

INTRODUCTION

IBN KHALDUN AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE



Perhaps an epoch is not quite long enough,
nor a single lifetime,
for pattern and order to emerge from numbers.
Better to look from far away.
—Tomasz Różycki, *To The Letter*

Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 CE) is not the father of anthropology. While some sociologists claim him for their own, even those anthropologists who are familiar with his writings are more likely to regard him as a distant relative than a direct progenitor. Why, then, include him as an ancestor of the discipline?

To answer that inquiry, one first has to ask: What is distinctive about anthropology? What are its key assumptions, its ways of framing questions, its intellectual hopes and proffered goals? To those concerns, a recognizable response is readily forthcoming. For if anthropology stands for anything among the disciplines, it stands for three things in particular: the willingness to seek through highly detailed study the patterns that inform the daily life of ordinary people, to connect diverse domains of social and cultural life that other disciplines may unwisely segregate, and to place oneself at once within the society as an unassuming participant and stand back long enough to be a dispassionate observer.

It is the argument of this study that Ibn Khaldun not only broke with the ways in which history was previously portrayed—both

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in the Muslim world and in the West—but that he set in play the elements from which a rigorous anthropology was imaginable, and with it a process whose contributions continue to resonate well beyond the most readily available of his theories.

Given such an emphasis, the strategy of the present assessment may appear to take a somewhat roundabout course. Most accounts of his work focus almost exclusively on Ibn Khaldun's well-known cyclical theory of history—solidary tribes, forged in the cauldron of religious ardor and kin-based ideology, come roaring out of the margins to capture the center only to become the victims of its decadent ways and unavoidable decline. But Ibn Khaldun's approach, however much it appears to incorporate ineluctable forces, is fraught with subtle ambiguities, features that lead him to see connections among cultural domains his forerunners ignored, features that render his overall account far from simply deterministic. Seeking connections is indispensable to his whole approach: "It is obvious," he writes, "that it is from the relations existing among the data that one finds out the unknown from the known" (Ibn Khaldun 1969: 89). Indeed, his style of making those linkages, though not unrelated to his uses of classical Western thought, has to be understood in its own terms if his ideas are not to be either trivialized or domesticated.

Moreover, since much about his life is unknown, and he did not always supply answers to the questions he raised, our analysis must needs be somewhat speculative. Perhaps an appropriately cautious account would not stray into such territory. However, there are several reasons why at moments I shall. First, because in doing so one may see connections previously unnoticed, connections that may help fill in the blanks of the materials we possess. Second, Ibn Khaldun himself commends the use of speculation (*nazar*) as a vehicle for gaining insight, so perhaps a certain degree of informed guesswork might even have met with his approval. Finally, trying to read between the lines not only may stimulate new insights into Ibn Khaldun's available thought but may demonstrate how his mode of thinking does indeed serve as an ancestral source for ways in which we might carry on his project.

We will, then, organize this analysis along three main lines: First, while dividing Ibn Khaldun's contribution into familiar domains—his theory of history, his approaches to tribal organization, mysticism, law, and politics—we will, in fact, be looking constantly at his form of reasoning and how it relates features in a way consistent with his own culture's assumptions. Then, second, we will consider how his approach fits with—and stands distinct from—the predominant modes of analysis of his own day. Here, Ibn Khaldun's ideas about free will, causation, credible information, and oral versus written transmission will all be relevant to an understanding of his methodology and intent. Finally, we will consider how his mode of analysis has relevance for the ongoing anthropological enterprise. For just as his famous theory of history concentrates on recurrent themes, so, too, the theories to which anthropologists attach themselves have a way of receding and returning, thus often redirecting our attention in new and challenging ways to the sources of our current concerns.

As in any such undertaking—and particularly one that reaches back to an individual who lived over six hundred years ago—the sources and reliability of our information become crucial. Fortunately, most of Ibn Khaldun's major writings have been handed down intact over the centuries. The most important is the *Muqaddima*, written during his withdrawal from the world to the fortified site of Qala ben Salama, near the present-day village of Tiaret in northwestern Algeria. He says of that work: “[t]his book has become unique, as it contains unusual knowledge and familiar if hidden wisdom” (Ibn Khaldun 1969: 9). Although we will refer to some of his other writings, particularly those on Sufism and his *Autobiography*, it is to this work that our attention must necessarily be most closely directed.

The *Muqaddima*, written during a brief period of five months in 1377, is commonly referred to as the “Introduction” or “Prolegomena” to the multivolume work collectively entitled the *Kitab al-‘Ibar* (Book of Lessons).¹ The “Introduction” contains the heart of Ibn Khaldun's cyclical theory of empires, while the following volumes deal mainly with the history of the Berber

tribes of North Africa. A separate work is usually referred to as his *Autobiography*.² This latter may seem unusual, but autobiographies were not as uncommon in the medieval Arab world as some have assumed. Westerners may imagine that St. Augustine's *Confessions*, written at the end of the fourth century, initiated a form that was quickly adopted, but the truth is that more than a millennium passed before such self-reflective works reappeared in Europe. Meanwhile, in the Arab world, autobiographies were fairly widespread.³ Biographies, too, were quite prevalent, their form being more settled than that of the autobiographies. But whether it was biography or autobiography, such works focused primarily on genealogical attachments and events as proof that the subject was indeed worthy of God's beneficence. What these accounts usually lacked was information about the individual's inner state, personal life, or generalizations about human nature and social forces drawn from personal experience. While chronology was not ignored, it was not taken as revelatory of individual dispositions or broad historical trajectories. And while, as we will see, Ibn Khaldun does not delve deeply into those features of personal identity that we think reveal a person's true self, he does, both by prescription and by example, demonstrate that his own rigorous analysis will not rest on those unverifiable features that characterized his predecessors' accounts.

How Ibn Khaldun, coming from a culture that placed heavy emphasis on individuality, related that factor to the forces of a universal history will also be of special interest. Although configured differently than in the West, the concept of the person and their relation to the unwinding of history is a vital aspect of understanding Ibn Khaldun's project. Why, we will ask, in such an intensely personalistic culture has he broken out to write about universal forces of history and not simply the deeds of individual men? Why, when biographical dictionaries in the Arab world were about family genealogy, military victories, and proofs of God's blessings, is he writing a "history of events"? Plutarch had described his own approach by saying, "It is not histories we are writing, but Lives" (Plutarch 1919: 7).⁴ Notwithstanding his emphasis on impersonal forces, Ibn Khaldun, though in ways quite

different from Plutarch and the ancients, still had to consider how character informs individual action—even (as he rather surprisingly notes) when it concerns proof of the Messiah’s legitimacy. What is at work, as we will see, is not mindless fate, even though history, in his view, cannot escape elements of the inevitable. It is not even the spiritual suffusing the mundane—though the role of Sufi mysticism is vital to an understanding of his work—for one must still arise each morning and make decisions of uncertain consequence. Perhaps, in the end, for Ibn Khaldun the contradictions *are* the consequence—of free will and fortune, of force and cohesion, of person and surround—each outcome no less poignant for that reason. His contradictions may not be ours, but that he copes with them renders him a part of our present, and with it a challenge to how we, in turn, understand others’ lives. By emphasizing deep structures, Ibn Khaldun set a course for the social sciences that anthropologists of various persuasions inherited even if they did not always acknowledge, or even know, they owed him a portion of that debt.

Moreover, it is not only the substance of what Ibn Khaldun has to say that is innovative but the way he matches his style to his form of explanation. While his mode of causal explanation will run as a theme throughout the present account, it is worth noting at the outset the connection between substance and presentation in his work. If, for example, you hold to a view of history focused on important leaders—or, as Margaret Mead once said, you believe that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world—your account will look very different from one in which you think that destiny lies in biology, economics, or the environment. Where earlier Muslim historiography centered on a particular version of persons and events, Ibn Khaldun was critical of those representations and clearly set forth a very different set of criteria. How he approached the philosophy of the ancient Greeks and that of his more recent Muslim forebearers on questions of causality, personhood, and the natural world is vital to an understanding of what he sought to explain, to his novel form of historical narrative, and to the influence he has had on the development of the social sciences.

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Ibn Khaldun's style of presentation is also no less important than his substantive claims. In his own day there were those who, though disagreeing with the substance of his analysis, saw great merit in its form of expression. Although his work was published and distributed in his lifetime—and was, along with his reputation as a diplomat and jurist, responsible for his being recognized in advance of his travels to various countries—Ibn Khaldun's theories have become more widely known outside of his own time and place than within them. Some people—both in the East and the West—have adopted Ibn Khaldun's cyclical view of history either as a way of claiming their own exception to it or as a way of gauging where they and others may be on the cycle, whether for purposes of taxation, expansion, or foreign relations. The Ottomans, for example, cited him in order to claim they were the exception to inevitable decline and some colonial regimes used his theory to justify their domination of societies they believed only the West could save from the decay he predicted, while Naguib Mahfouz (in his novel *Harafish*) could take the opposite tack and suggest that colonial regimes would be the ones to follow Ibn Khaldun's dynasts into inevitable decline.

In the West, Ibn Khaldun's work was not very widely known until the mid-twentieth century when a number of translations and critiques of his writings became available.⁵ A huge boost to his recognition came in 1948 with the discussion of his work by Arnold Toynbee who, in his best-seller *A Study of History*, characterized Ibn Khaldun as “an Arabic genius” comparable to Thucydides and Machiavelli, someone who, in the *Muqaddima*, produced “undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.”⁶ Translations into various European languages have also brought Ibn Khaldun's writings to a larger audience, while critical studies by Muhsin Mahdi, Abdeslam Chaddadi, Allen James Fromherz, Aziz al-Azmeh, and Robert Irwin have only increased his visibility.⁷

On the more popular level, one can point to Mark Zuckerberg's choice of the *Muqaddima* as a must-read and Ronald Reagan's glowing reference to his theory of taxation, while among science fiction writers, one can cite the influence of Ibn Khaldun

on Frank Herbert's *Dune* and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*. Even Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman (2013), after saying of the *Muqaddima* that "it truly is an awesome work, centuries ahead of its time," referred to Asimov's economist character Hari Seldon as showing that "Ibn Khaldun was setting himself up to be the Hari Seldon of medieval Islam. And he did a pretty good job!"⁸ Arab



Figure 0.1. Representations of Ibn Khaldun. Wikimedia Commons; Shutterstock; Pinterest, public domain.

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nationalists have also been drawn to Ibn Khaldun as an exemplar of indigenous scholarship and political astuteness. Thus, on the six hundredth anniversary of his death, numerous exhibitions and celebrations took place in Europe and various Muslim countries. Statues, stamps, commemorative plates, endowed professorships, a television comedy, and entire universities honoring him can now be found in many parts of the world.

Among anthropologists, Ibn Khaldun's work had an impact on various scholars, most notably Ernest Gellner and Akbar Ahmed, but also Philip Salzman, Talal Asad, and Mahmood Mamdani; among sociologists, Emile Durkheim, Pitrim Sorokin, and Robert E. Park regarded him as vital to the development of their discipline, while Eric Hobsbawm called him "the greatest social and historical mind of the medieval world." Grand scale history employing anthropology has, in the work of such writers as Yuval Harari, Edward O. Wilson, Jared Diamond, Harvey Whitehouse, and others, focused largely on biology, ecology, and economics, cyclical theories being less popular than traditional straight-line accounts. Nevertheless, Ibn Khaldun's work underscores two issues that anthropologists and others have always had to face.

The first relates to the tension between those classical rivals, the universal and the particular. As ethnographers, anthropologists confront the minutiae of everyday life in a wide range of societies yet remain tempted by grand theories—structuralism, cultural evolution, functionalism, etc.—that speak to more encompassing aspects of the human condition. As we will see, it is a tension Ibn Khaldun knew well. The second problem concerns alternative rationalities. Here the issue is whether perception, reasoning, and worldview differ fundamentally across cultures or respond to the same underlying traits and historical forces. A. M. Hocart put this dilemma quite succinctly when he said: "How can we make any progress in the understanding of cultures, ancient or modern, if we persist in dividing what people join, and in joining what they keep apart?"⁹ Ibn Khaldun understood that cultural differences were not simply erased by the commonalities of imperial history, but it is an open question how exactly he related individual accomplishment and imper-

sonal events. Whether in his quest to reconcile his mystical beliefs with his unvarnished account of the politics of empires or his recognition that his own North African heritage did not map exactly onto the culture of Mamluk Egypt, Ibn Khaldun recognized—and in his own life exemplified—an approach to the very problems succeeding generations of anthropologists would also have to face. Each of the following chapters will, therefore, be aimed at drawing us ever more closely to the topics and methods through which Ibn Khaldun seeks the universal while attending carefully to the particular.

Immanuel Kant once said that “experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play.” In chapter 1 we will review the extraordinary life of Ibn Khaldun in an effort to recapture the context in which he came to construct his theory of history—from his travails as a political adviser to his personal losses during the years of the Black Death, his encounter with Tamerlane, and his return to the fraught world of Mamluk Egypt. For this incomparably practical man, a universe of insurmountable forces had to be reconciled with a mystical faith, and the two had to confront a world at once preordained and subject to human effect.

Ibn Khaldun is hardly the only one who has seen cyclical movement in the unfolding of time: We all observe the rotating seasons; we all see birth and maturation and decline. But whereas many cultures—particularly those of the Christian West—see time as directional and history as if not purposive at least not subject to reflux, Ibn Khaldun saw patterns beneath events and with them a vision of how humankind was embedded in forces at once governing and manipulable. In chapter 2 we will, therefore, see how environment, economic forces, and social solidarity inform Ibn Khaldun’s view of the history of empires and humanity’s placement among them.

Muslims are not fatalists. Since “knowledge” is the second most frequently used word in the Quran (after the name of God) and must be sought “even unto China,” it is incumbent on all Believers to exercise their God-given powers of reason to overcome their passions and achieve a viable community of the faithful. Yet

context matters and no one is entirely free from external constraints. Like others before him, Ibn Khaldun had to ask: Do we possess free will or is it, as Isaac Bashevis Singer once quipped, that “we have to believe in free will, we have no choice”? Chapter 3 will seek to understand this conundrum from Ibn Khaldun’s perspective as both a Sufi adherent and a worldly jurist and political operative.

Neither in the *Muqaddima* nor even in the *Autobiography* does Ibn Khaldun concentrate on his inner feelings and thoughts. Yet that inward turn is vital to his religious orientation as a Sufi and with it to an understanding of how he would have us imagine an individual’s position in his times. For him, as we will see in chapter 4, that mystic world is not a denial or retreat from the messiness of everyday personal and political life but an indissoluble link to it, as necessary to completion of a fractured existence as it is to the desired course of human affairs.

On multiple occasions Ibn Khaldun served as a judge. Although records of his decisions have not survived, his views on the law can be teased out of his writings and the broader socio-religious environment within which he operated. Of particular interest in chapter 5 will be his approach to customary practices, an emphasis that often takes precedence over the strictures of formal Islamic law. Thus, in the course of placing his views of the law in the broader context of his studies, we will see Ibn Khaldun’s mode of bringing his theories of causation, facts, and events into a realm where uncertainty reigns but decisions must nevertheless be forthcoming.

It is imperative to keep in mind that Ibn Khaldun is deeply embedded in Arab culture. His assumptions, his categories, his modes of assessing others and their situations, however influenced by outside concepts, are invariably enmeshed in those of his Arab cultural heritage. In chapter 6 we will, therefore, return to several assumptions about persons and actions found in his work with the focus clearly on their distinctively Arab framing and employment—and his own creative departures from them.

Aimé Césaire has spoken of “a universal rich with all that is particular.” Accordingly, the final portion of the book will bring

us back to the central question of how Ibn Khaldun copes with the allure of the universal and the tug of the particular. In doing so we can relate features of his work that may seem inconsistent and underscore why his approach to this issue remains, across more than six centuries, a beacon for anthropologists who have followed in his wake.

NOTES

1. The full title is *Kitāb al-‘Ibar wa-Dīwān al-Mubtada’ wa-l-Khabar fī Ta’rīkh al-‘Arab wa-l-Barbar wa-Man ‘Āsarahum min Dhawī ash-Sha’n al-Akbār* (Book of lessons, record of beginnings and events in the history of the Arabs and the Berbers and their powerful contemporaries). The Arabic word *muqaddima* has also been translated as “premise” (Gule 2015: 8) and “allusions” (El-Rayes 2013).
2. The full title is *at-Ta’rīf bi-ibn Khaldūn wa-Riḥlatih Gharban wa-Sharqan* (Presenting Ibn Khaldun and his journey west and east). There is no complete translation of the *Autobiography* into English. For excerpts see, Alatas 2013, Ballan 2014, and Fischel 1952.
3. See Reynolds 2001, Ghamdi 1989, and Kilpatrick 1991. On biographies, see Hourani 1991: 165–66.
4. In his famous statement near the beginning of “The Life of Alexander,” Plutarch (1919: 7) says: “I am writing biography, not history, and the truth is that the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues or vices of the men who performed them, while on the other hand a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man’s character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshalling great armies, or laying siege to cities.”
5. Unless otherwise indicated, for purposes of this study the translation of the *Muqaddima* by Franz Rosenthal (Ibn Khaldun 1969) will be used, even though that version has been subject to some criticism. Few anthropologists will need to go beyond the abridged version of Rosenthal’s translation.
6. See Toynbee 1934: 321–28 and 1954: 84–87. Toynbee’s work was so popular that he was even featured on the cover of the 17 March 1947 issue of *Time* magazine. In response to the attention the story garnered, the publisher later wrote:
 The governors of seven states have been heard from, as have businessmen, Congressmen, plain citizens, radio broadcasters, journalists (Wrote Edgar Ansel Mowrer. *New York Post* columnist and foreign

affairs expert: “Never before, in my judgment, has any American magazine printed anything quite as important . . .”). In particular, the clergy has been strongly represented—the General Commission on Army and Navy Chaplains, for example, having requested 1,700 reprints for distribution to Armed Forces chaplains everywhere.

For critiques of Toynbee’s approach to Ibn Khaldun, see Irwin 1997; see generally, Montague 1956.

7. Similarly, Hugh Trevor-Roper praised Ibn Khaldun’s analysis as “subtle deep and formless as the ocean” (cited in Ruthven 2019). However, the claim by Bruce Lawrence (1983: 157) that his rediscovery by Western scholars demonstrates that “Ibn Khaldun is a product of Orientalism and the extent to which he can be assessed apart from the Orientalist interest evoked by him is highly questionable” overstates the case, particularly since that rediscovery was also carried out by a number of Muslim scholars. On the variety of Western readers’ interpretations of Ibn Khaldun’s writings see, Abdesselem 1983.

8. On the Reagan quote, see chapter 2. For Krugman’s reference to Ibn Khaldun, see Krugman 2013. Zuckerberg (2015) wrote:

My next book for *A Year of Books* is *Muqaddam* by Ibn Khaldun. It’s a history of the world written by an intellectual who lived in the 1300s. It focuses on how society and culture flow, including the creation of cities, politics, commerce and science.

While much of what was believed then is now disproven after 700 more years of progress, it’s still very interesting to see what was understood at this time and the overall worldview when it’s all considered together.

9. Hocart (1952) 1970: 23.