

On Ibn Khaldun's Historical Method

Prof. Dr. Nahide Bozkurt*

Abstract

The concept of history plays a fundamental role in human thought. What happened in the past affects all aspect of lives in the present and will, indeed, affect what happens in the future. Because the past is important to the present and future, most societies have felt a need interpretation of their past. But the problem is 'what exactly is the past?', 'what actually happened in the past?'. These fundamental questions in order to get and understand the past, historians apply their methods to the documents of the past. In this respect Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) who is Muslim and considered as one of the greatest philosophers of the Middle Ages, not only attempted to think the problem of history, but also developed a science of history, or a 'science of culture' (ilm al-umran). In his famous study which is called *The Muqaddimah* or *Prolegomena* ("Introduction") he introduced the scientific method to the social sciences.

This paper will focus on Ibn Khaldun's ideas about history and historical method according to his famous study *The Muqaddimah*.

Keywords: Ibn Khaldun, history, 'ilmu al-'umrân, the science of culture, *The Muqaddimah*, historical method.

His short biography

Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis in Ramadan 732/ May 1332. His family claimed descent from a Yemenite tribe originated in Hadramawt. His forefather Khaldun as a part of Arab conquest went to Al-Andalus (Spain) and subsequently settled there with his family. The family of Ibn Khaldun had held various high offices

* Ankara University, Faculty of Divinity, Ankara/Turkey.

in Seville but had migrated to Tunisia after the fall of Seville as a part of Reconquista. After the family migrated to Tunisia held important offices there.

His family's high rank enabled Ibn Khaldun to study with the best teachers in Maghreb. He received a classical Islamic education, studying the Qur'an, Arabic linguistics, hadith, sharia(law), islamic theology and fiqh (jurisprudence). He received certification (ijazah) for all these subjects. Also he studied the rational or philosophic sciences ('ulûm 'aqliyya), logic, mathematics, natural philosophy and metaphysics. Ibn Khaldun participated actively in the political life of western North Africa, and to a lesser degree of Muslim Spain and Egypt. Ibn Khaldun continued to be active as a scholar and a Judge during the last seven years of his life in Egypt and died there on 19 March 1406.

On his historical method

Ibn Khaldun makes an important emphasis on history and draws attention to history in his book *The Muqaddimah*. According to him, history is the knowledge that nations and tribes to transmit and narrate from each other. In this context, Ibn Khaldun states that people are excited to travel abroad to learn history, even people who do not care about the public and nothing else are interested in learning history.

According to Ibn Khaldun, there are two dimensions/aspects of history; external and internal. In considering the content of external history Ibn Khaldun says that external history is no more than information about political events, dynasties, and occurrences of the remote past and brings to understand of human affairs. Then Ibn Khaldun moves the content of internal history aspect and describes the inner meaning of history which is deep knowledge of understanding the causes and causes of existence and to reveal the causes of the events.

In this sense he described history as an honourable science which is firmly rooted in philosophy. For this reason he considers that history deserves to be accounted a branch of philosophy.¹

In this context Ibn Khaldun admits that history is a useful science, and its useful aspects are very many like; it makes human being acquainted with the conditions of past nations as they are reflected in their (national) character and also with the biographies of the prophets and with the dynasties and policies of rulers. Ibn Khaldun ends his discussion about useful aspect of history with the following definition: “*whoever so desires may thus achieve the useful result of being able to imitate historical examples in religious and worldly matters should learn history*”.²

On the basis of such a meaning that history has been laid, Ibn Khaldun expresses that the leading figures of the Muslim historians have included in their works the history of human history and leave these works as entrusted to us. Ibn Khaldun adds that: *but, then, persons who had no right to occupy themselves with history introduced into those books untrue gossip which they had thought up or freely invented, as well as false, discredited reports which they had made up or embellished. Many of their successors followed in their steps and passed that information on to us as they had heard it. They did not look for, or pay any attention to, the causes of events and conditions, nor did they eliminate or reject nonsensical stories*”.³

¹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah An Introduction to History*, Translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal, Edited and Abridged by N.J. Dawood, Bollingen Series/Princeton University Press, 1969, 1989, : Princeton, N.J., p.5.

² *The Mugaddimah*, p.11.

³ *The Mugaddimah*, p.5.

In this context Ibn Khaldun makes distinction between mere copying and critical enquiry and especially describes the cause of errors and fanciful accounts which are reported by historians, Qur'an commentators and leading transmitters. According to Ibn Khaldun, historians, Qur'an commentators and leading transmitters have committed errors in the stories and events which they reported because;

- They accepted stories and events in the plain transmitted form without regard for its value,
- They did not check them with the principles underlying such historical situations, nor did they compare them with similar material,
- They did not probe with the yardstick of philosophy, with the help of knowledge of the nature of things, or with the help of speculation and historical insight.

Therefore, they strayed from the truth and found themselves lost in the desert of baseless assumptions and errors.⁴

At this point Ibn Khaldun identifies in *The Muqaddimah* a number of reasons behind of “the causes of lies, errors and fanciful accounts in history”.

He notes seven critical points:

1. Partisanship for opinions and schools/sects,
2. Reliance upon transmitters,
3. Unawareness of the purpose of an event,
4. A mistaken belief in the truth,
5. Ignorance of how conditions conform with reality,
6. The common desire to gain favour of high-ranks persons with praise and spreading the fame of great man,

⁴ *The Muqaddimah*, p. 11.

7. The most important among the reasons previously mentioned is ignorance of the nature of the various conditions arising in civilization.⁵

Ibn Khaldun gives many examples of such misconceptions of historians: For example, al-Mas'ûdî (d.956) and many other historians report that counted the army of the Israelites in the desert. He had all those able to carry arms there were to be 600.000 or more.

In this connection Ibn Khaldun says that al-Mas'ûdî forgets

- to take into consideration whether Egypt and Syria could possibly have held such a number of soldiers,
- every country may have as large a militia as it can hold and support, but no more,
- an army of this size cannot march or fight as a unit because of the whole available territory would be too small for it,
- there were only three generations between Moses and Israel (Jacob). When Jacob entered Egypt with his children, the tribes, and their children numbering seventy souls. It is impossible that the descendants of one man could reach into such a number within four generations.⁶

Another example has been taken from al-Mas'ûdî again. According to al-Mas'ûdî's report; *“See monsters prevented Alexander from building Alexandria. He took a wooden container in which a glass box was inserted, and dived in it to the bottom of the sea. There he drew pictures of the devilish monsters he saw. He then had metal effigies of these animals made and set them up opposite the place where building was going on. When the monsters came*

⁵The *Mugaddimah*, p.35-36.

⁶ The *Mugaddimah*, p. 11-13.

out and saw the effigies, they fled. Alexander was thus able to complete the building of Alexandria.”

Ibn Khaldun finds this report absurd for various reasons and he uses below arguments:

- Alexander is said to have taken a glass box and braved the sea and its waves in person. Now rulers would not take such a risk. He could be replaced by the people with someone else,
- the jinn are not known to have specific forms and effigies,
- to go down deep into the water, even in a bow, one would have too little air for natural breathing... and he would perish on the spot.⁷

In considering the content of these kind of reports and news, Ibn Khaldun says that these

kind of reports and news are absurd/superstition/myth and that these absurd stories should not be trusted. While Ibn Khaldun discussing these kinds of stories he explores that only knowledge of the nature of civilization makes critical investigation of them possible. For him it is the best and most reliable way is to investigate historical information with the knowledge of nature of civilization in order to distinguish truth from falsehood in it. Ibn Khaldun considers that critical investigation about the nature of civilization is superior to investigations which rely upon criticism of the personalities of transmitters (authority-criticism) and therefore authority-criticism should not be resorted if information is absurd.

According to Ibn Khaldun, authority/personality-criticism is concerned with legal prescriptions and commands to action of Muslim religious information while history concerned with actual events. Authority criticism is taken into consideration in connection with exactness of the transmitters, while historical

⁷ Ibid, p.36-37.

reports should start by asking whether or not the events they describe could have taken place. He adds that to establish the truth and soundness of information about factual happenings, a requirement to consider is the conformity or lack of conformity of the reported information with general conditions. He ends his argument with necessity to investigate whether it is possible that the reported facts could have happened. For him this is more important than, and has priority over personality criticism. Therefore Ibn Khaldun says that history has to use both personality criticism and enquiry into the nature of things. Then history needs two sciences: the science of culture/ 'ilm al- 'umrân which deals with the nature of historical events and authority criticism which deals knowledge of reporting such events. In this sense Ibn Khaldun claims that via inspiration by God he created a new science which no one else mentioned before him. He called the new science as a 'the science of culture/ 'ilm al-'umrân'.⁸

As a result Ibn Khaldun highlight that several things were essential if a historian were to be qualified to deal with historical events and stories. These are;

- to know the principles of politics, the (true) nature of existent things, and the differences among nations, places, and periods with regard to ways of life, character qualities, customs, sects, schools, and everything else.
- to have a comprehensive knowledge of present conditions in all these respects,
- to compare similarities or differences between the present and the past conditions,
- to know the causes of the similarities in certain cases and of the differences in others,

⁸ Ibid, p. 37-42.

- to be aware of the differing origins and beginnings of different dynasties and religious groups, as well as of the reasons, their declared principles, their rules and major events in their history,
- to have complete knowledge of the reasons for every happening,
- to check transmitted information with the basic principles he knows.⁹

Conclusion

Ibn Khaldun's historical method based on criticism, observation, comparison and examination of accounts of historical events. He used scientific criticism to analyse accounts of historical events, the sources of these accounts and the techniques used by historians before him. According to Ibn Haldun historians just collected the narratives, but they did not care and obtain objective criteria of what had actually happened. For him many accounts rely on false and absurd stories which should not be trusted. Therefore Ibn Khaldun claims that only knowledge of the nature of civilization makes critical investigation of them possible. For him it is the best and most reliable way is to investigate historical information with the knowledge of nature of civilization in order to distinguish truth from falsehood in it.

⁹ Ibid, p. 6,7,11.