

Adab or Allying with the Stranger as the Strategy to Win the Globalised Planet

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The *Adab* is an information and communication strategy used by the 9th century Abbasid caliphs to broaden dialogue and help create and sustain an international Muslim community. The *Adab* involves an ethical conduct and a discipline of self-learning with the objective of each human being bettering himself adding the intelligence of the stranger to his own. For this, travelling is absolutely essential and treating strangers as equals is the first step to communicating with them. Therefore, this strategy shows that movement creates prosperity as long as it is accompanied by learning. In the present context, this is the best way of creating worldwide security and eradicating terrorism, which is based on isolation and paralysis to sow fear.

Adab: Power Is Communication

To kill or to dialogue? The sword or the pen? This is the eternal question the rulers of empires have asked their strategy experts to answer. No wonder the Pentagon's experts are probing it today. With the advent of new information technology, future conflicts will be necessarily "cyberwars" where victory will belong to the one who controls the information flow. Those who rely only on military force will lose. The word "cyberwar" – from the Greek root *kyber*, meaning control – was invented by John Arquilla, a professor of information warfare and a long-time consultant for the Rand, the California-based Pentagon think tank.¹ Unforeseen, though, has been the satellite TV and the Internet revolution which re-establishes the Arabic language as a



Calligraphy by artist Ouida, Marsam Gallery Rabat.

1. "Cyberwar Is Coming", *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 12, No. 2, spring 1993.

global communication medium, resuscitating *Adab*, the information strategy of the 9th century Abbasid Caliphs, which expanded travel, trade and dialogue, and helped create and sustain an international Muslim community. Their “Empire of Islam” stretched from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to Kashgar in China. One of the scholars who advised the Abbasids to adopt *Adab* as a strategy was Jahiz (776-868 AD/160-255 AH), whose masterpiece *The Art of Communication and Demonstration* (*Kitab al Bayan wa Tabyin*) suggested translating the books of foreign cultures to understand how they thought and to encourage travel and trade. *Adab* means both the norm of ethical behaviour and the discipline of self-teaching it requires. Caliph al-Mansur, the second Abbasid Caliph who created Baghdad in 762 AD (145 AH), launched a huge translation movement of key books from Persian and Sanskrit. *The Book of Sindbad* was among the latter. Treating the stranger as an equal is the first step to communicating successfully with him. Equality was the issue the Prophet Mohamed insisted on during his last Mecca pilgrimage speech (*hajjat al wada*) in 632 AD (11 AH): “Omen... The Arab has no advantage over a non-Arab... Did I make myself clear?”

Safar (Travel) as Self-Discovery

For Jahiz, the *Adab* strategy, to empower oneself by “adding the stranger’s brain to one’s own”, implies that you avoid getting stuck in your hometown and force yourself to travel: “Staying too long at home is one of the causes of poverty. Movement creates prosperity,” he recommends in his *Book of Metropolises and Wonders of the World* (*Kitab*



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al Amsar wa ‘ajaib al buldan).² It is this key idea of Jahiz’s *Adab* strategy, of travelling far to communicate with the stranger and make yourself useful to him by exchanging goods, which was celebrated by poets of the Abbasid court like Syrian-born Abu Tammam (804-846 AD/188-231 AH) “Travel! It is the only way to renew yourself!” he chanted in Baghdad streets.³

This idea of travelling as a quasi-biological need to regenerate oneself was expanded in later centuries to its cosmic dimension by the Sufis (mystics of Islam) who identified movement (*haraka*) with life (*hayat*) and inertia (*sukun*) with death. In the 11th century, the Egyptian born poet At-Tinnisi (who died in 1003 AD/393 AH) entranced his audience by

2. *Majallat Al-Mashrik*, August 1966, pp. 169-205.

3. Quoted by Hussein Nasr, *The Art of Travelling (Adab ar-Rihla)*, Cairo, Achariqa al Misriya linachr, 1991, p. 16.

reminding them what they gain from going to strange lands: “Travel! Journeys provide you with some advantages: entertainment, earning one’s living, self-discipline and the opportunity to be in the company of splendid creatures.”⁴ It is from the adventures Arab travellers described, once back in Baghdad, remembering their trips to India and China, which inspired the storytellers who invented Sindbad, one of the fictional heroes of *1001 Nights*.

Adab Is ‘iqd (Contract): Individual Responsibility

Adab, as a communication strategy, necessarily implies the individual’s global responsibility,

since constant travel dwarfs the importance of geography: “O, man! There is no special link between you and the country you happen to be born in! The best of countries is the one which benefits you.”⁵ This dwarfing of geography therefore holds up the individual (and not the state) as the only world-ordering agency: “Every man is a hostage of his own deeds” (Koran, sura no. 52, verse 21). The planet’s security is not the job of the state alone, but that of each single individual: “Believers! Honour your contracts” (Koran, sura no. 5, verse 1). Therefore the contract (*‘iqd*), the individual’s capacity to engage his responsibility without the intervention of the state, is the foundation of a mobility (*haraka*) engineered planetary order. To implement *Adab* as a planetary communication strategy, the Abbasid Caliphs should not invest in the military, but in books equipping Muslims with the information they need to become responsible travelling traders.

Ibn Khurdadbih (820-895 AD), one of the Baghdad Abbasid court’s most powerful Persian officials, who was in charge of both the intelligence and the postal services (*sahib al akhbar wa l-barid*), wrote the first official authoritative geography travel manual: *General Survey of Roads and Kingdoms (Al-Masalik wa l-Mamalik)*. These *massalik* (road) manuals, which would remain best-sellers even after the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258 and put an end to the Abbasids by killing the last Caliph, al-Musta’çim, provided Muslim travellers with the basic geography, astronomy and cultural information they needed to direct themselves correctly.

If today there are 35,000 Muslims in Korea, it is not because the Abbasid sent armies there, but because of the paragraph Ibn Khurdadbih



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4. Ibid.

5. Jahiz, *The Book of Trade’s Prospective Strategy (Kitab At-Tabassur fi-Tijara)*, Cairo, Maktabat al-Khanji, 1994, p.10.

devoted in his book to that country he called “Shilla”: “Beyond China, across from Qansu, there is a country with many mountains called Shilla. It abounds in gold. Muslims who happened upon it were fascinated by the charm of the environment and tended to settle there for good. There is no way of knowing what lies beyond it.” Hee-Soo Lee gives ample proof in his *The Advent of Islam in Korea*⁶ that *Adab*, the Abbasid strategy which encouraged merchants’ global responsibility, had more lasting impact than a state army.

Baghdad storytellers, who reflected in their Sindbad tales the successes of the real Arab travellers, promoted the *Adab* strategy as fiction-producers, just as modern Hollywood contributed to Howard Hughes’ military industry prosperity by idealising the cowboy.⁷

Future Conflict: Geocentrics versus Cosmocivics

The next conflict likely to split our planet will not be between a military camp, which encourages the state to rely on force (the *sayf* or sword) and a pacific one, which advises it to rely on information (the *qalam* or pen). The military camp has already had major economic losses for the United States which Mr. Bush’s war on Iraq has induced, quite apart from the death of more than 1,000 American soldiers and 20,000 Iraqis.⁸ The first loss is that Saudi oil decision-makers have turned towards China.⁹ The second is that Arab investors are re-locating their financial assets



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back to a digitally-thriving Middle Eastern economy.¹⁰ Mr. Bush’s financially disastrous decision to use the military to fight his “war on terrorism” is bound to strengthen the influential pacific camp which exists within the Pentagon itself and which predicted in 1997 that force will serve the terrorists’ cause.¹¹ As strange as it might sound, one of the most influential pacific camps today exists within the United States Pentagon Research universities and think tanks, led by “cyberwar” advocates who get their inspiration from Sun Tzu, the Chinese warrior philosopher who claimed in

6. Istanbul, Research Center for Islamic History, 1997, p. 49.

7. <http://www.hughes.com/about-us/business.xml>.

8. *Asharq al-Awsat*, 11th September 2004.

9. Y. Ibrahim, “The Kings of the Oil Jungle”, *Wighaat Nazar*, No. 66, July 2004.

10. J. Kifner, “Beirut, Terror’s Former Address, Reprises an Old Role”, *International Herald Tribune*, 10th September 2004.

11. *In Athena’s Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*, Rand, 1997, www.rand.org/publications/MR.MR880.

his 2400 year-old book *The Art of War* that “to win without fighting is the best.”

An internet Google search of 0.17 seconds reveals that among the 227,000 digital references to Sun Tzu, the Pentagon warfare researchers and their students occupy a pre-eminent position. But the problem with Chinese Sun Tzu is that his peace strategy is geocentric, based on the defence of a territory perceived as the primary source of wealth and the stranger as a negative intruder. Sun Tzu’s strategy seems to have rooted itself in the earliest pre-Ptolemaic theories which assumed that the earth was the centre of the universe “with the sun and the stars turning around it.”¹² The danger of geocentric peace strategies inspired by the Chinese Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* is that his advice not to kill the enemy is cost-motivated; to dash the enemy’s brain out costs too much: “He who wishes to fight must first count the cost. Therefore, one who is good at martial arts overcomes others’ forces without battle, conquers others’ cities

without siege, destroys others’ nations without taking a long time.”

The pacifists like myself who get their inspiration from the Arab Jahiz’ *Adab* strategy, share his Einstein-like vision of a universal gravitation where “a gravitational force is experienced by all matter in the universe, from the largest galaxies down to the smallest particles.”¹³

In the Arab *Adab* theory, expanded by the Sufis, for Islamic mystics who were often astronomers and mathematicians, geography has no importance since the fate of the human being is to tune to the universal movement and be in constant motion. For Ibn ‘Arab, “we never stop travelling from the day we are born!” So investing only in police and dogs to guard territorial frontiers instead of joining the planet’s state and citizen forces to invent a planetary global security is not only a waste of our tax money but a total surrender to the terrorists, who want to drive us into a paranoid self-inflicted isolation and paralysis!

12. Cosmology: www.bartelby.com/cosmolog.html.

13. Gravitation: www.bartelby.com/65/gr/gravitat.html.