

Anthropological Aspects of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*: A Critical Examination

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The contemporary reader of Ibn Khaldun may perceive this Tunisian author as having laid the foundations for many contemporary social sciences, including economics, politicology, sociology and anthropology. Such a perception is not unreasonable, as there are obvious parallels between Ibn Khaldun's ideas and the writings of modern social thinkers: these similarities are even more striking if we consider that Ibn Khaldun preceded the birth of positivist science in the West by almost half a millennium. The problems he investigated, the empirical data he used and the abstract quality of his theorizing all mirror the targets and demands of the modern scientific episteme, at least to some extent. Indeed, the last century has seen the publication of numerous texts which explore Ibn Khaldun's pioneering contribution to particular fields of study, even if, more often than not, such a task risked leading to an unintentional narrowing down of Ibn Khaldun's many-sided intellectual outlook.

It is perhaps on the grounds of cultural sensitivity and historical contextualization that only a few anthropologists have taken the potential disciplinary heritage of Ibn Khaldun's work into account. One of the most prominent members of this minority of anthropologists is, of course, Ernest Gellner. Gellner's book, *Muslim Society* (1981), is a theoretical attempt to link the religion, politics and social structure of the Muslim world by drawing heavily on Ibn Khaldun's theory. His ideal-type "Muslim society" (conceived as a singular socio-cultural entity) was not based on any particular empirical correlative. Gellner defined Islam, in a manner somewhat analogous to his theory of nationalism (Gellner, 1983), as the blueprint of

a social order which apparently corresponds, especially in its puritan logocentric, nomocratic form of interpretation, to the modern means of state building. From Ibn Khaldun he borrowed the dichotomy of “tribal” and “urban” Islam understood as a source of tension and sedition (accompanied by the call for religious purification) in the Muslim world. Despite his close reading of Ibn Khaldun (or maybe precisely because of it), Gellner’s theoretical considerations have attracted much criticism from his colleagues, some of whom claimed them to be implausible (Eickelman, 1982), considerably limited in scope (Lapidus, 1983) or based on ethnocentric as well as erroneous ideas of Islam (Asad, 2009).

Anthropological engagement with Ibn Khaldun is not exhausted with Gellner’s account. A number of present-day authors (Ahmed, 2002, Ahmed, 2005, Chaabani, 2012, Eriksen and Nielsen, 2013: 4-5) tend to portray the medieval Muslim thinker as one of the forefathers of anthropology, or as an initiator of a socio-anthropological type of research, centuries before it was first conceptualized in the West. The impulse to show how Ibn Khaldun’s ideas could be relevant for us today is not, however, shared equally among all practitioners of the profession. Some warn against an almost effortless stimulus to render Ibn Khaldun’s particularity into Western ideas of the universal, as in the process we might turn a blind eye to the greater lessons he may still teach us about the need to understand the specificities of one’s own time and place (Rosen, 2005: 596).

In other words, extracting Ibn Khaldun from the tradition of Muslim theological analysis of which he was a part in order to emphasise the similarities with some Western figures and their views may obscure the fundamental differences between the aspects compared. Even though Ibn Khaldun did recognize the significance of a number of elementary concepts such as culture, tradition and tribal coherence – concepts of significant importance to anthropology – the initiative to interpret those in a predominantly positivist, value-neutral fashion would probably lead to a misunderstanding of Ibn Khaldun’s wider outlook. First of all, his worldview was imbued by religious faith, and encircled by it: faith touched everything he deduced, even the basic (logical) tools for deduction. He did not seek to promote a proto-phenomenology of Muslim faith; he saw Islam as a framework for a perfect society, and the history of Muslim dynasties as a flow of events marked by divine intent. Precisely for this reason, it is important to note that Ibn Khaldun was not an outsider to the context he described and never claimed to be, in the non-participatory sense, “objective” about it (Anderson, 1983: 271).

As a social theorist, Ibn Khaldun was not shy of placing a value judgement and explicitly stating his ethical preferences; as an interpreter of culture he went beyond description for its own sake, to the moral purpose of description (Rosen, 2005: 599; Anderson 1983: 272). Nevertheless, he did pose some typical anthropological questions (which consider culture, environment, social cohesion and political authority, among others) and succeeded in offering clear answers by following similar, but not identical, tracks with secular modes of scientific discourse. This “semblance of modernity”, as Mahdi put it (1964: 293), poses a basic dilemma: is Ibn Khaldun’s work relevant to present-day anthropological research? If the

answer is yes, then it seems necessary to sort out its specific sphere of relevance; if not, then it appears equally important to describe its explanatory weaknesses.

Perhaps the exact answer lies somewhere in the middle: by scrutinizing the principles of Ibn Khaldun's science of culture within the context of Islamic philosophy and its interpretative application to the theory of history, we can reveal the author's intellectual outlook without the burden of proving (or, incidentally, disproving) his proto-anthropological tendencies. On the other hand, by carefully studying Ibn Khaldun's ideas, we can trace the possibilities of pre-modern, non-Western beginnings of anthropology against the background of Islamic scholarship in the history of science.

Ibn Khaldun: the nomadic urbanite

Abû Zayd ibn Khaldûn al-Ḥaḍramî was born in Tunis in 1332 to a family of intellectuals and administrators. His father was a scholar and an expert on Islamic jurisprudence, responsible for laying the foundations of Ibn Khaldun's early education and scholastic interests. Sadly, Ibn Khaldun's young adulthood didn't last long. In 1348, the Black Death came to Tunis and took away both of his parents, leaving the town almost desolate. He eventually left for Algeria and from there went to Morocco, where he found employment as one of the court secretaries in the city of Fez. At that particular moment in history, the administrative and political capital of the Marinid dynasty was a true cultural metropolis which attracted many thinkers and scholars from North Africa. He studied in the venerable Qarawiyyin mosque (founded in 865), where he took advantage of its well-equipped library and participated in its vivid academic life. The Qarawiyyin mosque was not only the largest religious edifice in North Africa but also served as the main scholastic institution in Morocco (today, UNESCO considers it as the oldest ongoing university in the world), offering lectures in a number of disciplines, from astrology and arithmetic to Qur'anic studies and sharia law. Al Qarawiyyin had distinguished alumni, including at least three illustrious persons. One of them was Leo Africanus, the famed author of *A Geographic History of Africa*; another was Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Maimonides, head of the Jewish community in Egypt and the great scholar of the Torah; and the third was Ibn Khaldun (Mamdani, 2017: 8).

The three eminent scholars were not contemporaries; however, Ibn Khaldun probably had some insight regarding Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, a standard work on Jewish religious thought which was studied at different times by Muslim scholars (Rosenthal, 1984: 23). There is also a strong possibility that Ibn Khaldun may have encountered in the *Guide* the notion that cowardice results from oppression and that the harshness of desert life has a rejuvenating effect on the internal constitution of society. Both ideas were of considerable significance to Ibn Khaldun's political theory, as will be shown.

The Tunisian scholar's stay in Fez proved intellectually beneficial, if not politically. He studied lavishly – and with the fine digestion of a highly promising scholar. His entanglement in court politics, on the other hand, was not as fruitful as his pursuit for abstract knowledge. In 1357, he joined an anti-Marinid conspiracy, which led to his brief

imprisonment. When he was finally released, almost two years later, he moved to Granada, finding protection at the court of Muhammad V. In Andalusia, the country of his forefathers, Ibn Khaldun's social skills quickly became equally respected and dangerously visible, engendering enmity from his more powerful rivals. Sensing danger, he left Granada and travelled back to Maghreb, receiving welcome from the governor of Bougie. This was in 1365. At that point, Ibn Khaldun experienced his first major "fieldwork" encounter with the Berber tribesmen in the mountains. He was named the chief minister of Abu 'Abdallah, the amir of Bougie, and was, among other duties, appointed to collect taxes from the highland tribes. While performing this task, he succeeded in glimpsing the nomads' political and economic life, religious attitudes and military ethos.

In the course of the next ten years, his positions at various courts allowed him to accumulate and further develop his initial observations. Engaged mainly in negotiating with different Bedouin and Berber tribes on raising taxes or organizing armies for various Hafsid or Marinid rulers, Ibn Khaldun gradually became an expert on what he later, in the *Muqaddimah*, described as the "character and natural qualities" of the "frugal" inhabitants of the desolate areas. At the same time, he was a full-blooded urbanite, well versed in the affairs of sedentary culture, and especially its political dynamic of which he, as the representative of the current power structures, had an intimate knowledge. Ibn Khaldun, thus, stood at a classical anthropological landmark: with one investigative step, he was turning close to the hinterland, while with another he was regularly placed in the world of urban elites and court politics. This shifting pair of footings enabled him to cultivate a sense of double vision typical for the modern practitioners of anthropology – a vision which allowed him to grasp the image of urban culture from the viewpoint of the nomad, as well as to perceive the tribesmen with the sophisticated gaze of the affluent citizen.

This conflicting pair of perceptions shapes the conceptual core of the *Muqaddimah* (Prolegomenon): a book which theorizes on different levels of interaction between the ruling dynasties, the nature of political authority and cultural propensities of sedentary civilization; simultaneously, it takes into account the culture of tribal power, its sources, aims and overall character of nomadic societies. Written in the Castle of Banu Salama in western Algeria (in the year 1377), and additionally revised in Egypt seven years after the writing of the first draft, the *Muqaddimah* was composed as the introduction (or Book I) of the history of Bedouin and Berber dynasties in North Africa. Ibn Khaldun's magnum opus, titled *Kitab al-Ibar* (Book of Lessons) of which the *Muqaddimah* is an integral part, was originally published in seven volumes. As exposed in his lengthy introduction, Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history is clearly circular and, up to some point, repetitive. It is presented as if following predictable phases and consecutive rules of unfolding. In explaining why this is so, Ibn Khaldun employed not only historical evidence, but (proto-)sociological and cultural argumentation as well, which makes his text highly accessible to anthropological reading.

In his attempt to advance the study of history, Ibn Khaldun relied exceedingly on formal logic. For him, logic was a tool which helped historians to rule out the nonsensical

statements, sensationalism and baseless and erroneous assumptions from their own research as well as from the works of their intellectual predecessors. Logic is the first of the four “intellectual sciences” (the other three being physics, metaphysics and mathematics); it protects the mind from error and serves as a guideline for distinguishing the correct arguments from fallacious assumptions. Supported by logic, the critical mind of a historian can relate his research data to the broader conditions governing social organization and the principles stemming from custom which, together with the fundamental facts of politics, as the author saw it, present a clear view of “the nature of civilization”. To put it differently, the results of sociological, anthropological and politicological research provide an adequate context for the more exact interpretation of history.

Anthropological concepts – case one: phenotype

There are several anthropological concepts employed in Ibn Khaldun’s *Prolegomenon*. The first pair, culture and custom, are of fundamental importance to anthropology as well as to Ibn Khaldun’s work. The other two, tradition and the phenotypic differentiation of humans, have no critical significance for his theory as a whole, but will be examined here for their wider relevance to the history of anthropological ideas.

Ibn Khaldun’s reflections on the human phenotype can be found in the opening chapter of the *Muqaddimah*. They are a part of prefatory discussions concerned with world geography and the influence of the climate system on human cultural development. In writing this section of the book, Ibn Khaldun divided the Earth into seven zones, two excessively hot, two severely cold and three mild in temperature. The three temperate zones were posed as the arenas of civilizational growth, while the other four (two in the north and two in the south) were portrayed as unadvanced regarding material culture and intellectual shape of their inhabitants.

It should be stressed that Ibn Khaldun’s discussion on phenotypic differentiation of humans is not based on biological presumptions. For instance, the Tunisian scholar was sharp in his criticism of the assertion by some Muslim genealogists that all sub-Saharan nations were descended from Ham, the disfavoured son of Noah. By dismissing the Hamitic hypothesis as a “silly story” (61), he criticized the contrasting idea that the human phenotype is a premise of some inherent, or God-given *racial order*. For him, differences in human complexion reflected variables in overall human condition, not biology. What is meant here under human condition is cultural and religious sophistication of human groups as well as the geographical, environmental and climatic factors they are influenced by. Since people can move from zone to zone and since they are not ethnically predestined to be “black” or “white”, their somatic characteristics are described as fluid categories, devoid of determinist connotations that could turn racial when applied to entire communities:

Negroes from the south who settle in the temperate fourth zone or in the seventh zone that tends toward whiteness, are found to produce descendants whose color gradually turns white in the course of time. Vice versa, inhabitants from the north or from the fourth zone who settle in

the south produce descendants whose color turns black. (60)

The environmental thesis Ibn Khaldun professed bore many similarities to later works of early naturalists and proto-ethnologists such as Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) and Comte de Buffon (1707-1788). Both Blumenbach and Buffon believed, on the same lines as Ibn Khaldun's ideas, that the observed human variability must be environmentally induced (Harris, 1971: 84-86; Frederickson, 2002: 57-59). The dark complexion of sub-Saharan Africans was explained as the result of their exposure to tropical sun. The wind and cold were responsible for the bronze skin tone of ethnic groups inhabiting the Arctic region; the Chinese were fairer than the Tatars because their urban habitat protected them from the elements; and so forth.

On the other hand, these 18th-century European thinkers maintained that the origins of humanity were Caucasian and that a set of intertwined factors – climate, diet, hybridization, disease – caused humanity to “degenerate” from the original white-skinned racial type (ibid.). Ibn Khaldun held no similar views regarding racial superiority of Arabs or Semitic people in general. However, he did retain a cultural supremacist stance in believing that Muslims generally are superior to non-Muslims as a consequence of their acceptance of the Islamic faith, culture and moral premises of rulership.

For him, in other words, the concept of human primitivity, futility and backwardness had nothing to do with skin colour or ethnic origin. Wild and savage people were, as Ibn Khaldun implied, people “without culture”. What living in a community devoid of a comprehensive moral code (extracted from religion, or secular law), really meant, as Ibn Khaldun saw it, was persisting in a state conspicuously unemancipated from nature.

In such a primeval condition, without any authority (conceptual or physical) to hold them back, people are disposed to mutual aggressiveness; in such close dialogue with their “animal nature” (47) they are liable to be hostile and unjust “because the evil in [a man] is the result of the animal powers in him” (111). Humans, as Ibn Khaldun believed, needed “restraining influence” to prevent them from destroying each other in the maelstrom of universal enmity (a concept comparable to the Hobbesian war of all against all). [1] The restraining influence which Ibn Khaldun (as well as Hobbes) mentioned is, of course, state power, which rests to a considerable degree on the authority of a sovereign (47). But the restrictive force which is even more influential than state power is, as the Tunisian scholar estimated, religion.

Traditions

Ibn Khaldun portrays civilians under state rulership as “carefree and trusting” in their meek defencelessness: they are disarmed, pacified, guarded by militia and protected by city walls that surround them and cause them to be fully assured in their safety. Benign and trusting, they are similar to “women and children, who depend upon the master of the house” (95). Through early education and basic instruction in civil discipline, they adopt the ways of proper civic behaviour and conform to laws and regulation of the state. Fear for safety,

property and wealth softens them and keeps them governable.

Citizens, moreover, tend to live comfortably and at ease, and the state performs its subtle art of subordinating and disciplining them through the use of educational and government laws (with an eye to keeping underlings humble). Religious law, on the other hand, does not humiliate humankind: it aims to improve human dignity, moral standards and social conduct by eliminating evil and injustice from their affairs. It outweighs their worldly interests and causes them to act in accordance with their religion in all areas of life, including state politics. As Ibn Khaldun notices, “Anything (done by royal authority) that is dictated by force, superiority, or the free play of the power of wrathfulness, *is tyranny and injustice* and considered reprehensible by (the religious law)...” (154-155, italics added). Divine law, thus, liberates men, while government law deprives them of their fortitude. Religious means of restraint come from the inside, while coercive measures taken by the government come from the outside. This is precisely why the restraining influence of religion is, as Ibn Khaldun understood, more meritorious than that of the state. Cultural values inscribed in the Holy Scriptures lift humanity into a new collective, political and moral awareness that mightily transcends the original consciousness of “primitive” and “savage” nations.

Against this background, culture, not race, emerges as a benchmark between animal and human “natures”; when this threshold appears to be thin or non-existent, men are regarded as evil and bestial; only when it is vital and strong are they estimated to be truly human and deserving of God’s grace.

For Ibn Khaldun, the world of humans was, then, divided between those aware of divine laws (Muslims, Christians and Jews), those who lived under the restraining authority of royal rulership and those who had no restraining authority at all. In other words, he recognized three types of sociopolitical organization – monotheistic, polytheistic and acephalous – and arranged them hierarchically, with monotheistic regimes at the top and (pagan) societies without states at the bottom. Precisely for this reason, he saw some ancient African states – Christian Abyssinia, Muslim Gao, Takrur and Mali – as cultural equals of the most advanced civilizations located in the three temperate zones. In the same vein, he qualified “those Slavs, European Christians, and Turkish nations that have adopted Christianity” (59) as a small minority of culturally advantageous white northerners, on account of their recognition of prophecy.

It is clear, given these premises, that humans are distinguished from other living beings by their intellectual and cultural, not somatic, qualities. All men have the disposition to think, although not in equal degrees:

The degree to which a human being is able to establish an orderly causal chain determines his degree of humanity. Some people are able to establish a causal nexus for two or three levels. Some are not able to go beyond that. Others may reach five or six. Their humanity, consequently, is higher. (335-336)

On the lowest level, people perceive as animals do, without establishing the causal chain in the sensory data. By creating connections between the information they receive through their senses, they establish links and increase cognitive experience of the external world. This more complex level of thought process separates humans from animals. Finally, humans employ hypothetical knowledge that leads them beyond sensory perception and gives rise to more abstract thought processes.

Thus, vocabulary, logic, crafts, sciences and many other aspects of human intelligence emerge. Development of intellect corresponds directly to the development of civilization, since highly sophisticated culture provides and additionally stimulates the expansion of knowledge. A single human being cannot give birth to culture: he needs to associate with others in order to secure his existence in a satisfactory way. Association and co-operation of individuals with mutual interests requires exercise of experimental intellect which regulates their social interaction and makes their behaviour sensible to them. Humans therefore act, observe, think and consult with each other on the most suitable arrangements for their social behaviour. These culturally arranged modalities of interaction are called, according to Ibn Khaldun, *tradition*.

Ibn Khaldun asserted that tradition is a particular form of collective experience – one that leads humans from evil to good, “from the things that are detrimental to them, to those that are in their interest” (336). As an outcome of human mutual reflection on the consequences of their social actions, tradition cannot be learned from books; it is a type of informal, embodied knowledge, amassed through past experience, transmitted from one generation to the next, and employed in social relations considered appropriate in one’s culture. Tradition, therefore, ought to be learned on an individual level through socialization. To acquire this social intelligence, one should accept the instruction of one’s elders and learn from their experience.

One who is ignorant of tradition will find it hard to make ends meet among his fellow men. He will act as a rule-breaker, transgressor of cultural boundaries and an outsider to the community he wishes to be part of. It is important to note that Ibn Khaldun understood tradition as a *craft* “that later generations take over from the earlier ones” (342); like each craft, tradition appears in its proper place within the broader arrangement of crafts, encouraging the mind to acquire additional intelligence which paves the way for reception of yet other crafts. Accordingly, the intellect is conditioned for a quick flourishing of knowledge which helps individuals to enhance their culture and increase their participation in humanity.

Culture and custom

Similar to many early anthropologists, Ibn Khaldun held the view that culture is a uniform, internally harmonious and bounded system of values, concepts and practices, which by implication limits internal heterogeneity and individual agency in the community. Customs, as Ibn Khaldun saw them, “determine human nature and character” (107) in as much as a

“man is a child of the custom”, “not of his ancestors” (300), nor “the product of his natural disposition and temperament” (95). Humans interiorize the conditions to which they have become accustomed until these conditions become character traits and matters of habit. In referring to “conditions”, Ibn Khaldun aimed at socio-cultural surroundings of humans, not their natural environment – he insisted upon the “outlook” of the group, its general attitude towards the external world *and* bodily existence. Culture (which provides this outlook), therefore, shapes the individual; nurture, in other words, takes precedence over nature.

In addition, customs show aptness to alter in different cultural, or rather civilizational settings, tailoring in the process the identity of their bearers for a new set of cultural preferences. Paired alteration of both the customs and the character of the group is the result of the group’s successful accommodation to civilizational conditions previously unfamiliar to them. This process of group adjustment is achieved with far less difficulty in the case that the group adapts from worse to better conditions. For instance, Bedouins who give up their arduous, yet simple and spiritually pure existence in the desert for the amenities of a gentler and more lavish urban life can easily adopt the epicurean habits of the (upscale) citizen; but there is a price to pay: the bohemian lifestyle of sensuality and pleasures of flesh leads to corruption of the spirit and destruction of virtuousness and manliness of the “desert outlook” (because it is unavoidable that actions influence the soul). There are a number of passages in the *Muqaddimah* which vividly illustrate this point. [2] In spite of the many advantages which sedentary civilization has to offer, Ibn Khaldun evidently asserted that an urban population is exposed to a fundamentally evil form of culture:

Corruption of the individual inhabitants [of the city] is the result of painful and trying efforts to satisfy the needs caused by their (luxury) customs; (the result) of the bad qualities they have acquired in the process of satisfying (those needs); and of the damage the soul suffers after it has obtained them (...) Because of the many desires and pleasures resulting from luxury, they [i.e. the city dwellers] are found to know everything about the ways and means of immorality (...), where the Bedouin attitude requires modesty (and avoidance of) obscenities. (...) Eventually, this becomes a custom and trait of character with most of them [i.e. citizens], except those whom God protects. (286-287)

Ibn Khaldun portrayed the nomads in terms similar to the concept of noble savage prevalent in the eighteenth-century European moral philosophy: nomadic tribesmen are untamed, primitive, but also, as indicated above, pure in heart, courageous and uncorrupted by the influence of civilization. In short, “Bedouins”, Ibn Khaldun stressed, “are closer to being good than sedentary people” (94).

It is clear that the writer of the *Muqaddimah* saw the two cultures – that of the Bedouin and that of the urbanite – not only as fundamentally distinct, but also as polarized. He portrayed both cultures as carrying certain underlying essences which acted as reverse mirror-images of each other. These essences can, in fact, be presented in a set of binary oppositions, in a manner as shown in Table 1:

Nomadic Culture	Urban culture
Simple	Complex
Wild	Cultivated
Tribal	Civil
Egalitarian	Hierarchical
Genuine	Artificial
Moderate	Excessive
Firm	Delicate
Pure	Corrupted
Difficult	Desirable
Rigid	Sensual
Militant	Submissive

The essentialist components of the two cultures have been described on the pages of the *Muqaddimah* as pre-moulded and existing prior to any individual human actor. People cannot influence them consciously even if these cultural traits – or social facts, as Émile Durkheim would call them – actively influence human consciousness and their social actions. In other words, they are *sui generis* elements of culture which shape the ways individuals behave and disallow any unpredictability in social arrangements:

[It] should be known that the things that come to being (...) require appropriate causes which are prior to (their existence). They introduce the things that come into being into the realm dominated by custom, and effect their coming into being. Each one of these causes, in turn, comes into being and, thus, requires other causes. Causes continue to follow upon causes in the ascending order, until they reach the Causer of all causes, Him who brings them into existence and creates them. (348)

Causes responsible for the creation of cultural phenomena can only be traced back to God. The origins of certain cultural processes, particularly those made plain in the realm of custom, predate humans. Humans cannot entirely uncover the logic of every symbolic practice they collectively perform. They can either interiorize it or change it for some different cultural practice, available in a different set of cultural norms.

For an individual to become *culturally* a nomad or *culturally* a citizen means that they should adapt their personality to their immediate life conditions (desert or urban). Their culture will regulate their character, determine their personality, sharpen their worldview and give shape to their thoughts and actions. Customs of their community will manage the process of their adjustment to the environmental and material circumstances they are surrounded with. But customs are interchangeable. By converting customs and switching cultural habits, one merely moves from mould to mould, adopting the already existing social roles and becoming a virtual replica of the past generations, condemned to repeat their mistakes. While in the process of transition from one set of customs to another, from one type of social practice to another, one does not really change culturally as much as *blending in with* the pre-cut (“desert” or urban) “outlook.”

Ibn Khaldun was, as Ernest Gellner noted, a superb inventor of ideal types (1981, 88), yet it

seems unlikely that his hypothetical abstractions could be devised without some level of simplification of a more complex reality. While drawing on fixed assumptions about the desert and sedentary civilizations, he attempted to reveal the inner logic of historical events in the Muslim world, to uncover their shared features and to present them in a neatly arranged pattern. In this pattern, all elements combine and reproduce the greater design again and again by taking predictable steps.

Anthropological concept engaged

The Tunisian scholar's value-laden contrasting of Bedouin and urban customs stands, as will be seen, at the centre of his philosophy of history. The easiest way to illustrate this point is, perhaps, to imagine that the Bedouin and sedentary cultures represent two life forms, separate, but mutually reproducible. The urbanites, in this allegory, are female and nomads are the male-gendered entity. To secure the female, the male must act forcefully, compelling his adversaries to step down. However, "male energy", metaphorically put, is in Ibn Khaldun's opinion, a perishable good. It has its scope, its function – and its expiration date. Bedouin culture is the wellspring of energy; sedentary culture drains it. Since the desert is the breath and bone of cities, and since every Bedouin's goal is urbanization, the city shall take in the Bedouin's energy, reproduce it, and perform a symbolic castration on her mate (114-115). In this way, civilization lives, while dynasties perish. The turn of historical events is not only circular but also predetermined, which in fact means it is dependent on strict laws similar to how physical objects are subject to Newton's laws.

This position, as already stated, suggests that history follows predictable stages and rules that can be discerned by a viable scientific theory. Ibn Khaldun's basic theoretical observations are as follows: sedentary civilization is sophisticated, passive and soft. Bedouins are courageous and strong. Sedentary people have laws, rulers and dynasties. When the dynasty becomes weak, sedentary people cannot defend themselves. When the ruling elites become too preoccupied with their putrid cravings, the urbanites need the Bedouin group energy to carry out the job of exterminating the corrupt government for them.

Nomadic tribes will not shed royal blood for nothing: they will want to fill the anticipated gap in authority by establishing a new dynasty under a new ruler, one of their own kin. To achieve this goal, they need to acquire formal political recognition so as to avoid falling, like looters and cut-throats, into the unpolitical, that is the criminal sphere.

It is important to note how, in Ibn Khaldun's viewpoint, Bedouins achieve political transformation from proud and wild outlaws into legitimate challengers of the royal house. This semantic shift is, according to the Tunisian author, linked with the very origin of political influence, as well as with certain essential qualities of Bedouin/urban culture. The author of the *Muqaddimah* asserts that in order to achieve prestige and nobility, a would-be leader must primarily be in a state of being outside – outside of leadership, outside of influence, devoid of nobility – in short, in a "base, humble position" away from official

sources of power (105). It is quite clear why Ibn Khaldun saw this as a rule. Sedentary culture is, namely, contaminated by distorted habits and bad qualities. Due to their evil customs, urbanites gradually lose all capability of doing praiseworthy deeds. The process of moral deterioration captivates not only common townsfolk, but aristocracy and members of the royal house as well; it is an inherent aspect of sedentary culture, and therefore inevitable. To destroy the vicious circle of decadence, wickedness, corruption and greed, one must break it from the outside, crushing it with stimulus flowing from pure virtue, untouched by the lure of earthly temptations.

Besides being preserved from twisted habits and defective qualities of sedentary civilization, Bedouins are – in Ibn Khaldun’s mind – ideal for such a task because they possess a distinct sharpness of character honed by something he called ‘*asabiyya*, or “group feeling”. The Tunisian author saw ‘*asabiyya* as the basis of all human political organization, even though he found it to be stronger between nomads than among sedentary people. Bedouin nomads, camel herders, who make excursions deep into the desert, take pride in their courage and freedom and keep themselves away from subservience of any kind. “It is”, in Ibn Khaldun’s words, “difficult to subordinate themselves to each other, because they are not used to (any control) and because they are in the state of savagery. Their leader needs them mostly for the group spirit that is necessary for the purpose of defense” (120).

Considering that Bedouin culture is by character anti-authoritarian and anarchic, it should be difficult for a tribal chief to impose his command upon a substantial number of nomadic kin groups. To complicate things even further, Ibn Khaldun observed that “every Bedouin is eager to be the leader” and that “[T]here are numerous authorities and amirs among them” (119). This surplus of leadership aspirations, which bears individualistic and atomizing social qualities, speaks in favour of apparent savage and centrifugal forces in the Bedouin culture. The opposite factor, one that seemingly provides coherence to tribal community, stems, in Ibn Khaldun’s view, from a natural, biological urge: it involves affection for one’s blood relatives, “(the feeling that) no harm ought to befall them nor any destruction come upon them” (98). This affection, in turn, engages sentiments like compassion, commitment, loyalty and trust between closely knit kin groups. It is the basis of ‘*asabiyya*, or group solidarity.

Group solidarity

The notion of ‘*asabiyya* is of utmost importance in Ibn Khaldun’s philosophy of history. The word itself appears over five hundred times in the *Muqaddimah*. In medieval Arabic dictionaries, as noted by Robert Irwin, ‘*asabiyya* is defined as “a strong attachment, which holds several persons closely united by the same interests or the same opinion” (Irwin, 2018: 45).

The framework for this close unity is kinship, on account of tribesmen’s tracing their descent from a common apical ancestor. Belonging to a single tribe involves a feeling of loyalty profound enough to overpower one’s personal interests, especially in the hour of need. The

collective aspect of nomadic pastoralist culture is therefore more efficient and tangible than the individualistic drive one may feel, seeing that an individual excluded from her tribe could not survive on her own in the desert, and that the refusal to show loyalty may lead to exactly such expulsion. What is visible here is the great influence of natural environment in the hypothetical crystallization of group solidarity. Without the life pressures imposed by harsh natural conditions, nomads would, *ex hypothesi*, stay disobedient and atomized, and the tribal hierarchy stemming from *'asabiyya* would be far less achievable.

In the framework laid out in the *Muqaddimah*, the basic goal of group feeling is the achievement of royal authority. Its energy – its group strength and stamina – arises from the toughness of desert life, on the grounds that hard living conditions produce wild and courageous men whose only notion of fear is that induced in the hearts of others. This fear-inducing shared vigour is the key to the tribe's success. Bravery is power; power leads to expansion and expansion to superiority, that is – to the domination of the mightiest tribe over all who dare to stand in its way.

Each group feeling maintains its sway over its own domain and people, as is the case with tribes and nations all over the earth. However, if the one group feeling overpowers the other and makes it subservient to itself, the two group feelings enter into close contact, and the (defeated) group feeling gives added power to the (victorious) group feeling, which, as a result, sets its goal of superiority and domination higher than before (...) [W]hen the ruling dynasty grows senile and no defender arises from among its friends who share in its group feeling, the (new group feeling) takes over and deprives the ruling dynasty of its power, and, thus, obtains complete royal authority. (108)

The question of dynastical shifts intrigued Ibn Khaldun inasmuch as he noted that the founders of dynasties – Bedouin and Berber tribesmen – had the same cultural upbringing as their later contenders who drove them to ruin. In stating that “the desert is the basis and reservoir of civilization and cities” (93), he hinted at exactly such mobility of power which circles from the waste regions, aims at the royal palace and flows back to the desert. Once the new powerholders come to fill the ranks of the government and the new leader seizes the throne, the sedentary culture starts working its way through the cultural makeup of novice Bedouin royalty, modifying their customs, reassembling their moral standards and cultivating their habits for the thrills and splendours of sedentary life.

The breakdown of desert outlook does not, however, happen at once. Ibn Khaldun, in fact, mentions three generations of rulers who reaffirm the power and seal the fate of a single dynasty (the fourth generation, if it prevails at all, will serve only to stamp out the prestige of the royal house). In his assessment, the rule of three generations is an almost universally applicable theoretical tool for the accurate examination of the history of Muslim states.

The rule of three generations

Theoretically, blood ties are responsible for the formation of kin groups, and kin groups are

the physical (biological) basis of group feeling. Group solidarity can employ communities as wide as tribes and even nations (as is the case with Arabs at the beginning of Islam), provided that there is a leader capable of connecting all fragmentary outputs of *'asabiyya* and submitting them under his command. Ideally, such a person should be firmly rooted in desert customs; his fellow combatants and tribal chiefs should fear and obey him, since "[E]ach individual group feeling that becomes aware of the superiority of the group feeling of the leader is ready to obey and to follow him" (101). A true ruler, as Ibn Khaldun presumes, is an outsider to the city, the chieftain of nomadic troops, superior master of tribes and group feelings (293) – his reputation should by far precede him, casting a formidable shadow on the royal house, soon to be eradicated. When the inevitable occurs, and the old dynasty is done away with, the unifier of tribes acquires the throne and claims royal authority for himself, owing to the precept that "royal authority is the goal of group feeling" (109).

While still fresh from the desert, the new dynasty under a new ruler is puritanical and self-disciplined. It earns respect from its subjects by maintaining a sober and just political image. The sovereign is held in high esteem for the virtue of being generous, compassionate, humble and pious. He is supportive of men of religion, open-handed towards the poor, inclined towards forgiveness of error and attentive to religious duties as well as to any sign of social discontent. He has not forgotten the toughness of the desert life or the steadfastness of his comrades who followed him to triumph. His tribe does not renounce him because he proved to be fair and proper in sharing the power between his kinsmen. Such is the regency of the first ruler.

His successor rushes to the throne with more self-admiration: he employs political means chiefly to reinforce his advantages. He relinquishes the code of *'asabiyya* to boil down the group energy and to free himself from the pressure of a consanguineous power structure which limits his autonomy and narrows down his room for manoeuvre. He carefully keeps at bay the other clansman who may see themselves as having lawful entitlement to royal status and power: by pushing them "with the palms of his hands" (146), he turns them into his enemies.

Meanwhile – to avoid the danger of insurrection – the second generation ruler gains other supporters outside of his own kin group, whom he appoints as wazirs, tax collectors, military commanders and administrative officers. These "other friends" are called *clients*. The clients swear to protect their master with their lives; they are indebted to him for his benefaction and he, in turn, finds among them his new brethren and closest advisors. Instead of a just government upheld by natural qualities of group spirit, the master-client relationship unfolds in a perfidious atmosphere of flattery, duplicity and treachery; it is driven by pure interest rather than by natural urges and genuine feelings, and is hence inferior to the code of *'asabiyya*: it is a symptom, as Ibn Khaldun says, of a disease of the dynasty (147).

This disease grows fatal in the third generation. Its members completely lose touch with customs and traditions of their forefathers: sedentary culture has taken them under its wing and blinded them towards their glorious past. They have become proud, spoiled and weak.

“With their emblems, apparel, horseback-riding, and (fighting) skill, they deceive people and give them wrong impression” (137). In their attempt to preserve the personal, as well as the prestige of the dynasty, they rely completely on royal pomp to blur the fact that the tigers they profess to be are really made of paper. Their feebleness and addiction to opulence cannot, however, be hidden from view of the military elite. The ruler in this stage needs the protection of strong and courageous men (as he himself is neither brave nor capable of looking after himself) and is therefore ready to “smooth over the situation through generous allowances and much spending (for the soldiers)” (249). To cover the expenses of the army, he collects unjustified taxes, violates property rights of the populace, confiscates their possessions and raises customs duties, therefore putting the economy at risk. On top of everything, he wastes wealth on his own pleasures and on the growing demands of his inner circle of clients. His closest followers, experienced in pleasing him and keeping him in convenient mood, gradually grow weary of his caprices, and become disdainful of their master, who, as a result, shuns them. The realm of the ruler eventually sinks into hands of complete strangers, “servants” and “helpers” (149), formally followers of the dynasty, but practically outsiders to it. These outsiders finally split the dominion between themselves, stripping it completely of its coherence. Thus, the power escapes the grip of those who had first won it. The dynasty falls into the hands of groups who had not established it.

In this stage, history reaches its full cycle. Ibn Khaldun sums up effectively: “The (mistakes of the past) grow stronger with each successive generation and lead eventually to loss of the (dynasty’s) identity” (147). When the identity of the old dynasty fades away (to senility), new group energies burst out in the outskirts of its realm, or among neighbouring tribes, and a fresh code of *‘asabiyya* emerges, promising blood. The provincial governors start choking each other off; the bordering nations, noticing the dynasty’s weakness, revolt against it. The group which energizes the firmest group spirit shall finish the senile regime and start a new one, founded on identical premises, and sharing an identical faith (252-253).

Theological roots of Ibn Khaldun’s “new historical science”

In examining the Tunisian scholar’s anthropological ideas, it should be recalled that he did not pay much attention to ethnographic detail. His was an Olympian approach to society: he regarded socio-cultural phenomena as if scrutinizing a complex and fascinating image retrieved from the opposite end of a telescope. His portrayal of the nomad’s way of life is more an abstract characterization than a meticulous description; as Robert Irwin noticed, “if the sources did not tell us otherwise, one might have guessed that he had never spent a single day of his life in a nomadic encampment” (Irwin, 2018: 46). He told his readers nothing about the strategies of group survival in the desert, or about the distribution of power and resources in the clan. He stayed quiet on the subject of kinship terminology and the culturally imbued individual sensemaking of blood relations. He did not provide us with any knowledge of the life-cycle rituals of nomadic peoples, nor insights about their oral traditions and cultural taboos. He employed the notion of custom extensively in his explanation of social dynamics, but he never displayed any clear depiction of customs of

nomadic people which apparently reflected their strict cultural values.

The lack of ethnographic evidence in Ibn Khaldun's written account can, of course, be justified by the author's attempt to make a theory of *dynastic*, not of cultural transitions. He, therefore, emphasized the elements of greater importance to his theoretical ponderings, such as the concept of *'asabiyya*, the question of royal authority, the problems of just rulership or the origins of corruption, and left other, less immediate questions unconsidered. This way, he allowed himself to lean on the metaphor of state as a functionally integrated organism (which keeps itself in one piece through hard work), along with that of history as a rhythm of biological cycles affecting the life of the dynasty in various domains. Such a theoretical layout would, perhaps, be less productive if Ibn Khaldun did not derive his hypotheses from ideal types, but from some less abstract level of human affairs.

The Tunisian author repeatedly used induction as a method of reasoning: universal claims, such as "all Bedouin", "every citizen" and similar, occur regularly on the pages of the *Muqaddimah*. Some of his inferences drawn from general claims have unfortunately backfired on his otherwise admirable logic. By way of illustration, Ibn Khaldun claimed that nomadic people in general feel an irresistible pull towards the city. He saw nothing anomalous in such a pull: it is in perfect accord with natural human tendency to obtain more satisfactory existence and leave behind the life of hardship in the waste regions. Given the general statement that urbanization is the goal of every nomad, Ibn Khaldun assessed that "most inhabitants" of "any given city" are in fact ex-nomads of Bedouin descent (93). This assessment, however, contradicts the view explicated later in his book, which states that desert people are culturally unfit to settle in an urban environment: "Every Bedouin who is attracted to the city life", he noticed, "quickly shows himself unable (to compete) and is disgraced" (278).

In premise (1), Ibn Khaldun hypostasized that the goal of every Bedouin is to "change" into an urbanite; while in premise (2), he stated that all Bedouins who seek their fortune in the city are swiftly dishonoured. Obviously, the conclusion (a vast majority of populace in any given city is originally Bedouin) is wrong, or the premises are; either way, this logical contradiction illustrates the weaknesses of scientific explanation based on hasty generalizations.

Ibn Khaldun did not only occasionally draw general conclusions without considering any possible variable; he also allowed his religious ethics to interfere with his reasoning. Consider the following example: in economic terms, as Ibn Khaldun described it, Bedouin culture is tailored for the satisfaction of merely basic needs; this is due to the fact that the most appropriate way to move through the desert is to travel lightly. Precisely for this reason, camel herders are disinterested in accumulating profit and property (another virtue of the noble savage), except in the sense of expanding their herds. They live on a severely restricted diet. They are not attached to goods. There is no extravagancy in food consumption among them. Poverty and malnutrition, however, have a favourable effect on their spirit, by bringing them closer to God (66-67).

Now, in observing that people accustomed to abstinence are found to be more religious than those who live in abundance, the Tunisian author implied that chronic hunger and privation of Bedouins serve as an eco-physiological source of their exemplary virtuous character. This is probably why he assessed that nomads are closer than the sedentary people to the “ways and means of goodness”: material advancement is, in Ibn Khaldun’s view, inversely proportional to moral perfection (94).

There is a broader moral point to such a view. Like individuals, all civilizations have a life-span. Nations conquer other nations, become proud, decadent and weak in periods of stability, and eventually fall prey to other conquerors. Similarly, human behaviour is simple and relatively virtuous in its “natural state”, but becomes tainted by the affluence and splendour of civil society; barbarians tend to become civilized, yet in the transitory process they gamble away their good fortunes. In writing his introductory volume, the author wanted, among other things, to express his beliefs about the human condition, clearly shaped by religious teaching:

[T]he purpose of human beings is not only their worldly welfare. This entire world is trifling and futile. It ends in death and annihilation. The purpose (of human beings) is their religion, which leads them to happiness in the other world. (154)

Ibn Khaldun’s views on the limits of knowledge, on just rulership, on hunger and abstinence, on the tyranny of greed and misery of luxury all speak in favour of his deeply religious mindset. He applied strong evaluations of cultural practices while relying on essentialist judgments; his strict delimitation of good and evil customs was clearly influenced by moral evaluations coloured by Islamic faith. Some of his interpretations of Islamic tradition (183; 161) would, no doubt, be considered as radical by today’s standards. He was in decisive favour of theocracy: he saw theocratic rule as the only way out of civil society’s decadence and sin. Since the culture of a society is a mirror image of the culture of its ruling class (25), and since secular authority is susceptible to many lures of the material world, the only salvation for the rulers *and* for their subjects is religion – conceived as the model of improving the government, its laws and the whole of society (96; 157; 281). Pure justice, in Ibn Khaldun’s assessment, can be found only in the legal caliphate governed by shari’a law. Shari’a does not suppress the authority of the secular nomenclature; however, it can prevent the ruling elites, along with their chief representative (caliph) from carrying out the unjust decisions, ruining the state’s wealth and endangering the religion of Muslims.

Conclusion

Ibn Khaldun held the firm belief that there is an underlying order to history, a common thread knitting together peaks and pitfalls of civilization within the diachronic diagram of Islamic past, present and future. This unifying thread, as our author believed, is perfectly intelligible to the careful eye of a historian, since the amplitude-like occurrences of social instability followed by periods of tranquillity are natural to humans. Civilization and history are the products of mankind, and the historian has the task of discovering the basic

principles of history which cannot, however, be discerned solely through historiographical work.

To begin with, the competent researcher of history, Ibn Khaldun thought, should compare ancient sources with contemporary material and detect analogies or differences between “present and past conditions” (11; 24). The comparative method should further be applied in the analysis of theory and practice of politics (past and current), in the examination of conditions governing human society and in the research of differences among nations, customs and ways of life in different periods of antiquity, till the present moment. In mastering these subjects, the historian finally acquires complete knowledge “of the reasons for every happening” and of the “origin of every event” (24). The accumulation of such perfected knowledge draws the scholar nearer to uncovering the basic principles of history, or to the latent nature of occurrences which are relevant for historical research.

Ibn Khaldun was a Malikite scholar, but it seems beyond question that he was also inclined towards Sufism (see his discussion of the related topic, 358-367). The question whether he was an active practitioner of Sufism or not is perhaps debatable; on the other hand, his acknowledgment of the spiritual/mystical side of nature, culture *and* history of humans supports the assumption that Sufism had influenced his thought to some degree (Ahmad, 2003: 8-9). His attempt to unveil history and reveal its hidden truth bears certain similarities to the concept of *kashf* (the removal of the veil) through which the Sufi grasps the divine world beyond senses, inaccessible to the ordinary person (Ibid., 66). Nevertheless, he was not the only pre-modern thinker who struggled to find meaning behind the surface of events (see Crone 2003: 89-90); some of his elementary concepts – ‘*asabiyya*, among others – could not be reduced to any Sufi teaching; his intellectual guidance by the *Weltanschauung* of Islamic mysticism and asceticism should not, therefore, be overestimated (Irwin, 2018: 116-117).

The author of the *Muqaddimah* attempted to lay out a prolegomenon to something more axiomatic than a form of Sufism which embraces the sort of subjectivity and esoteric extravagance he strongly disapproved of (Ahmad, 2003, x). Above all, he wanted to write a volume of principles, based solidly on historical fact and logical inquiry. In doing so, he was a thinker in the Aristotelian tradition, albeit with an orthodox Muslim’s doubt on the matter of human knowledge and its scope.

For Ibn Khaldun, humans could grasp coherent phenomena (even if they are highly abstract) and nothing more. But God could see further; there is no way in which we can second-guess His views (Crone, 2005: 272). The limits of logic, as Ibn Khaldun saw them, basically matched the boundaries of scientific speculation outlined in the gigantic shadow of God’s wisdom. These boundaries cannot be crossed, since in the background of everything humans perceive stands the “Causer of all causes”, the Holy Presence, which pulls every present, past and future string in perfect agreement with His unknowable will:

[As] a rule, man is able only to comprehend the causes that are natural and obvious and that present themselves to our perception in an orderly and well-arranged manner... [T]he way in which causes exercise their

influence upon the majority of things is unknown. They are only known through customary experience and through conclusions which attest to (the existence of an) apparent (causal) relationship. What that influence really is and how it takes place is not known. Therefore, we have been commanded completely to abandon and suppress any speculation about them and to direct ourselves to the Causer of all causes, so that the soul will be firmly colored with the oneness of God. (348-349)

The realm of human intellect, in the Tunisian author's mind, ends once we step too deep into the web of causes. To walk firmly down the path of truth, rational judgment must not lose its track of the palpable level of human affairs, the one that can be logically traced back to its humanly ordained source, that is, to custom. Beyond custom, there is no possible way to understand the "inner truth" of human actions. This is perhaps so because some aspects of custom are established in the manner preferred by God and should not be critically judged; unless, that is, in the open propagation of heresy. Custom is, therefore, the first and the last "safe" harbour for human exploration of its own trajectories through space and time. History cannot be properly understood without reasonable insight into the cultural forms the observed group is – or rather, was – accustomed to.

Ibn Khaldun's text, however, provided no sharp separation lines between the concepts of culture and custom. Theoretically speaking, custom is responsible for the shaping of the collective ethos – specifically, for the value its members ascribe to certain material and immaterial aspects of everyday life. Culture, on the other hand, takes precedence over the individual's natural dispositions. In its first natural state, the human soul is, according to our author, a *tabula rasa* in terms of moral values. It is the cultural substrate that designs and directs it gradually towards good or evil: "When customs proper to goodness have been first to enter the soul of a good person, and his (soul) has thus acquired the habit (of goodness, that person) moves away from evil and finds it difficult to do anything evil. The same applies to the evil person" (94). Analogous to civilization and history, culture – observed, here, primarily in the realm of custom – is man-made; but when habits drawn from a certain constellation of customs enter the soul, they become internalized as common behaviour of individuals and, by implication, of groups.

It is important to note that Ibn Khaldun portrayed cultural change somewhat fatalistically, as a predetermined *and* inescapable development which leaves unfortunate consequences for the party undergoing transformation. Paradoxically, like some modern anthropologists noted for their ahistoricity (such as Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski), he regarded cultural change as a type of collective pathology that causes deterioration of the culture's key values and basic social norms. For him, change was an imminent, albeit debilitating condition of existence of social groups; it can be regarded as change only if we consider the flowering of the seed into a sickly-sweet fruit as change; but the same seed always "changes" into the same fruit. The potential irregularity of the transformative process, the idea of change as a result of countless and fundamentally unpredictable individual relations is, thus, conspicuously lacking in Ibn Khaldun's account.

This is not to say that his “new historical science” is misguided or that his ordering of concepts took priority over understanding the social world. He was able to contemplate the complexity and bloodiness of politics as practised by various Muslim dynasties and was able to draw from it laws that governed the formation and dissolution of communities (Irwin 2018: 204).

His significance for anthropology could be sought, as Jon W. Anderson noted, in the discipline’s dual roots in social philosophy, particularly in the rationalizing naturalism of the Enlightenment, as well as in anthropology’s direct involvement in other ways of life, which is the hallmark of the discipline. There are, in fact, some striking similarities between Ibn Khaldun’s work and the mid-20th-century anthropological (notably British) scholarship on the Middle East: the thematization of principles of tribal organization, the exploration of group action and leadership in societies where central authority is not only lacking but actively resisted, the analysis of the tribal code of honour and its relation to politics and violence, etc. Both Ibn Khaldun in the 14th century and structural-functionalists six centuries later commonly excluded women from their analysis (in the *Muqaddimah*, the social existence of women is touched upon only in one short paragraph), and both gave strong emphasis to the apparent masculine vitality of tribal culture, its supposedly freedom-cherishing, autarchic nature, its Spartan virtue. That is not to say, however, that Ibn Khaldun had foreseen the birth of sociocultural analysis in the Western hemisphere, nor the development of any modern social science, for that matter. His attempt was mainly to perfect the historical research, and by the same stroke to describe the properties and forces which hold the civilization of the nomads as well as that of the urbanites together – at least until the two “separate worlds” start fracturing, converging and paving the way for the new protagonists of history.

Ibn Khaldun’s comparative analysis of different social forms, their interaction and eventual consequences on moral values directly address central issues of anthropological research, especially those pursued by more sociologically oriented thinkers in the field who stress political and structural factors instead of cultural and contextual postulates. The relevance of Ibn Khaldun’s work for today’s anthropology may be registered, then, above all, in the author’s rich and many-sided intellectual legacy, that is in the wide variety of ideas, concepts and theoretical issues which distinguish his writing and are reflected in it. But to approach this intellectual heritage and regard it accurately, one should remain aware that Ibn Khaldun was “a man of his times” (Rosenthal, 1984) and that even if he could be perceived as a forerunner of later intellectual developments and an originator of ideas commonly believed to have had their origins in a much later time, to gain a deeper understanding of these ideas is to understand them on their own terms, and also to place their author, as securely as possible, within the cultural and historical environment he belonged to.

Regardless of his great potentiality to inspire and enrich anthropological thinking, it should be kept in mind that his thinking was strongly influenced by orthodox Islamic teachings and that he saw his own life as a reflection of the history of his times. Even if his theoretical

examinations show some similarities to modern positivism (as well as to certain ideas of Hobbes, Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Jünger) it should be kept in mind that Ibn Khaldun approached sociological and anthropological themes from the standpoint of a cleric whose basic loyalty went not to scientific but to religious truths. Any attempt to secularize his thought is therefore unfounded. By seeking to improve the methods of historiography and to present his own theory of history, Ibn Khaldun evidently wanted to demonstrate the ways in which God transmits His influence on the world through social phenomena. His culturally specific vision of sociocultural development, and resulting variations of human nature does not square with the Enlightenment-derived scientific discourse. Mismatched with the intellectual premises of secular science is, before all else, Ibn Khaldun's clear refusal to understand religion as a human creation. On the other hand, combined with his main research topics – description of cultural, social and political phenomena, as he saw them – the strict rational criteria he advocated in conducting scientific work, as well as the level of abstraction of his theories, provided his theoretical reasoning with the recognition of logical and empirical laws that govern scientific research.

Reason, however, in Ibn Khaldun's mind, has its limits due to his supposition that the intellect climbing up the ladder of abstraction must necessarily stop at a certain point, since the pure light of reason, however clear it may be, cannot comprehend certain aspects of human existence and conduct, guided by divine light. [3] One can, and should, instead, turn to positive, empirically grounded aspects of human affairs, past and present, and analyse them thoroughly by applying reason and logic. Against this epistemological background, the context and meaning of Ibn Khaldun's work can be understood as different but not as entirely distinct from social theory writing in the modern West.

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[1] See *Leviathan*, Part 1, Chapter 13, *Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as concerning their Felicity and Misery* (Hobbes 1839: 110-116).

[2] [When Bedouins] were Bedouins and lived in tents, they had many camels, and the women and children lived in camp with them. Then they achieved royal luxury and became used to living in palaces and in a sedentary environment and they abandoned the ways of the desert and waste regions. (227)

[Bedouins] restrict themselves to the bare necessities in their way of life and are unable to go beyond them, while sedentary people concern themselves with conveniences and luxuries in their (...) customs. The bare necessities are no doubt prior to the conveniences and luxuries. Bare necessities, in a way, are basic, and luxuries secondary. Bedouins, thus, are the basis of, and prior to, cities and sedentary people (...) The toughness of desert life precedes the softness of sedentary life. *Therefore, urbanization is found to be the goal to which the Bedouin aspires.* (93 - italics added)

Bedouins may be concerned with worldly affairs as (sedentary people are). However, such concern would touch only the necessities of life and not luxuries or anything causing, or calling for, desires and pleasures. (...) As compared with those of sedentary people, their evil ways and blameworthy qualities are much less numerous. They are closer to the first natural state and more remote from the evil habits that have been impressed upon the souls (of sedentary people) through numerous and ugly, blameworthy customs. (94)

[3] "When Muhammad guides us toward some perception, we must prefer that to our own perceptions. We must have more confidence in it than in them. We must not seek to prove its correctness rationally even if (rational intelligence) contradicts it. We must believe and know what we have been commanded (to believe and know). We must be silent with regard to things of this sort that we do not understand. We must leave them to Muhammad and keep the intellect out of it" (390).