

# An Alternative Pilgrimage: Teachers Doing Hizmet Abroad

by David Tittensor on 19 October 2010. Posted in Gülen Conference in Indonesia

## Introduction

Travel has an important place within Islamic faith and tradition with regards to connecting with the divine. One of the five pillars of Islam is that the all Muslims must make the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca if they are physically able and can afford the expense. Alongside this there is the doctrine of hijra (migration), where one is obligated to migrate from a land if they are not able to practice their faith freely, and ziyaras (visits to shrines) (Aziz, 2001: 153). Closely associated with travel is the search for ‘ilm (knowledge). Both the Qur’an and the Hadith direct the believer to undertake riḥla (travel) in the world that God created in order to better understand the Creator. The Qur’an contains numerous verses that exhort the reader to “travel the earth and see” (3:137; 6:11; 12:109; 16:36; 29:20; 30:9; 30:42) (Euben, 2006: 35), and specifically uses the term riḥla in Sura Quraysh (106:2), with regard the capacity of the tribe of Quraysh to travel north and south and the success that it brought them (Gellens, 1990: 53). In like fashion, the hadith literature, which reports the life and deeds of the Prophet Muhammed after his death, builds on this Qur’anic thread, with many related tales extolling the need for both travel and knowledge. Al-Tamirdi (d. 892) relates the story where the Prophet explained that “those who go out in search of knowledge will be in the path of God until they return” and there is the now famous hadith in which Muhammad is purported to have uttered the injunction “seek knowledge even as far as China” (Euben, 2006: 35; Netton, 1996: vii).

Subsequently, the importance of travel as a pious activity that brings God’s approval and grace has been historically imbedded in the Muslim consciousness (Gellens, 1990: 53). Terms such as riḥla and ‘ilm inspired a literary genre al-riḥla fī ṭalab al-‘ilm (travel in search of knowledge) in Medieval Islam (Netton, 2010), and, as will be shown, this literature is particularly useful for understanding the motivations driving the Gülen Movement teachers today. Drawing on 16 teacher interviews that undertook hizmet (service) abroad, this paper will highlight the parallels between movement teachers and their medieval counterparts. As will be discussed there are a complex set of ideas that drive these pilgrims to do the work that they do, which have their genesis in the riḥla tradition.

## The Riḥla tradition

This literary canon is believed to have begun with the riḥla of Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217), which functioned as the template for subsequent travelogues. Although Ibn Jubayr’s principal reason for embarking on his journey was to undertake the Hajj to absolve himself of guilt, for being forced to drink wine by the governor of Grenada to whom he was Secretary, ṭalab al-‘ilm was an important

component of his documented journey. His travel writings document visits to mosques, shrines, colleges, and tombs, with encounters with multiple saints, and scholars. For this reason, many of the *riḥlatayn* that followed began with the Hajj as the primary motivation for setting out. However, this often functioned as an excuse to embark on a journey that would give way to wanderlust and a range of other more mundane or pedestrian pursuits (Netton, 1993: 46-7). A classic example of this is the *riḥla* of Ibn Jubayr's successor Ibn Battuta (1304-68/9 or 1377). He travelled in three capacities: as a pilgrim, a scholar of the law, and as a Sufi (though he never gave himself entirely to the asceticism of mystical life), and according to Ross Dunn (Dunn, 1993) Ibn Battuta's travels and career were not markedly different from the other well documented accounts of other North African journeyers like Abu Muhammad al-'Abdari, Muhammad ibn Marzuq and Ibn Khaldun.

A chief function of their journeys, apart from being a pilgrim and seeking knowledge, were to operate as 'frontiers men'. They were educated pioneers who journeyed to the peripheries of the Muslim world and brought back knowledge and prestige (Dunn, 1993: 63). This frontiers man role had numerous benefits such as: a) there was the prospect of work, which otherwise was not necessarily forthcoming in their homeland; b) an opportunity to increase one's status abroad for the search for knowledge confers distinction; c) become an object of praise upon their return, which lends itself to increased status on the hierarchy of piety that in turn translates into a senior position reserved for them upon their return (most travellers return). Ibn Battuta, for example, despite being an indifferent scholar, was routinely employed as a qadi during the course of his travels and a senior post was reserved for him upon his return to his native Morocco {Dunn, 1993 #32}.

Alongside these personal benefits, frontiers men were also important for Islam. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, a time of Islamic expansion, these "reasonably literate, urbane and cosmopolitan" wanderers took with them to the peripheries of the *umma* the values of scripturalist Islam and helped lend a sense of theocratic righteousness to newly established Muslim governments, thereby strengthening a collective sense of Muslim identity (Gellens, 1990).

## Hizmet Teachers Operating as Modern Day Ibn-Battuta's

Today many of the teachers from the Gülen movement are following in the *riḥla* tradition of their forebears, striking out to other countries in the name of their God and Prophet and to act as 'frontiers men' for their fellow man. For them it is an alternative pilgrimage:

Pilgrimage, *hijra* [migration] to Mecca, this is another thing. But I mean, in one of our prophet's say[ings], I mean the best of human beings is the one who contributes to human kind most. There is a kind of saying, so perhaps this motivation urged me to go there. (Özgür, English Teacher, Kazakhstan)

Similarly, Bülent, an English teacher who was stationed in Pakistan, relates that are following in the righteous footsteps of the friends of the Prophet to take their skills and knowledge around the world:

You know in the past, it's related to our ancestors too, in the Ottoman Empire you know, people rode horses, and went to different countries and you know the friends of our Prophet did the same thing, went to different countries and they informed those people for the new, this religion, and died there, many, many of them. Thousands of people died in those countries. So it was for the sake of God, not for nothing. They lived very poor lives, poor conditions, but, so they believed in their religion strongly, and they did whatever they could, they could have done, they did everything, their very best (Bülent, English Teacher, Pakistan).

Further to this, Bülent went on to explain that practicing temsil (representing) abroad is much more valuable than doing so at home, as it is better to go out and show other people in foreign land "good example as much as you can" and spread the movement's message. This greater value attached to representing abroad was based on the fact that it would have been easy to remain in Turkey in his comfort zone. As he put it, "I thought it would be a bit flat, a bit monotonous and routine to go to a State school and work there you know and have a comfortable life". Thus, like those of yesteryear, Bülent was governed by both a desire for adventure and to test one's mettle in the face of adversity:

It is dedication because it's another environment, you know, it's difficult to be in an environment with foreign people, and without your family, without your friends, many friends are here you know, it's much more valuable, a lot more valuable.

Difficulty and sacrifice were seen as important elements of the teacher's journey. Many spoke nostalgically of the various trials faced during their sojourn overseas. Dağestan, a Turkish Biology teacher who spent eight years in Kyrgyzstan, spoke at length of the poverty and trying conditions under which he toiled and how he thrived on the challenge. He recounted how three heaters were required in the room to combat the cold, and after 8'clock in the evening the electricity in the city would be shut down. Yet he described this period of his life, despite these difficulties, as "very good days" and stated that he was "very proud, because [he] lived there." Others spoke of how they had to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers or worked for little or no remuneration for extended periods of time:

I mean, of course it was difficult. There was a different geography, a different education [system]...Especially, for example, we had to explain to them using a translator. Over there, there were also difficulties given one does not know the language... there was the adjustment to the environment, to the culture (Çetin, Turkish Literature Teacher, Tartarstan).

Many teachers there couldn't get any salary for months. We worked there for three hundred dollars [a month] at the time, and we couldn't get the salaries in time after ten months or so (Anil, English Teacher, Kazakhstan & Kyrgyzstan).

The lack of funds, particularly in the formative period of the schools, was not unusual as these schools were often free. The initial small contingent of students in the first intake all received scholarships that covered their tuition and materials while the teachers waited on their salaries to come from donations gathered elsewhere. Such was the case in both Afghanistan and Kazakhstan, with all the funds provided by esnafilar (small businesses) involved with the movement both locally

and from abroad, particularly those based in Turkey and Germany. Moreover, often when teachers did receive their wages, they were quick to part with it for the benefit of their students. One graduate from Kyrgyzstan, for example, expressed to me her gratitude for her teacher who handed over her savings so that she could continue her studies in Turkey: “when I came to Turkey...my father could not support [me], and I know that one of my teachers paid all my [expenses], I mean the travel money, I mean for the ticket, and she gave also some pocket money. My father could not do that, and in that year, I know that she gave me that money and she did not come to Turkey, because she didn't have any other money.” Even more remarkable was the story of a Turkish teacher at an Afghan school who supposedly donated ten months of his salary back to his school.

Despite these difficulties, privations, and sacrifices the teachers were generally positive about their decision to leave the relative comfort of Turkey. Anil, like Dağestan, repeatedly reflected that despite the poverty and treacherous weather that his thirteen years abroad were a “good experience.”

This emphasis and reverence for sacrifice stems from the movements Sufistic underpinnings. Gülen with his reworked theology is seeking to find a middle way between conventional Islam and traditional Sufism with his concept *aksiyon insani* (man of action. Gülen's man of action, who abandons asceticism and its preoccupation with the inner spiritual quest to actively work and engage with society, is predicated on revised interpretations of two core principles of Sufism that are thoroughly intertwined: *halwat* (seclusion) and *riyada* (austerity). Traditionally the follower of the mystical path is required to be secluded away for a period of forty days so he can struggle for control over the *nafs* (the soul), which houses the lower self such as the carnal desires of the flesh (Schimmel, 1975: 112). In this time the initiate is able to discipline the body and reduce carnal desires and focus attention on meditation and prayer in an environment that “is regarded as a door opening on nearness to God” (“Allah'a kurbet kapisı sayılan bu halvethânedede bedenî ihtiyaçlarını en aza indirir”) (Gülen, 1993, 2007a). Also during this time of seclusion the initiate is to lead an austere existence eating and drinking little again with the view to controlling and disciplining the needs of the body.

However, Gülen argues that the the practice of seclusion has undergone change overtime and that it is no longer necessary to perform periods of seclusion like those undertaken by the Prophet Abraham, and the forty day periods of the Prophet Muhammad. His basis for this position is the conduct of Rumi, who, whilst having undertaken many forty day periods of seclusion in the early days of his initiation, gave up the practice for the company of people once he had found a true master (Gülen, 2007a: 17).<sup>[1]</sup>

Instead of seclusion Gülen advocates simply for austerity in everyday life which functions as another avenue through which one can obtain divine grace. For, through austerity, which means holding back the carnal desires like thirst, appetite and sleep, one can “acquire piety righteousness and nearness to God” (“Zühd ü takvâ ve kurb u mükâşefe maksadiyla, dünyanın beden-i hayvânîye bakan zevklerinden kaçınma”) (Gülen, 1994, 2007b). Further to this, in his *Sizinti* piece on austerity Gülen speaks of the need for the austere individuals to also liberate themselves from worldly ambitions as well as the carnal (“dünyevî eğilimlerden ve cismanî temayüllerden siyirilarak”) (Gülen, 1994, 2007b). This reference to worldly ambitions most likely refers to need for wealth and material

possession in the sense that one should not covet these things and make them the focus of their existence. Although not explicit here, he makes these sentiments more clearly in one of his sermons regarding the ideal person:

Sacrifice is one of the important characteristics of a person who teaches others. Those who do not, or cannot, risk sacrifice from the start cannot be a person of cause. People who do not have a cause cannot be successful. Yes, those who are ready to leave at one stretch whenever necessary, their wealth, life, family, position, fame etc, things which many people desire and put at the purpose of life – that their cause eventually reaches peaks is certain and inevitable (Gülen, as cited in Ergene, 2008: 179).

Thus, the migration to foreign lands, wherein the teachers give up their comfortable life, family, friends and money, functions as a 'rites of passage' in similar vein to that of the Sufis of yesteryear. The challenges and privations they face are willingly taken on as they grant them spiritual badges of honour that bring them closer to God and both increase their status and advance their career on the hierarchy of piety within the movement. For those that have gone abroad have shown their devotion to the cause and like Ibn Battuta can be rewarded upon their return – the vast majority of hizmet teachers come back – with a better position upon their return to their homeland. Indeed, many of those who do go abroad are fresh out of university and come home to senior positions within schools and the various other institutions of the movement. For example, a good number of the teachers I interviewed are now Vice-Principals and Principals of schools back in Turkey or are working within either one of the publishing houses or the Writers and Journalists Foundation. In other words, the finite period of sacrifice operates, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, to propel members forward not only spiritually but also professionally. It is important to note here that I am not suggesting that the career boost is their primary concern, but rather that it is an outgrowth or by product of their spiritual endeavour to both seek and share knowledge.

Though that said, the status of these modern-day Ibn Battuta's is well understood within the movement. As one teacher explained to me, they are highly thought of and valued:

They are some special people, they are considered as special people and they are presented as special people because it's a difficult job. Everybody accepts this side, and some places they went for some countries I'm talking – maybe Senegal was not like that, my country – but some places are really difficult for Turkish people and for any people I mean. If you're coming from middle class family or having some different opportunities around you in your own country, but in the places you will have difficulties, so people who are going there are too much specialised for us. Let me say that. So by model I mean that, they are special people and they are very valuable (Merve, English Teacher, Senegal).

Another movement member who spent many years abroad, and is now very senior with the daily newspaper Zaman, went so far as to suggest that those who fail to go overseas and make this alternative pilgrimage feel ashamed, as they have failed in their duties to the cause. Subsequently there is a fair degree of competition within the movement to obtain these postings overseas. Many spoke of how they admired the schools and the work they were doing and how they always wanted

be one of the hizmet teachers. As a result of this strong desire to do service abroad, lotteries are often held at seminars for teachers by subject to decide who gets to go and where. Such was the case for Dağestan who after completing his university studies attended a seminar in which all the biology teachers were brought together to draw lots for a number of open positions ranging from South America to Central Asia, and as he put it: “so there’s a lottery, so I took one and looked in [and it was] Kyrgyzstan. So I went to Kyrgyzstan...like that.” Through entering the lottery, Dağestan did exactly as his the movement’s leader requested, he took a leap of faith, wherein he put the cause ahead of, family, friends and wealth to go and serve, and a host of teachers are eagerly waiting for an opportunity to make their pilgrimage. Ibrahim, for example, a seasoned teacher of nine years in local Turkish hizmet schools in Ankara, still holds out hope that he will one day get a chance to emulate his colleagues: “I observed the situation of the schools there [Europe and Russia], but I never worked as a professional, I mean as an English teacher there...I would like to...it’s really important I think, and I have so many friends who have worked abroad.”

## Conclusion

Here it can be seen that this alternative pilgrimage functions in much the same way as it did for travellers such as Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Battuta. It sated their desire for adventure but also provided them with the opportunity to both learn and share their knowledge, as well as to advance themselves both spiritually and professionally. The traveller is advanced spiritually through their sacrifice; they leave behind family, friends and comfort and eschew the pursuit material wealth for the betterment of humanity through the sharing of their skills and knowledge. A by-product of choosing this path of sacrifice and hardship is a spiritual badge of honour that sets them apart and acts as an example for fellow movement members, and is rewarded upon return through both recognition of their newfound status and an increased responsibility in the provision on hizmet on the home front Again, it is important to note here that I am not suggesting that professional gain is a chief motivator for the provision of service. Rather, the elevated status and more comfortable jobs are merely a secondary concern to the provision of service or quality education for their fellow man.

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Footnote<sup>[1]</sup> Another line of thought that may have influenced Gülen on this point is the practice of *halwat-dar anjuman* (solitude in the crowd), which is practiced by the Naqshibandi Sufi order (Schimmel, 1975).