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Suhaila Abdullah

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The Philosophical Thoughts of Ibn Khaldun on Pandemics as Deterioration Factors of Human Civilization

Suhaila Abdullah

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

Abstract

Ibn Khaldun was a notable medieval Muslim philosopher known for his historical theories and philosophy, as well as his insights into the development and fall of civilizations. There have been episodes of pandemics and the emergence of infectious diseases throughout human history that have caused deterioration not only in health but also in many aspects of their everyday life. Hence, the purpose of this article is to explore Ibn Khaldun's idea of how pandemic diseases can ultimately lead to the decline of human civilization. Ibn Khaldun's view can provide some insights and guidance in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and at the same time strengthen and consolidate our civilization while preventing deterioration.

Keywords: Ibn Khaldun, al-Muqaddimah, Pandemics, Civilization, Deterioration

Introduction

Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) was a famous medieval scholar and historian who wrote his magnum opus *al-Muqaddimah*, the prelude to his universal history, in the 14th century. Ibn Khaldun's full name is Waliy ad-Din Abu Zaid 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun al-Hadrami al-Ishbili. In his writings, Ibn Khaldun had explained general laws of history and society's evolution in it, most of which was based on empirical evidence. The theory that he accomplished was revolutionary in the sense that he attempted to persuade people that most of their understanding of politics and history is based on personal bias, whereas more permanent and correct laws exist beyond that.

As for his background, Ibn Khaldun had an excellent classical education under some great teachers. Nevertheless, the Black Death struck the city when he was 17 years old. His parents as well as a number of his teachers had perished. The terrible pandemic that devastated the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe in 1347–1348 had killed at least one-third of the population and left survivors traumatized. Its influence was felt in all areas of life including intellectual life, economic activities, social structures, art, literature, and so forth. Hence, it was unquestionably one of the events that affected Ibn Khaldun's worldview and perception.

Pandemics

The term pandemic is similar to several other terms such as outbreak, epidemic, and endemic which refer to the occurrence of health condition problems as compared to its predicted rate

along with the situation of its spread in geographical areas as well as disease transmission from place to place, as has been done historically for centuries such as the Black Death (Morens *et al.*, 2009). Based on *A Dictionary of Epidemiology*, a pandemic is defined as a plague occurring over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries, and usually affecting a large population (Porta, 2014).

Pandemics have always been a mix of randomness and structure throughout history. Genetic mutations randomly increase the transmission or virulence of a germ, and fortuitous interactions between human groups facilitate the rapid spread of an infectious disease. It involved pathogenic microorganisms such as viruses, bacteria, and protozoa which were passed from one species to another. As a result, pandemics seemed like chaotic and random events or as literal or symbolic acts of God. It also created biological shocks and wreaked havoc on civilizations and overthrew governments throughout human history.

A Muslim scholar, Ibn Sina (980-1037) (known as Avicenna in Latin and the West) who has been recognized as the “Father of Early Modern Medicine” in his masterpiece *al-Qanun fi al-Tibb (The Canon of Medicine)* stated that infections are caused by the contamination of body secretions of host organisms by foreign tainted microorganisms. Ibn Sina went a step further to hypothesize that microbial diseases were contagious and that those infected should be quarantined (United States National Library of Medicine, MS A 53).

With the advancement of human civilization, expanded trades between communities have increased interactions between humans and animals and facilitated the transmission of zoonotic pathogens. Subsequently, expanded cities, extended trade territories, increased travels, and even impact on ecosystems due to increased human population, eventually gave rise to the emergence and spread of infectious diseases leading to higher risks for outbreaks and even pandemics (Lindahl and Grace, 2015).

In the past, the Silk Route had been used as a network of land and sea channels connecting East and West especially between the second and fifteenth centuries of the Common Era. Hence, it was the primary source of commercial, cultural, and religious contacts between communities. The route delivered everything from spices to languages, and it is thought to have also conveyed the deadly plague. Meanwhile, in the modern time, the advancement of technologies, trade activities between communities, increased travel, as well as expanded cities and trade territories, had facilitated the transmission and spread of certain infectious diseases (Lindahl and Grace, 2015).

Pandemics and large-scale infectious disease outbreaks can increase morbidity and mortality in a wide geographic area and cause significant economic, social, and political disruption. Evidence suggests that the likelihood of pandemics has increased over the past century due to global integration, travel, urbanization, land use, and environmental exploitation (Jones *et al.*, 2008; Morse, 1995).

Controlling infectious diseases is, in general, a characteristic of modernity. Pandemic mortality has had an impact on society throughout history. Nonetheless, education, economics, technology, and politics have shielded humanity from the worst of the consequences. In the 18th century, the most dramatic mortality episodes came to a stop. Due to advancements in agricultural science and public policy, the frequency and intensity of famine have lessened. Furthermore, immunization aids in the prevention of the worst plague outbreaks, while quarantine methods have slowed the spread of disease. Even when infectious diseases killed the majority of people, contemporary cultures were able to minimize the severity of severe mortality due to the creation and growth of science.

No contemporary society appears to have ever had a mortality crisis like the Black Death. Based on the past and present trends, we may need a combination of pharmacological and nonpharmaceutical treatments to avert runaway mortality. Recently, COVID-19 has disrupted human civilization worldwide. Based on experience, irrational decision-making and bad leadership have the potential to exacerbate disease-related harm. By accurately assessing and appropriately responding to the real threat of COVID-19 and its legacy, we can lessen the pandemic's effects. On that account, we must look to the past for guidance on how to move forward in control.

Background of Ibn Khaldun's Work

Al-Muqaddimah is primarily intended to serve as an introduction to *Kitab al-Ibar*, a massive text of Maghrib history. Nonetheless, the creation of *al-Muqaddimah* includes general information on human civilization studies. Ibn Khaldun's motivation for creating *al-Muqaddimah* is related to his motivation for writing his *Tarikh*. *Al-Muqaddimah* is the first volume of his *Tarikh*, namely *Diwan al Mubtada' wa al-Khabar Fi Ayyam al-Arab wa al-Ajam wa al-Barbar wa Man 'Asharahum min Dhaw al-Sultan al-Akbar*.

The cycle of dynasties as well as the rise and the fall of civilization are among the most innovative contributions of his *Muqaddimah* and are the primary patterns of human history according to Ibn Khaldun. Another significant concept that has been pointed out by Ibn Khaldun in his civilizational theory is the *asabiyyah* concept which refers to a feeling of common purpose and social cohesion. According to Ibn Khaldun, *asabiyyah* (group solidarity) was the source of power that enabled collective action during the growth phase of a civilization. Success and affluence, on the other hand, acted to erode the sense of cohesion that had permitted one group to rise to power. As a result, civilization eventually became corrupted from within (Abdullah, 2018).

In his approach, Ibn Khaldun employed the methodological concept of *ibar* (understanding) and the theoretical concept of *asabiyyah* to formulate *Ilm al-umran* (solidarity). In defining the concept of *umran*, Ibn Khaldun emphasized history as the medium to disseminate information on society-related matters which socially interdependent among one another. In this regard, Ibn Khaldun claimed that humans have to look back to history to see the reasons and factors and learn something from the past for the benefit of their future. He added that humans tend to repeat the same mistake hence it is crucial to refer to historical experiences. Thus, it is without a doubt that most of the Islamic empires in the past failed to maintain their power due to being too comfortable and prioritizing their selves over society (Ibn Khaldun, 1967).

Undeniably, Ibn Khaldun had created a groundbreaking theory of historical change that combined social, political, economic, and demographic dynamics, and surprisingly, he had predicted how infectious diseases would be incorporated into it. In connection to this, Ibn Khaldun himself had witnessed the Black Death, which was considered by some to be the biggest biological disaster in human history.

Pestilence, according to Ibn Khaldun, was a necessary part of civilization's demise. Plagues, on the other hand, were not just random actions of God or nature. They were a phenomenon that could be explained logically. A pandemic may arise as a result of population growth. Population growth would be facilitated by a strong civilization with effective governance, but the demographic upswing would also unleash lethal pandemic diseases and social collapse (Ibn Khaldun, 1967).

The Impact of Pandemic Disease on Human Life and Civilization

Interaction between humans is the factor that contributed to the enhancement and expansion of human civilization. Nevertheless, on the other hand, human interactions also drive the spread of infectious diseases in the human population (Dobson and Carper, 1996). Based on an observation by Ibn Khaldun, a Maghribi philosopher who lost his family during the plague, he adopted occasionalism in his *Muqaddimah* on the rise and fall of civilizations and stated:

“Civilizations both in the East and West were hit by a catastrophic plague which decimated nations and caused populations to vanish... Everything in the inhabited world has changed.” (Ibn Khaldun, 1967, p. 30)

After this horrific disease, Ibn Khaldun penned his depiction of civilization, which stated:

...“Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed. The East, it seems, was similarly visited, though in accordance with and in proportion to (the East's more affluent) civilization. It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world had responded to its call.” (Ibn Khaldun, 1967, p. 30)

The 'Black Death' as it was afterward dubbed, spread from Italy throughout most of Southern Europe. By 1348 CE, it had found its way to England, France, and Spain, and by 1349 CE, it had made its way to the Scandinavian countries, as well as Iceland and Greenland. It also wreaked havoc on the famous Arab cities of Alexandria, Cairo, and Tunisia. The Yersinia Pestis plague, which was caused by the same bacterium that caused the Justinian Plague in the sixth century, was medieval Europe's largest humanitarian disaster.

Another important figure who witnessed the pandemic that struck human civilization was Lisan ad-Din ibn al-Khatib, an Andalusian scholar who lived at the time. He was an Arab politician, polymath, poet, writer, historian, philosopher, physician, as well as a tutor of 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406). Both scholars had been infected by the plague. The Black Death arrived in Ibn Khaldun's hometown of Tunis when he was 17 years old. Many of his teachers, as well as his parents, perished. Hence, the terrible impacts of the pandemic were observed by Ibn Khaldun.

In terms of Ibn Khaldun's background and experience, this famous fourteenth-century Muslim historian had lived in a time of political disintegration, and he also experienced the plague, that claimed the lives of his parents and many of his acquaintances. Moreover, his wife, five daughters, and personal library were later lost in a shipwreck in Alexandria, Egypt. Ibn Khaldun also lost his parents and some of his teachers during the Black Death in Tunis, realizing the serious effects and consequences of the plague for a civilization.

Based on Ibn Khaldun's review on the plague that occurred during his time in his *Muqaddimah*, he stated that in the middle of the fourteenth century, a cataclysmic epidemic has attacked civilization in the East and West, shattering nations and wiping out populations. It devoured and wiped out many of civilization's good things. It overwhelmed dynasties when they approached the end of their reign and were senile. Their position was undermined, and their clout was reduced. As a result, their authority was weakened. Their situation was on the edge of being destroyed and disintegrated (Ibn Khaldun, 1967).

Ibn Khaldun (1967) also noted that the demise of humanity paralleled the decline of civilization. This can be witnessed through the calamities whereby cities and structures were destroyed, highways and route marks were dismantled, villages and palaces were abandoned, and dynasties and tribes were weakened. The entire inhabited world suffered a change. The East appears to have been visited similarly, albeit in proportion to (the East's more rich) society. It was as if the world's voice had screamed out for oblivion and restraint, and the world had heeded the call.

While Ibn Khaldun was contemplating the pandemic's devastating repercussions, another great scholar who lived contemporaneously with him, known as Ibn al-Khatib (1313-1375) had formulated the concept of contagion or the belief that sickness spreads from one person to another through intimate contact. He did so centuries before the concept was even considered in Europe. "The existence of contagion is evidenced through experience and reliable reports of transmission through clothing, vessels, and earrings; by its spread by people from one house, by infection of a healthy seaport with the arrival from infected land and by the immunity of isolated individuals" (Ober & Alloush, 1982, p. 422).

The next significant contribution to the pandemic discussion in the fourteen century were al-Maqrizi (1364-1442) and al-Asqalani (1372-1449). Based on al-Maqrizi's narrative concerning the plague's arrival in Egypt, he described a familiar pattern of the Black Death. al-Maqrizi explained how in 1347, a pestilence "worse than any seen before in the Islamic world" began with the arrival of a ship full of corpses drifting into Alexandria. There were a few sailors still alive on the ship but they died soon after. This is the beginning of Egypt's experience with the Black Death plague (al-Maqrizi, 1956).

Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, a great Muslim scholar in the Science of Hadith in his book *Bazlu al-Ma'un fi Fadhli al-Ta'uun* (translated as *Offering Assistance for the Sake of the Plague*) had provided elaboration on plague's concept in Islam. The author had also described the *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. that becomes a reference for disease and pandemics. Ibn Hajar's account of events during the pandemic was much more concise than Maqrizi's and did not encompass the same level of detail.

Ibn Hajar was aware of the increase in the infectious rate of this epidemic following the large gathering of people, when he noted that a great number of people of fine character and the public gathered and that many of them died, multiplying the number from what it was. From this statement, it is obvious that Ibn Hajar had noticed a connection between the large gathering of people and the accelerated mortality following the assembly of the group. The indiscriminate nature of this epidemic was reiterated here with the description of a huge gathering of people, who contracted the disease and died (Ibn Hajar, 1969). The increased fatality rate following the group crowded together indicated an extremely contagious disease that was possibly airborne.

According to al-Maqrizi, the disease began killing a hundred people per day in Alexandria, and then doubled to two hundred persons per day. There were mass funerals for as many as 700 persons as the plague outbreak reached its peak. The epidemic was then swept across the Nile Delta, leaving no one to harvest the crops. Al-Maqrizi noted that mosques, stores, and hostels in the city of Bilbays on the eastern side of the Delta were left empty (Al-Maqrizi, 1956).

When the plague invaded Cairo, the king and the reigning regime's top officials fled the city, while mass prayers were held in mosques and cemeteries. When the plague was at its worst in December of 1348, it was estimated that 7,000 people were killed every day. The

plague ended in February of the next year, and Cairo was like a cemetery in stillness, motionless and deserted (Al-Maqrizi, 1956).

Hence, details provided by eyewitness observers and scholars such as Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani and al-Maqrizi for the 1430 plague had clearly defined these plague outbreaks, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The number of plague deaths per day is what they keep track of. These figures were relayed to them by the high-ranking members of the Circassian (Mamluk) military dictatorship and its civilian bureaucracy. The overall number of deaths each day was documented by civil bureaucrats under the command of regime leaders from the *musalla*, whereby Cairo had about fourteen in 1430 and seventeen in 1460. The *musalla* was an open space than a mosque, with a smaller ceremonial scope. It was frequently found at a city's gates, with a prayer niche built into the wall (*mihrab*).

The Bab al-Nasr *musalla* at the northern end of Fatimid Cairo was the most frequently mentioned throughout these two outbreaks. The bodies were taken here for a brief funeral prayer before burial. However, in 1430, these funeral prayers were hurriedly performed over lengthy lines of remains. This mass blessing was followed by mass burials, with graves dug out for forty or more corpses at a time (Ibn Taghribirdi, 1930).

That was how the outbreak occurred in history and affected human life. When this outbreak happened in wider geographical areas, it is called a pandemic. Hence, a pandemic is a global disease outbreak that affected communities worldwide and caused a large number of deaths. It often creates social disruption, general hardship as well as economic crisis.

Ibn Khaldun is not an epidemiologist, and the COVID-19 pandemic is different from the Black Death. However, there is an obvious collective sense that we are living through something epochal, similar to the fall of the Berlin Wall or the collapse of the twin towers on 9/11, and in moments like these, we instinctively look to the past in search of patterns. Medical science and economic models are not the only sources of information at this time. The causes of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its potential repercussions succumbed, can be learned from history. In this case, Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* is one of the sources that can be referred to when dealing with the pandemic issue in the civilizational context.

Conclusion

The emergence and spread of infectious diseases with pandemic potential occurred regularly throughout history. Plague and diseases had been a side effect of the growth of human civilization. The continual expansion of human populations had contributed to increasing numbers of different pathogens.

In general, many infectious diseases that contribute to pandemics are caused by zoonotic infections that spread to people as a result of increased contact with animals owing to breeding, hunting, and global trade activities. Henceforth, understanding the mechanics of disease transmission towards people enables the development of infection prevention and control techniques. For centuries, public health measures such as isolation, quarantine, and border control have aided in managing contagious diseases and preserving society's structure.

Meanwhile, infectious diseases continue to have disastrous implications in human populations in many regions of the world, despite breakthroughs in medical research. Regardless of the information and experiences gained since human civilization's beginnings, there are still gaps in our understanding of ecosystem disease management and how human actions might contribute to or prevent the spread of infectious illnesses. Thereupon, a multidisciplinary approach is required in both research and policymaking. Indeed, illness control is no longer solely a medical and epidemiological science; it should also include

research into human civilization's history and past experiences, social and environmental studies, psychological and economic effects, and so on.

Succinctly, this article details the theoretical and contextual contributions of Ibn Khaldun's ideas on how pandemic diseases can affect the structure of society, human civilization and ultimately lead to a decline. Hence, this study is important nowadays because the world is experiencing COVID-19 pandemics. It proposes the study of Ibn Khaldun's theory to see how natural factors such as pandemics and epidemics had influenced the evolution of society. Ibn Khaldun's cycle theory, which is a broader theory, contains these features. Using logical argument and analysis, this theory explains and teaches lessons from past experience, as well as provides insight on numerous current and future situations.

Corresponding Author

Associate Professor Dr. Suhaila Abdullah

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia 11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

Email: aila@usm.my

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