tijārah*) then leave it for another business; and if you cannot find your livelihood in a place then change to another place.”

The Persians (al-Furs) say, “The one who profits in a market is the seller of what he has spent on.”⁵

The Arabs (al-‘Arab) say, “When you see a person on whom fortune is smiling (*aqbalat ‘alayhi al-dunyā*), then you should attach yourself to him, for that will generate sustenance for you.”⁶

It was said to some well-to-do people (*al-mayāsīr*), “How did your wealth increase?” They said, “We never sold on deferred payment (*nasi’ah*) at all,⁷ and we never rejected a profit however small; and not a *dirhām* would reach our hands but we spend it back into the business.”⁸

And it is often said, “Do not buy what you do not need, lest you sell that which you cannot do without.”⁹

³ i.e., the more intelligence you have the more opportunities you will find and pursue for prosperity.

⁴ i.e., anyone who is not Arabic in speech.

⁵ i.e., the seller makes a profit by selling something at a price higher than what he has spent on it; or he only profits by selling what he has initially spent on; or he makes a profit out of what people spend of their wealth in the market.

⁶ i.e., if you want to be prosperous, be with the prosperous.

⁷ i.e., never sold on credit

⁸ i.e., every dirham earned from a venture is reinvested in another venture to generate more dirhams.

⁹ i.e., do not buy what you do not need, for you will waste your money, and in the end you may find yourself so broke that you are forced to sell your possessions in order to survive.

Some wise men believe that the following words were found in the will of a Persian, “O people, there is no familial ties between you and the country where you live, therefore the best countries are those most conducive to you.¹⁰ The best age is that in which you find yourself in prosperity, and the best people are those who benefit you. The best water is what quenches your thirst, and the best animals are those that can carry you.¹¹ The best garments are those which cover you, the best business is what generates profit for you, and the best knowledge is what guides you. The best beauty is that which you deem beautiful even if it be ugly.”¹²

And it is often said, “The best craft is working with silk stuff (*al-khazz*)¹³ and the best business is the textile business (*al-bazz*).”¹⁴

¹⁰ i.e., do not be too attached to a place for the best place is where you can easily earn your livelihood.

¹¹ i.e., carry your burdens or your merchandise.

¹² i.e., beauty is not only physical or sensual but also intellectual, spiritual or emotional.

¹³ i.e., silk textiles.

¹⁴ i.e., trading in fabrics, cloths, rugs and garments.



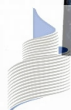


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