

Conference Report

Seminar on Ibn Khaldūn and Muslim Historiography

The Department of History and Civilization of the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, organized a one-day seminar on “Ibn Khaldūn and Muslim Historiography.” The seminar was held at the University’s main campus at Gombak on July 23, 2003.

The objective of the seminar was to examine the intellectual contribution of ibn Khaldūn (d.1406/808) to the development of Muslim historiography, and discuss how he fused the knowledge of his predecessor Muslim historians with the rich harvest of political and social experiences which had made him aware of the meaning and deep significance of history.

In the preface to his *magnum opus*, the *Muqaddimah*, ibn Khaldūn defined the craft (*fann*) of history and analyzed in detail the sources of error in the historical writings of his predecessors, in particular partisanship for opinions and schools of thought, overconfidence in sources, failure to understand what is intended, mistaken belief in the truth, the inability to place an event in its real context, the desire to gain the favour of those in high rank, exaggeration, and, most important of all, ignorance of the laws governing the transformation of human society. Therefore, he argued that the lack of such critical investigation had led to historical errors even among the best Muslim historians such as al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 957/346). In this sense, ibn Khaldūn introduced revolutionary ideas concerning the approach to history, the methodology and cultural knowledge that could help scholars to approach history scientifically.

The wealth of ideas which the paper presenters and discussants found in the *Muqaddimah* has made them hail ibn Khaldūn as the forerunner of a number of modern disciplines in humanities. The seminar focused on the early beginnings of several disciplines such as history, sociology and political science, and covered a variety of topics ranging from the role of *‘aṣabīyah* and religion in building political institutions to the relevance of Ibn Khaldūn and his thought to the modern age.

Keynote Address

The seminar was opened by the Rector of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Professor Dr. Mohd. Kamal Hassan, who congratulated the Department of History and Civilization for organizing such a seminar. To him, the seminar transcends both time and Fukuyama since the latter believes in the end of history and ibn Khaldūn considered history as a process that recurs itself through time and space.

Professor Kamal Hassan observed that ibn Khaldūn has succeeded in combining in a very unique way reasoning with intuition and realities with ideals, and in breaking up discipline barriers. His *Muqaddimah* should be revisited by young scholars as it is still a treasure of wisdom that explains a host of issues including the rise and fall of civilizations and the rules that govern the dynamics of societies and states. The Rector appreciated the observation by the British historian, Arnold J. Toynbee (d. 1975/1394), who wrote:

[Ibn Khaldūn] is indeed the one outstanding personality in the history of a civilization whose social life on the whole was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. In his chosen field of intellectual activity he appears to have been inspired by no predecessors and to have found no kindred souls among his contemporaries and to have kindled no answering spark of inspiration in any successors; and yet, in the Prolegomena (*Mugaddamat* [sic]) to *Universal History* he has conceived and formulated a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the great work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place. It was his single brief acquiescence from a life of practical activity that gave Ibn Khaldūn his opportunity to cast his creative thought into literary shape.¹

Papers in English

Five of the eleven papers were in English and the rest in Arabic. Associate Professor Ahmed Elyas Hussein, in “Ibn Khaldūn’s Contribution to Historical Criticism,” surveyed the development of historical criticism in the ancient and Islamic civilizations. He argued that historical criticism began with the science of the *ḥadīth*. The early Muslim historians utilized the methods and techniques of the *muḥaddithīn* (reporters) to test the authenticity of the sources and assess the accuracy of historical events. Accordingly, Hussein argued that the development of historical criticism in Muslim historical writings was a cumulative process which took its final shape in the hands of ibn Khaldūn whom the author portrays as a highly vibrant and original thinker not only in the field of history, but in sociology, economics and political science. The *Muqaddimah* of ibn Khaldūn, he observed, was first celebrated by Western scholars who translated it into their own languages and presented its Latin version to the Muslim world. In other words, ibn Khaldūn was introduced to the Muslim world from the perspective of the Western scholars who overlooked some aspects of his ideas, and concentrated on those that suited their preconceived notions. He concluded that young Muslim scholars need to revisit the intellectual legacy of Ibn Khaldūn and highlight its holistic relevance to the current intellectual discourse.

Assistant Professor Wahhabudin Raees dealt with “The Role of ‘*Aṣabīyah* and Religion in Building Political Institutions from ibn Khaldūn’s Perspective.” He observed that ibn Khaldūn, having resorted in vain to rational philosophy, Islamic jurisprudence and the existing formal or narrative Muslim historiography, found a “causal determinative analytical tool” to explain development, progression and disintegration of ‘*umrān* (lit. culture). He argued that ‘*umrān* comes into existence as a result of five types of causes: (1) the “Ultimate or First Cause,” (2) final cause, (3) efficient cause, (4) formal cause, and (5) material cause. However, in ibn Khaldūn’s scheme of analysis, the efficient cause of ‘*umrān* and political institutions consist of two factors: (1) ‘*asabiyyah* and (2) religion. Ibn Khaldūn believed that a meaningful investigation of the relationship between religion, ‘*asabiyyah* and ‘*umrān* is possible if investigation is narrowed down to the study of human nature. Hence, according to Ibn Khaldūn, what is true of human nature is also true

of *‘umrān*. Stated differently, the rules applicable to human nature are applicable to *‘umrān* and political institutions.

The third paper by Professor Abu Yaareb al-Marzoūkī examined the “epistemological paradoxes of ibn Khaldūn.” He argued that Ibn Khaldūn’s intellectual approach lacks the distinctive features of the traditional philosophical discourse. Accordingly, Al-Marzoūkī suggested that the science of human culture “created” by ibn Khaldūn has to be critically assessed in the light of the philosophical solutions proposed by Plato (d. 347 B.C) and Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.E), and later adopted by Muslim philosophers. He called the science of human culture as “meta-history” and denied its absolute validity for studying all social and metaphysical phenomena. He concluded that ibn Khaldūn has failed to apply the meta-historical rules defined in the *muqaddimah*, particularly when he studied the history of the Arabs and Berbers.

The fourth paper by Professor Ataullah B. Kopanski, analyzed the exegesis of ibn Khaldūn and ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328/728) with reference to history and power. Kopanski argued that intellectual contributions of these two great Muslim minds to the science of history and struggle for power were profoundly influenced by the political upheavals and fortunes of war of their times. Their reflections on socio-political issues, such as, the concepts of *imāmah*, *khilāfah* and *ummah*, were truly interrelated with each other, and gave socio-political paradigms of a dynamic history animated by the cycles of the rise and fall of civilizations. He highlighted the concern of the two scholars about the end of the long supremacy of the Arab ruling dynasties and the decline of Islamic civilization.

Ustadh Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammdy discussed “The Relevance of the Khaldūnian Discourse to the Modern Age.” He suggested that the Khaldūnian discourse is of great significance and will help Muslims to maintain their identity and achieve unity in the era of globalization. He argued that the solidarity of Muslims could be achieved if Muslims understood the concept of *‘aṣabiyyah* in conformity with the concept of *ummatic* brotherhood. He explained how late Sa‘īd al-Nūrsī (d. 1960/1369) discussed the *‘aṣabiyyah* principle within the framework of positive nationalism. For al-Nursi, “positive nationalism arises from an inner need of social life and is the cause of mutual assistance and solidarity; it ensures a beneficial

strength; it is a means for further strengthening Islamic brotherhood.”² El-Muḥammady concluded that the adoption of the positive *‘aṣabiyyah*, or nationalism, would enable Muslims to regenerate their identity and civilization, and enable them to counteract positively the cultural and civilizational challenges of “the new world order.”

Papers in Arabic

Professor Muhammad Isa Salihyya explained the methodology of ibn Khaldūn in writing history. He asked if ibn Khaldūn was the pioneer of the science of history. He emphasized that ibn Khaldūn’s legacy was a continuation of that of his predecessor Muslim historians but his contribution to the development of historical criticism, history as a professional discipline and the science of human culture is unique and admirable. While appreciating ibn Khaldūn’s contributions, Ṣālihiyyah lamented that ibn Khaldūn’s universal history did not portray the rigour found in the *Muqaddimah*. Ibn Khaldūn demonstrated a surprising lack of knowledge when he was dealing with the history of the Jews in Palestine and the Safriyya ruling family in North Africa. He also denounced ibn Khaldūn’s political behaviour, particularly his allegedly opportunistic attitude towards the Mongol leader, Timurlane (1404/806), whom he presented as the man of the century who possessed enough *‘aṣabiyyah* to reunite the Muslim world, and gives new direction to the history of mankind.

The second Arabic paper, delivered by Muhammad Uthman al-Khatib, is entitled “The Khaldūnian Critique of the Methodology of Historical Writing.” This was a descriptive analysis of ibn Khaldūn’s methodology in utilizing the intellectual heritage of his predecessors and laying the foundations of the sciences of history and human culture. The author highlighted the structure of the historical methodology of ibn Khaldūn and its various aspects that include the definition of history, the establishment of a set rule that would test the authenticity of the sources and evaluate the accuracy of historical events. Besides, he discussed the role of the social and environmental laws in causing historical events to follow regular and well-defined patterns and sequences. Finally, al-Khatib maintained that ibn Khaldūn is a pioneer in the field of history and

that his historical methodology is founded on historical data derived from his views on human and social nature, his religious beliefs, legal precepts and the philosophical principles to which he adheres.

The paper presented by Associate Professor El-Fatih Abdel Salam was titled “The Philosophy of History and Civilization of Ibn Khaldūn: A Critical Review.” The author proposed conceptual and operational definitions for the philosophy of history and civilization as two central concepts in the treatise of ibn Khaldūn. He used these two definitions to analyze ibn Khaldūn’s methodology of studying history and the laws which he invented to understand the patterns and sequences of historical events.

The second major issue of the paper was ibn Khaldūn’s thesis on the rise and fall of civilizations and their cyclical occurrences through time and space. El-Fatih criticized the validity of *‘aşabiyyah* as an analytical tool for examining human struggle for power, ibn Khaldūn’s treatment of the concept of the state as synonymous to that of civilization, and his insistence on the inevitability of the fall of all civilizations. Notwithstanding this critique, El-Fatih acknowledged the significant contribution of ibn Khaldūn to the development of intellectual discourse in both the West and the Muslim world.

Professor Ahmed Shehu Abdussalam focused on “A History of the Usage of the Arabic Language: Ibn Khaldūn’s Perspective of Linguistic Domination.” The author adopted a historico-analytical approach to study the impact of the socio-political factors on the spread of the Arabic language and its usage in the Muslim world. Thus, he pointed out that the objective of his study was to examine the role of religion and politics as the two most important driving forces behind the dominant position of any language and Arabic in particular. He also scrutinized the conflicts and interactions that took place between the Arabic language and the rest of the Muslim languages in various Muslim regions and through different historical eras. Shehu finally suggested that the Khaldūnian perspective of linguistic domination be revised in the light of the available information on the historical usage of Arabic and other Muslim languages in various socio-linguistic communicative functions in the Muslim world.

Assistant Professor Hanafi bin Dollah focused on “Ibn Khaldūn and the Significance of the Science of Arabic Language for *Sharī‘ah* Scholars.” The author highlights ibn Khaldūn’s concern on the fluency in the Arabic language and its sciences as a means that would permit *sharī‘ah* scholars to establish their legal opinions on the authentic Arabic sources of Islam. He argued that the absence of such concern in the Muslim world as a whole has greatly affected the holistic understanding of Islam as a code of life and led to a serious misinterpretation of the authentic sources of Islamic legislation (the Qur’ān and the Sunnah). To demonstrate the positive response of the Islamic educational institutions in Malaysia to this Khaldūnian approach, the author studied the educational backgrounds of the lecturers who teach Islamic studies at the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (IIUM) and the Academy of Islamic Studies (UM), from which he concluded that 46.77% of the total number of staff of the two institutions are fluent in Arabic, 37.90% have a working knowledge in Arabic and 15.32% are not literate in Arabic. He concluded that a degree of concern at the higher educational specialized institutions in Malaysia would contribute to the uniformity of the interpretations of the authentic Arabic sources of Islam and lead to the establishment of a general consensus on the fundamental principles of the *tawhīdīc* religion.

The final paper, presented by Assistant Professor Abdul Ghani Yakob, examined the Khaldūnian concept of Sufism with special reference to his book *Shifā’ al-sā’il li-tahdhīb al-masā’il* (The Healing of the Seekers). The theme of the book emphasized the significance of a Sufi master for leading his novice along the Sufi path. In this respect, Ibn Khaldūn tends to follow the model of al-Imām Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī (d. 1111/504) in reconciling mysticism with theology, though he goes further than the latter in bringing mysticism completely within the purview of the jurisprudence, and in developing a model of the Sūfī *shaykh* as being rather similar to the theologian.

Closing Remarks

The closing session of the seminar was addressed by the Deputy Dean for Postgraduate Studies, Islamic Revealed Knowledge and

Human Sciences, Professor Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim. He observed that the seminar had achieved its objective by touching all issues discussed in ibn Khaldūn's major works, particularly his *magnum opus*, the *Muqaddimah*. He reminded the audience that the *Muqaddimah* that was intended to be an introduction to ibn Khaldūn's great history of the World, *Kitāb al-ʿibar*, turned out to be much more valuable than the text itself. This is because it discusses highly philosophical issues, including the philosophy of history. He also emphasized the significance of the Arabic language as a gateway for understanding the wealth of ideas mentioned in the *Muqaddimah* and other intellectual works of other Muslim scholars. He recommended that "the seminar on ibn Khaldūn and Muslim Historiography" should be a model for scholarly gatherings that would revisit the intellectual heritage of the great Muslim minds from various perspectives and show their relevance to contemporary concerns.

Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk
Department of History and Civilization
International Islamic University Malaysia