The Meaning and Doctrinal Roots of Riḥlah ‘Ilmiyah

It is not easy to define riḥlah ‘ilmīyah precisely. Classical sources used it in a very free manner, referring to various activities and situations. Riḥlah is a derivative word from the root ṭ-h-l. Lisân al-‘Arāb gives many derivative words from this root, encompassing a very rich possibility of usages.1 As a matter of fact, the term riḥlah ‘ilmīyah is applied

any traveling made by someone to seek knowledge, to seek a better place of learning, to seek a more authoritative teacher, or a travel by a scholar to different places whether or not he is formally undertaking any academic activity. Therefore, *rihlah 'ilmîyah* might refer to a well-planned journey for academic purposes (learning, teaching, seeking books, attending academic meeting, etc.), or any journey made by those involving in academic activities.

Perhaps an exact and clear-cut definition will not help that much. The history of Islamic civilization assure us that *rihlah 'ilmîyah* was practiced very extensively in classical Islam. An author even goes to say that it became a very important feature of classical Islamic education.²

The roots of the practice of *rihlah 'ilmîyah* could be found in the Qur’ân and the hadîs, that is to say in the very center of Islamic doctrines. Some Qur’anic verses emphasize that this world is so wide and people are encouraged to travel from one place to another.³ A famous tradition from the Prophet orders Muslims to seek knowledge, even if they have to go to China for that purpose: "Seek knowledge even if it be in China."⁴ The specific reference to China must have had special meaning, considering that Muhammad lived in the 7th century Arabia. First, China is recorded by the history of humanity as one of the centers of ancient civilizations. By the beginning of the 1st century A.D., the Chinese had discovered the technology of making papers, and by the end of the 2nd they started printing books. And, as history illustrates, it was from the Chinese that the Arab Muslims learned about papers as well as gunpowder.⁵ Second, geographically, China was the remotest among the ancient civilizations from which the emerging Islamic civilization

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³ See, for example, Q.S. al-Nîsá’/4: 97; and al-‘Ankabût/29: 56.
was benefiting. In 7th century A.D., when Muhammad was preaching Islam, China must have been considered an extremely far and foreign place. The spirit of the tradition, therefore, is very clear: distance should not be an obstacle in seeking knowledge; Muslims must go anywhere for knowledge and undergo whatever it takes to do that.

The Qur’an and hadīṣ shape the Islamic spirit and outlook regarding knowledge. The demand to travel for knowledge is not more than practical part of the very strong injunction in the Qur’an and hadīṣ to love, seek, and disseminate knowledge. Based on some Qur’anic verses and hadīṣ that are specifically related to riḥlah ālmiyyah, and well aware of the general spirit of Islam regarding knowledge, some ulama developed their views that are strongly supportive of the practice.

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, for instance, casts a very positive view about riḥlah ālmiyyah and considers it as an important factor in supporting one’s success in learning. The great historian, Ibn Khaldūn, also emphasizes the benefits of this practice. Al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī holds the opinion that riḥlah ālmiyyah is very relevant especially in the field of hadīṣ. He even wrote a book specifically devoted to the theme. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr includes an interesting chapter regarding the practice of riḥlah ālmiyyah in his well-known work, Ḥākim Bayān al-‘Ilm wa-Faḍlīḥ wa-mā Yanbaghī fi Riwāyatīh wa-Ḥamlīḥ. As will be seen in the coming pages, those ulama did not advance mere theoretical statements, but practiced riḥlah ālmiyyah themselves very extensively.

The Development of Riḥlah Ālmiyyah

It seems practically impossible to determine the first time riḥlah ālmiyyah was performed. Nevertheless, from his biography, we learn that the Prophet Muhammad send some of his companions to different

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part of Islamic world to teach Islam to the local population. The most popular case would be when Muhammad sent his companion Mu‘âz ibn Jabal to Yemen. This case becomes so popular mostly because of the dialogue between Muhammad and Mu‘âz on the latter departure. The dialogue, quoted repeatedly and in different wordings, considered by ulama as the basis to justify *ijtihâd* and rational interpretation of Islamic tenets. We have to note that history books did not report the experience of Mu‘âz, or those of other companions, as a *rihlah ‘ilmîyah*. Nonetheless Mu‘âz did go to Yemen as a scholar (‘âlim) with the responsibility of teaching Islam there as well as to function as a judge. Therefore, when we consider the essence of the experience we can apply the term *rihlah ‘ilmîyah* to it. The khulafâ’ al-râsyidun followed the example of Muhammad in this matter; they send teachers to different areas to ensure that Islam was thought properly and that legal problem of the population was settled according to the principle of Islam.

From certain perspectives, these examples set by the Prophet and his early successors became the foundation on which the practice grew throughout the classical history of Islamic education. The Prophet and his closest companions are the top authority on religious matters. So, when they decided to send someone, they certainly opted the most suitable person for the assignment. Aside from its practical function (teaching Islam and performing legal duties), from the perspective of our current discussion, what happened was an active and rather planned distribution of the sources of knowledge (the ulama) to different places.

Through this policy, beside the seats of power (Madinah, Damascus, Baghdad), other minor cities area also becoming the resident of some renown ulama. Those early ulama pave the way to the emergence of new generation of ulama. By the beginning of the 2nd/8th century, cities like Kufah, Basrah, Yemen, Damascus, or Jerusalem, had become centers of learning comparable to Makkah or Madinah. Then, these centers of learning multiply according to the fast development of Islamic civilization in general. This fast development provides a fine background for the development of *rihlah ‘ilmîyah*. People of knowledge travel from...
one place to another, seeking a better place to learn, looking for a more authoritative master, experiencing different lifestyles provided by different cities.

The earnest attempt to collect and reconstruct the *hadīs* of the Prophet was the original driving force of the practice of *riḥlah ‘ilmīyah*. After the codification and standardization of the Qur’an at the time of Usmān ibn ʿAffān, the companions, and later on the *tābi‘īn*, realize the urgent need to collect and select the *hadīs* as the second source of Islamic teachings. As the companions of the Prophet was living in different part of the Islamic world, the long travel to collect the *hadīs* became unavoidable. The biographies of the early generation of *hadīs* collectors clearly illustrate that many of them took the responsibility and made long journeys for the sake of the *hadīs*.\(^9\)

When the generation of *tābi‘īn* took over the task from the generation of companion, the distance that had to be covered grew farther and farther, following the expanding border of the Islamic kingdom and the increasing number of important seats of learning. So, the journey to pursue *hadīs*, to collect them, and later on to codify them was the first practical form of *riḥlah ‘ilmīyah* in the intellectual history of classical Islam.

From a practice in the field of *hadīs*, the practice *riḥlah ‘ilmīyah* developed very quickly. Some ulama who were not specializing in *hadīs* studies soon realized the benefits that can be gained from the practice; and they started to practice it too. After all, almost all Islamic branches of knowledge related to *hadīs* in one way or another. It did not took too long before *riḥlah ‘ilmīyah* become a very important part of intellectual activities in all fields of study.

\(^9\) As an illustration, Ibn al-Daylami who lived in Jerusalem, Palestine, had doubt regarding a *hadīst* that says praying in Bayt al-Maqdis worths more than a thousand prayers in other places except in the Ka‘bah. As far as his knowledge this *hadīswas* related by Abdullah b. ‘Umar who lived in Madinah. To ascertain that he set out for Madinah, where he learns that Abdullah had moved to Makkah. He continued his *riḥlah* to Makkah only to find that the man he was seeking did not life in Makkah but in a village named Al-Waht. In the end, he arrived at Al-Waht and met Abdullah b. ‘Umar, who, however, denied to have related the *hadīs*. Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *al- Rihlah*, pp. 137-138. Some other interesting instances could be found in *Ibid.*, pp. 160-170.

Hasan Asari: *Rihlah ‘Ilmiyah*
Examples of riḥlah ʿilmīyah can be found easily by reading the biographies of scholars from the classical period. And we are very fortunate to have those biographies well recorded in the biographical dictionaries (tabaqat, tarajim). While reading the travels made by past masters, most of the time we are fascinated by their mobility. Many of the classical ulama were born and started his career as a student at a corner of the Islamic kingdom, then started a long and extensive intellectual journey covering most of the civilized world of his time. Sometimes they passed away in a place so far from his homeland. Some of them died in his very homeland, but after completing a very long way of traveling.

Below are some biographies to illustrate the mobility of classical Muslim ulama. The following information on the travel of Al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-ʿArabi, Al-Jurjani, and Ibn Khaldun has been adapted (with some minor modifications) from an interesting map by Francis Robinson.10

Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111)

This very popular multi-discipliner scholar was born 1058 in Tūs, Khurāsān; at a very early age he went to Jurjan, 1073; after some journey in the region of Khurasan, he was known to be a professor at the Nizamiyah Madrasah in Baghdad in 1091; but later on decided to leave this capital of civilization behind, and in 1095 headed for Damascus; from there, during 1095-1095 he visited Jerusalem, Iskandariyah, then Madīnah and Makkah, before returning to Damascus; in 1097 al-Ghazālī was back in Baghdad, but then decided to return to his hometown, Tūs; in 1196, for a short period of time, he accepted the professorship of the Nizamiyah Madrasah, Nisyapur; toward the end of his career he, once more, returned to Tūs, and stayed there until his death in 1111.

Muhy al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240)

Ibn ‘Arabī was born in 1165 in Murcia, Andalusia; in 1173 he moved to Seville, another Andalusian city; in 1194 he crossed Gibraltar Strait and known to be in Tunis (North Africa); then in 1195 he was in Fez (North Africa); in 1199 he visited Cordova and Almeria (short return to Andalusia); in the same year (1199), he crossed the strait again, to Tunis; in 1202 he headed to the east: 1202, Cairo (Egypt); 1202, Jerusalem (Palestine); 1202-1204, further east, Makkah (Hijaz); from 1204-1205, he visited Baghdad (Iraq), Mosul, and Malatya; 1204-1209, Konya (Anatolia); 1205-1209, Cairo, Jerusalem, Makkah; 1211, Baghdad; 1212, Aleppo (Syria); 1215, Aksaray, Sivas (Anatolia); 1216-1229, Malatya; 1229-1240, the final period of his life was spent in Damascus.

‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406)

This scholar who made his reputation primarily through his magnum opus, Al-Muqaddimah, was born in 1332 in Tunis, North Africa; in 1349 he moved to one of intellectual centers of North Africa, Fez; in 1352 he moved to Biskarah; in 1353 returned to Bijayah; in 1354 back to Fez for some times; in 1362 cross the Gibraltar to Andalusian city of Granada; in 1365 returned to Bijayah for a second time; in 1366 he again lived in Biskarah; but in 1372 our man is reported to be back in Fez; in 1375 he made a short return to Granada, across the strait, but at the same year he headed for Frenda until 1379; from 1379-1382 Ibn Khaldun lived in his hometown, Tunis, before deciding to make a rihālah toward the eastern part of the Islamic kingdom; in 1382, he was known to have reached Cairo, another city of learning and civilization that held him for quite some time; in 1400, he started another short travel to the east, this time to Damascus, and went on to Hijaz; from Hijaz he decided to return to Cairo and lived there to the end of his life; he died in 1406.

Al-Sayyid al-Syarīf al-Jurjānī (1339-1413)

Al-Jurjānī was born in 1339 in a small town called Taju, Jurjan, southeast of the Caspian Sea. In 1365 he was reported to have traveled

Hasan Asari: Riḥlah ‘Ilmīyah
to Herat; then in 1368 to Kirman; then in 1371 to Cairo, a dream town of scholars of his time; from Cairo he traveled west to Constantinople; in 1377, he headed for Syiraz; and then in 1378 to Samarqand; after some time, in 1404, he returned to Syiraz where he spent the final years of his life and died in 1413.

If the examples are scholars from the central land of Islam, it does not mean that Muslim scholars from other part of the Islamic world did not take part in the practice of *rihlah 'ilmīyah*. The excellent study of Azyumardi Azra that focuses on the 17th and 18th centuries Nusantara clearly demonstrate the high mobility of scholars from this particular part of the Islamic world. Their mobility is in fact comparable to those examples given above.  

The career of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānírī (d. 1658), for example, shows that he traveled very extensively in centers of learning of the Indian Subcontinent, Sumatra, Malay, as well as Hijaz. Another scholar from Nusantara, Muhammad Yusuf al-Maqassari (d. 1699), made an amazing travels during his life that include Ceylon, and South Africa, apart from cities of Celebes, Java, Sumatra, the Indian Subcontinent, and Hijaz.  

Classical Muslim scholars gave high value to mobility and dynamism. The foregoing examples show that they mostly seek knowledge and disseminate it to different places throughout their careers. Some of the most prominent scholars can be said to have visited and absorbed the culture of all civilized world of the time. If we take the state of transportation technology of the time, their travels become even more fascinating. It is most certain that behind these high mobility lays a strong determinism and uncompromising spirit regarding the importance of *rihlah 'ilmīyah* to the advancement of knowledge. It is also not surprising that *rihlah 'ilmīyah* facilitated them to become scholars who were well aware

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of many situations, cultures, traditions, and schools of thought. Their rihlah ‘ilmīyah and the resulting experience added their quality as scholars.

An interesting question should be asked at this point, i.e.: what are the factors that facilitate the development of rihlah ‘ilmīyah within the classical Islamic civilization? The available sources usually note the extensive practice of rihlah ‘ilmīyah without any interest to explain the factors that support the practice. Nevertheless, through an extensive reading of history works, especially biographical dictionaries, we can extract some information that indicate the supporting factors behind the practice of rihlah ‘ilmīyah:

1. General attitude of the society to people of learning, seekers of knowledge, reputable scholars, and others who in one way or another contribute to the advancement of knowledge. We have abundant reports that show how different segments of the society support intellectual activities. Well-to-do individuals and political elites would spare good amount of their wealth as endowment to support education. For example, we have a report that a certain wealthy man called Badr ibn Hasanawayh al-Kurdi (d. 979) spent a huge amount of money to build hundreds of motels (khān) for travelers for intellectual purposes or otherwise.¹³ Many caliphs and viziers did the same. This supportive attitude was so common that a traveler did not have difficulties wherever he goes in the Islamic kingdom. A scholar usually receive warm acceptance from local population, because in Islam knowledge and knowledgeable people are to be respected.¹⁴


Hasan Asari: Rihlah ‘Ilmiyah
2. Political integrity of the classical Muslim world. This was a great benefit available for the classical generation. At its height, Islamic civilization dominated a very wide territory, extending from the Iberian Peninsula (Andalusia), North Africa, Egypt, Arabian Peninsula, Persia, Transoxiana, Afghanistan, Sind, Hind, down to the Malay-Nusantara region. This huge territory was pretty much integrated and thus open to all travelers. Of course there were political boundaries, but usually those boundaries bound only as far as political matters were concerned. They did not prevent scholars from moving around to places of their interests. A scholar of Andalusian origin would consider North Africa, Persia, and Anatolia as mere parts of his big residence. He was free to make journeys to any place he deemed necessary for his intellectual career. The concept of citizenship, as developed in the contexts of modern nation-states, were not known during the classical period of Islam, especially when related to intellectual matters. The whole world is open for a scholar of classical Islam, as illustrated by our examples above. We might also emphasize that during the time of our concern many political struggles and wars took place in different areas, but they did not prevent those scholars from doing their rihlah.

3. General flourishing of Islamic civilization in classical period. At a more general level, the practice of rihlah ‘ilmiyah was possible because it was facilitated by the general civilization itself. In other words, different factors provide good opportunity for people to travel. As has been mentioned, the integrity of Islamic world allowed people to move freely. Nothing would prevent someone to travel from the very west point of Andalusia to the very east spot of the Malay-Nusantara region. Another significant aspect was that normally, as human history illustrate, an advanced civilization tend to be dynamic socially—the population does not stay foot in one place but rather migrate and move around, temporally or permanently. Culturally, every advanced society is open to others from outside of itself. Financial support was available and many Islamic dynasties were...
known to have developed excellent economy. Although scholars were not known as wealthy people, they generally could support riḥlah 'ilmīyah they want. A scholar could do riḥlah 't/miyah on his personal expense, or through the help of wealthy individuals.

In short, the classical Islamic civilization provides a milieu that was conducive for the practice of riḥlah 'ilmīyah. This civilization was based on doctrines that support intellectual activities; this civilization provide freedom of movement in a huge geographical space; it also provide a socio-cultural situation that was friendly to travelers; and this civilization provided ample financial support for them. The condition was certainly an excellent place for travelers, including those who did it for intellectual purposes.

The Functions of Riḥlah 'Ilmiyah

The practice of riḥlah 'ilmīyah played some functions in classical Islamic civilization. Apart from some purely intellectual functions, riḥlah 'ilmīyah seems to play some wider function as well. The following are some of the most important functions of riḥlah 'ilmīyah:

1. As a way of finding a better qualified teacher. For a seeker of knowledge (tālib al-ʿilm), a well-qualified teacher is a precondition for his success. Therefore, in classical Muslim education, a student would normally take the burden of making a long travel to seat at the feet of reputable scholar. In many instances a student who has completed his study under a certain teacher, would ask his teacher's recommendation regarding his further study and seek advice in deciding the next teacher he should study under. In such situation, it was very common for a teacher to recommend his own teacher or his fellow scholar. Following his former teacher's recommendation, a student might have to do a long riḥlah 'ilmīyah. In classical Muslim education, the number and the reputation of one's teacher was very highly appreciated, usually more than the institution in which one...
studied.\textsuperscript{15} And this helps explain why some students were ready to move from one teacher to another in order to perfect his learning. The high value of personal contacts between teacher and student in the classical Muslim education contributes to the popularity of \textit{rihlah} \textit{‘ilmīyah}. Learning through books, while being acknowledged as a legitimate way, was not recommended as long as personal direct meeting with the authors is possible. So, in many cases, one would try his best to meet a reputable scholar even when he already studied his books thoroughly. Imam al-Syāfi‘ī, for example, had read an memorized the entire \textit{al-Muwaṭṭa‘}, but still felt the necessity of meeting and studying under direct guidance of the author, Imām Malik ibn Anas.\textsuperscript{16}

2. As a way of widening one’s perspective and intellectual horizon. Through \textit{rihlah} \textit{‘ilmīyah} one is exposed to new experiences. Within the boundaries of classical Islamic word, one could find many kinds of peoples, a wide variety of intellectual traditions, many colors of culture that made up the civilization of classical Islam.\textsuperscript{17} Through an extensive traveling a scholar exposed himself to those cultures and intellectual traditions, and by so doing expand his perspective and enrich his experiences. Experiences lead to maturity of a scholar. Social, cultural, religious contacts that one get in his travel contribute to his quality as scholar. Taking the size of Islamic territory, it would seem that an average human life span is not enough to allow one to absorb all the richness it offered. Classical Muslim scholars made use of this wide geography to build their experience and knowledge. Learning knowledge and staying in one place was not the ideal type


of scholars for them. A scholar was reported to constantly encourage his students to travel for the sake of knowledge.\textsuperscript{18}

3. As a media of knowledge transmission. \textit{Riḥlah ʿilmīyah} played a great part in the process of knowledge transmission in the classical Muslim intellectual tradition. The ulama were constantly moving from one place to another, bringing with them their knowledge. \textit{Riḥlah ʿilmīyah} meant distribution of books; as a matter of fact, it explains how an interesting work can be read in many parts of the Islamic world in a relatively short period of time from the publication of the work.\textsuperscript{19}

A good traveler often produce excellent notes about different things he experienced during his travel. In many cases, those travel notes were later on developed and refined into a comprehensive book, describing many aspects of life in the areas the author visited. The most popular example of this is perhaps the travel notes of the renown Muhammad ibn ʿAbd Allah Ibn Batutah (d. 1377) that contains a very rich information about many part of the Islamic world.\textsuperscript{20}

We can also add the book of Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (d. 1048) about India (Hind) which is still appreciated as an important classic work on anthropology.\textsuperscript{21} A good \textit{riḥlah ʿilmīyah} provides one good chance to give as well as to collect information. In a more specific context, \textit{riḥlah ʿilmīyah} contributes in expanding intellectual networks

\textsuperscript{18} Abu Bakr al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, Tankh Baghdad aw Madinat al-Salam (Kairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1931), vol. XIV, p. 204.


\textbf{Hasan Asari: Rihlah ʿIlmiyah}
involving series of teachers and students that can be very long and complicated.\textsuperscript{22}

4. As an integrating aspect of Islamic civilization. Rihlah ‘ilmiyah facilitates a lively exchange of information among different parts of the Islamic world. Through this exchange different regions learn from one another and mutually enrich their knowledge and experience. Those who made rihlah ‘ilmiyah include top scholars of the time. Therefore, it is safe to say that rihlah ‘ilmiyah contribute in maintaining the unity of the Islamic world. If those travelers left permanent footsteps on every road the followed; and if we were able to see those footsteps, they would certainly make crisscrossing lines that hold Islamic world in one unity of civilization. We have so far tried to illustrate how rihlah ‘ilmiyah became very popular among scholars and seekers of knowledge in the classical period of Islam, showing their commitment for creativity and mobility. Through rihlah ‘ilmiyah information transmitted, knowledge disseminated, shared, exchanged, developed, and civilization united. The travelers benefited greatly from their rihlah ‘ilmiyah in the form of new experience and wider perspective. The wider society benefited as well by having the opportunity to learn from scholars of foreign origin.

With its significant contribution to classical Islamic society, it is perhaps a wise thought to reconsider this practice in the context of contemporary Muslim intellectual activities. Certainly information technology has change traditional modes of knowledge transmission greatly. Computer and the internet, for example, contribute greatly in accelerating the process of storing and retrieving information. Yet, acquiring knowledge from digital lines cannot be compared to experiencing the knowledge in real life. A Muslim scholar should

\textsuperscript{22} A very interesting study on intellectual networks of the Nusantara has been made available by Azra, \textit{Jaringan Ulama}. 
always stresses the importance of experience acquired through extensive traveling, because the richness of experience contains spirit of freedom and creativity. The importance of traveling has been immortalized in an old Malay wise saying: “Jauh berjalan banyak dilihat, lama hidup banyak dirasa.”