

SCIENCE OF MEDICINE IN IBN KHALDUN'S THOUGHT

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1. Introduction

Ibn Khaldun's (732-808 A.H/1332-1406 C.E) intellectual achievements have received much international attention since the rediscovery in Europe of his *magnum opus*, *Muqaddimah (An Introduction to World History)*, in the nineteenth century. The vast majority of numerous studies conducted on Ibn Khaldun's work and thought have been primarily focused on the examination and evaluation of his views on human civilization as such, or on specific sub-themes of civilization such as economics, politics, social life, culture and education. To the authors' knowledge, an examination of Ibn Khaldun's views on the craft of medicine (*sina'ah al-tibb*), however, has not yet been undertaken. The current study thus aimed to elucidate the major aspects of Ibn Khaldun's thought on this subject.

From the perspective of Islamic medicine, *al-tibb* (medicine) is a branch of physics (*tabi'iyah*). It is a craft (*sina'ah*) for the study of the human body in its illness and health. The physician's role in this craft is to preserve health and cure illness with the aid of medicine and diet, after he ascertains the illness peculiar to each limb of the body and their causes. In this regard, Ibn Khaldun wrote in "*Muqaddimah*" a section on *Sina'ah al-Tibb* (the craft of medicine). Here, he explains the meaning of *al-tibb* and its relation with physics as well as the status of the medicine of the Prophet Muhammad and whether it is based on human experiences or God's revelation. He goes on to discuss the origin of disease especially in relation to diet and fever as the main causes. Lastly, he mentions and endorses the works of several physicians in the eras of the ancient Greek and medieval Islamic civilizations.

2. What is Medicine (*al-Tibb*)?

A comprehensive meaning of a discipline is often only arrived at long after it has been initially defined. In fact, systematic definition and meaning is made possible due to long standing practice that has survived over centuries. Ibn Khaldun, who lived in an era when medical literature was abundant and included many subdisciplines, defines medicine as the craft (*sina'ah*) that studies the human body in its illness and health (*al-tibb hiya sina'ah tanzuru fi badn al-Insan min haythu yamrudu wa yasihhu*).¹ This notion has many implications including the understanding of *al-Tibb*, as the notion of 'health' over disease. The preservation of health should be the primary object of medicine for the physician rather than focusing on the 'disease' alone. Throughout the medieval Islamic civilization, the primary goal of the medical system was to maintain health rather than cure disease, or to restore health whenever lost. This principle reflected the belief that 'prevention is better than the treatment of disease' (*al-wiqayah khayrun min al-'ilaj*).²

The above does not mean that therapeutic medicine is not important. It is on the basis of Ibn Khaldun's definition of *Tibb* that the restoration of lost health is the second aim of medicine. The restoration of health in the Islamic medical tradition consists of a number of different therapies or treatments. Ibn Khaldun recommends that physicians treat their patients by drug and diet (*al-adwiyah wa al-aghdiyyah*). The former is referred to *al-adwiyah al-murakkabah*

¹ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah* (Beirut: Dar al-Jayl, n.d), 545.

² It would be interesting to mention in relation to this discussion that Ibn Jazlah (d. 493/1100) drew a parallel between the strength or health of the body and the supplies of the traveler. The wise person must prepare his supplies for traveling according to the distance intended, for if the supplies end before the destination is reached, the traveler perishes. However, if the supplies are sufficient for the entire journey, he is safe. This is parallel to the health of human being. If the body has sufficient strength, it will be able to overcome an illness, however, if strength is not sufficient and the body weakens before the end of the illness, the person is in danger and requires treatment together with the care of a physician. See, Joseph Salvatore, *Tabulated Compendium in the Eleventh Century as Represented in the Works of Ibn Jazlah*, 55.