

Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406): His Contribution to the Science of Civilisation

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‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn was a Muslim historiographer and historian of Arab origin, and one of the founding “fathers” of modern historiography, sociology and economics. He is best known to modern readers for his *Muqaddimah* (Prolegomena [To History]), the introductory book to the magnificent seven-volume account on history of the world entitled *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* (Book of History), which outlined the basic foundations of the science of civilisation. This work was designated by the well-known British historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, as a “philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.” Another British scholar, Robert Flint, commented on the significance of Ibn Khaldūn accordingly: “as a theorist of history he had no equal in any age or country until Vico appeared, more than three hundred years later. Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine were not his peers, and all others were unworthy of being even mentioned along with him.”

‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn al-Haḍrami al-Ishbīlī, commonly known as Ibn Khaldūn, was born in Tunis in 1332 CE into an influential Arab family of Banū Khaldūn from the Haḍramaut. His family’s high status in society enabled Ibn Khaldūn to study with the best teachers in the region. After receiving a standard education in the traditional disciplines, he held different senior positions at various courts in North Africa and Spain. At the age of twenty, in the midst of the inter-dynastic and intra-dynastic turmoil in the region, Ibn Khaldūn began his public career as a secretary to the Hafṣid sultan of Tunis, but soon became attached to the Merinide rival. He stayed in Fez for almost ten years, often negotiating with the Bedouin tribes in North Africa on behalf of the Merinides. He delighted in intrigues between members of the Merinide dynasty, who ruthlessly competed with each other for supremacy; and spent two years (1357-1359) in prison for conspiring with a Hafṣid prince, who tried to regain power. Ibn Khaldūn was released from prison only after the death of the Merinide sultan, Abū ‘Inān. A new sultan, Abū Salīm, appointed him to senior positions, including supervision over civil law. In 1361, the sultan was murdered and Ibn Khaldūn was given safe passage out of Fez on condition that he left North Africa altogether.¹

¹ Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn: An Essay in Reinterpretation* (London: Frank Cass & Company Ltd., 1982), 2-3.

Ibn Khaldūn was welcomed at the Naṣrid court in Granada by the sultan, Muḥammad V (r. 1354-1359 and 1362-1391). During his stay in Granada, Ibn Khaldūn was given various duties, including leading an embassy to Pedro El Cruel in Seville in 1364. Due however, to obscure disagreements with the influential *wazīr*, Ibn Khaṭīb, he left Granada soon afterwards. He returned to Bougie and became a chamberlain to the Hafṣid prince, Abū ‘Abd Allah, who was murdered by rebels just over a year afterwards. For the next nine years, Ibn Khaldūn travelled around central and western North Africa, developing tribal relations. It was here that he recognised the fundamental differences between nomadic and settled lives, and between rural areas and cities. In the solitude of a Berber castle, he wrote his *Muqaddimah* (completed in November 1377) and some parts of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*.

In 1383, Ibn Khaldūn left Tunis for Egypt with the hope of obtaining a more peaceful life of teaching and writing. In 1384, as a professor of Maliki law, he was appointed as a grand judge. He was reported to be a very harsh judge and this caused many conflicts, clashes, intrigues and dismissals. He died in Cairo in 1406.

Science of Civilisation (‘ilm al-‘umrān) In the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn outlined the basic theoretical and methodological foundations of different fields of knowledge, particularly the science of civilisation (‘ilm al-‘umrān). His main concentration was the rise and decline of various Muslim dynasties in North Africa. By focusing on what he regarded as the essential differences in the social make-up between pastoral nomadic (‘umrān *badawī*) and sedentary (‘umrān *ḥaḍarī*) societies, he provided his simple but profound explanation of ‘civilisation.’ To designate any settlement above the bare level of substance, he used the term ‘umrān. Ibn Khaldūn made a distinction between two types of ‘umrān: ‘umrān *badawī* is generally the result of production of necessities, while ‘umrān *ḥaḍarī* is the result of production of luxuries. With increased security and freedom, he believed, people get involved in competition and other activities tied into economic production and growth; as a result, ‘umrān further increases and flourishes: old cities are rebuilt, and new ones are constructed. Consequently, Ibn Khaldūn envisaged civilisation as a product of material progress and economic development. It was a continuous progressive process that mankind naturally achieves through cooperation and striving. When the scale of cooperation and the number of

people involved in that cooperation increase, a larger and more improved *‘umrān* will emerge.²

For Ibn Khaldūn, *‘umrān* comes into existence with the formation of *‘aṣabiyyah*, often translated as ‘group feeling’ or ‘social cohesion’. He maintained that groups with strong *‘aṣabiyyah* could establish political rule over those with weak *‘aṣabiyyah*. At the same time, in order to build a strong civilisation, the *‘aṣabiyyah* must be guided by religious laws. Ibn Khaldūn assumed that religion gives the additional power to *‘aṣabiyyah* and unites people under one strong leadership.³ He consequently concluded that *‘umrān* comes into existence as a result of the harmonious interplay of human reason and religion.

‘Umrān in the thought of Ibn Khaldūn was always in a state of change from a primitive form into an advanced state or continuously in cyclical evolution. He saw every tribe as moving through a cycle from nomadism to city life that then repeats itself again. Once the state is established, it follows, like a biological organism, a natural and necessary law of growth, maturity, and decline. According to Ibn Khaldūn, each stage is culturally more advanced than the one preceding it, but politically weak in terms of power and strength of the state. He also indicated that rural communities were morally stronger than urban communities. Bedouins were characterised by courage, intrepidity, freedom, morality and religion. The city, on the other hand, was said to embody the final stage in the life of a state and of its civilisation. Town dwellers, according to Ibn Khaldūn, were prone to dishonesty; they failed to maintain unity and solidarity and, due to their sedentary life, became addicted to luxury and ease.

Discipline of Historical Criticism Another field of discipline, to which Ibn Khaldūn made a significant input, was historiography. In the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn succeeded in widening the inherited scope of history, gave priority to the study of social, economic and cultural aspects of the whole human past, and set out a system of good and sound historical criticism, and rational evaluation of historical accounts.

Ibn Khaldūn appreciated the early Muslim historians as outstanding, who presented comprehensive collections of historical events in their books. Afterwards, he noticed, historians introduced the tradition of documenting fake stories and unauthentic reports. While presenting historical records, these second generation historians habitually did not pay any

² Elmira Akhmetova, “Defining Civilisation and Religion,” *IAIS Journal of Civilisation Studies*, vol.1, no.1 (October 2008), 47-48.

³ Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, transl. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, 2nd ed.), 1:320.

attention to natural circumstances, and to the changes in conditions and in customs of different nations and races. In their works, as Ibn Khaldūn observed, they presented historical narrations as established fact without any supporting evidence. Ibn Khaldūn consequently outlined a method of historical criticism comprising several important steps of assessment. Historians, according to him, in order to create authentic and trustworthy historical accounts, should possess a good command of the principles of politics, the true nature of existent things, and the differences among nations, places and periods with regard to the ways of life, character qualities, customs and traditions. They also need a comprehensive knowledge of present conditions in all respects of life. Then historians should compare the present and past conditions, and the clear similarities and differences between these periods of time should be taken into account in the evaluation of historical events. Ibn Khaldūn accordingly requested historians to be aware of the differing conditions in the rise of different dynasties; as well as to recognise the disparate reasons and incentives that brought them into being, the concrete circumstances, and the main objectives of their founders. The main goal of historians, as Ibn Khaldūn believed, must be having of comprehensive knowledge of the reason for every happening, and to be acquainted with the origin of every event. At the last step of evaluation, he suggested to historians to check the transmitted information with the basic principles they know. If it fulfils all their requirements, then it would be considered as sound. Otherwise, he believed, the historian should consider the transmitted information as spurious.⁴

Economic Thought Through his great sense and knowledge of history, together with his meticulous observations of men, times, and places, Ibn Khaldūn used an insightful empirical investigation to analyse the role of wealth in the rise and fall of civilisations, and produced original economic thought. For the first time in the field of economics, Ibn Khaldūn raised the significant socio-economic questions concerning population, wealth, labour, surplus, and the hopes of labourers in the fruits of their labour. He clearly demonstrated breadth and depth in his coverage of value and its relationship to labour; his analysis of his theory of capital accumulation and its relationship to the rise and fall of dynasties; his perceptions of the dynamics of demand, supply, prices, and profits; his treatment of the matters of money and the role of governments; his significant theory of taxation, and other economic subjects. Not only did Ibn Khaldūn plant the germinating seeds of classical economics, whether in

⁴ See, Ahmed Elyas Hussein, "Ibn Khaldun's Contribution to Historical Criticism," in Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk (ed.), *Ibn Khaldun and Muslim Historiography* (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2003), 7-8.

production, supply, or cost, but he also pioneered in consumption, demand, and utility, the cornerstones of modern economic theory.⁵

Ibn Khaldūn's unprecedented contributions to the overall field of economics should place him in the history of economic thought as a major forerunner, if not the "father," of modern economics, a title which has been given to Adam Smith, whose eminent works were published around three hundred and seventy years after Ibn Khaldūn's death.

When Ibn Khaldūn wrote his *Muqaddimah*, Islamic civilisation was already declining; his methods and rules remained forgotten in the Muslim world for centuries. His ideas and methodology, yet, were extensively used by early modern European scholars in sociology, political science, economics and history. Ibn Khaldūn's biography appeared in European writings in the end of the seventeenth century and translations of the *Muqaddimah* appeared in Europe in 1806.

Further Reading:

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⁵ Oweiss Ibrahim, "Ibn Khaldun, The Father of Economics," *Georgetown University*, <<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/imo3/ibn.htm>> (accessed 13 August 2013).