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IBN KHALDÛN: HISTORIAN OF THE PAST AND THE PRESENT, HERE AND ELSEWHERE

Ibn Khaldûn: Historien du passé et du présent, de l'ici et de l'ailleurs[i]

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INTRODUCTION

The 14th century is distinguished by the work of Ibn Khaldûn (1332–1406), who was born in Tunis into a family of high-ranking officials of Andalusian origin. He received a comprehensive education in law, literature, and the sciences. Ibn Khaldûn held prominent positions in the kingdoms of Tunis, Fez, and Tlemcen, and travelled extensively in Spain. These experiences gave him a firsthand understanding of courtly life, the functioning of states, and the dynamics of Arab and Berber tribal societies. At 43, he withdrew from public life to devote himself to scholarly pursuits. He left us the *Book of Lessons and Treatises on Ancient and Modern History, on the Deeds of the Arabs, Persians, Berbers, and Rulers of Their Time* (*Kitāb al-'Ibar wa-Dīwān al-Mubtada' wa-l-Khabar fī Ayyām al-'Arab wa-l-'Ajam wa-l-Barbar wa-Man 'Āṣarahum min Dhawī al-Sulṭān al-Akbar*), the first part of which is known as the *Muqaddima* (Introduction) or *Prolegomena*. This monumental work is, in essence, a *Discourse on Universal History* (*Discours sur l'Histoire universelle*) and a profound reflection on the philosophy of history.

This education, these roles, and this broadened perspective reveal that we are engaging with an original thinker within the Muslim world—a visionary whose work significantly innovated the tradition of medieval Arab historiography.

In his *Mûqaddima*, Ibn Khaldûn highlights the essential conditions for writing History, among which is the necessity of relying on "numerous sources and a wide range of knowledge," a perspective he described as that of a "researcher"—a term that was strikingly innovative for his time. He urged historians to move beyond traditional narratives by attaining a "clear understanding of the principles provided by customs, the foundations of politics, the very nature of civilisation, and the conditions that govern human society." He also stressed the importance of evaluating "ancient or long-standing documentation by comparing it with more recent or contemporary data," to avoid errors and misjudgments[ii].

Ibn Khaldûn's concept of error is particularly revealing. He attributed errors to partisan attitudes—which could often be *ideological* — a blind trust in sources, a failure to grasp the meaning of an event, compounded by the certainty of holding the truth. In this regard, he critiqued his predecessors—Quran commentators, chroniclers, and Arab historians from the 8th to the 13th centuries—who frequently went astray by accepting their own narratives at face value, "without verifying them against principles, comparing them to other accounts, or testing them by the touchstone of philosophy, nor by engaging in reflection and critique." Ibn Khaldûn therefore argued for the necessity of using diverse, rigorously controlled, and cross-verified documentation. He addressed a fundamental issue: the document itself, which, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, serves as both a foundation and a guarantee for history, "its ultimate means of proof"[iii].

Ibn Khaldûn's approach to the historian's craft seems to be inherently comparative. Can this be asserted definitively? Without a doubt, as he wrote: "One must compare the past and the present, the near and the distant, and the causes of similarities and differences. […] The aim must be to understand thoroughly the causes of each event and their origin." His own work did not deny these principles: the "here" and "elsewhere," the past and the present, are vividly brought to light, and his overarching endeavour is the writing of a "Universal History." From Greece to Islamic civilization, passing through Persia, Rome, and Byzantium, he sought to reconstruct the past. A perceptive observer of the present, he analysed the society of his time in-depth, exploring themes such as politics, science, art, literature and more. The scope is open from *here* (the Maghreb and the rest of the Islamic world) to *elsewhere*, notably Western Europe.

1.0 QUESTIONING THE NATURE OF CIVILIZATION

His approach is remarkable: spanning from the past to his present, he reconstructed the history of the intellectual sciences, described their state during his time in the Maghreb and beyond, and observed with precision that while these sciences were beginning to decline in the Maghreb, interest in their pursuit was emerging elsewhere:

> I have just learned that philosophical sciences are highly esteemed in the land of Rome and the northern coast neighboring the land of the Franks. I am assured that they are being studied again and taught in many courses. There are said to be numerous treatises on these sciences, many experts, and students eager to learn them[iv].

Productive curiosity. In Ibn Khaldûn's work, unlike the Arab historians of the Middle Ages, events no longer take centre stage; history takes human and universal civilisation as its subject. His approach led him to explore the nature of civilization—wildlife and social life, particularisms and clan solidarity, the modalities of domination. This last point prompted him to analyse the emergence of power, dynasties, and *social classes*. With Ibn Khaldûn, history expanded its scope to include professions, livelihoods, human endeavours, sciences, and the arts — everything that defines civilization.

His conception of history departs from a utilitarian and immediate approach, viewing history as an *end in itself* [fin en soi]. Ibn Khaldûn follows in the tradition of Herodotus, whom Cicero called *pater historiae* (father of history), whose work aimed to "preserve what owes its existence to humanity." He also continues the legacy of Thucydides, whose method was based on *skopeïn*—the examination of events, actions, accounts, and speeches.

Among the elements of Ibn Khaldûn's work, it should be emphasised that, as in the case of his predecessors, the beginning of history does not coincide with the appearance of Islam, but predates it.. For the first time, the "ancient Maghreb," alongside Rome and Carthage, is included within the framework of universal history, which had previously been shaped by an "Orientalist" perspective that prioritized the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Jordan, and Persia.

Another crucial aspect is his detailed discourse on the historical evolution of intellectual sciences. His reconstruction begins with Persian civilization. Why? Guided by a commitment to the objectivity of his work, Ibn Khaldûn explains: "There were many

sciences and sages among human civilizations. More scientific knowledge has been lost than has reached us. Where are the Chaldeans, Assyrians, Babylonians? […] Where are *the results* of the Egyptians and their predecessors? Only Greek scientific texts have reached us." The presence or absence of documents serves as the cornerstone of his method.

This method led him to systematically address topics such as the stagnation of intellectual sciences in Rome, the deliberate and official interest of Islamic civilization in ancient heritage —Indian, Persian, and Greek — and the history of translation efforts commissioned by various caliphs from the 8th to the 10th centuries. These efforts, crucial for the circulation of ideas, went beyond mere transmission to include thorough studies, commentaries, and critiques. For example, he critiqued the Platonic-Aristotelian notion of the *ideal* city, a concept adopted by some Arab philosophers, including Al-Fârâbî (872–950).

Throughout his analysis, Ibn Khaldûn maintains the *truth of history*: history is not only true in the past, it is also true in the present. His reading of his own time acquired a new dimension as he also delved into *social fact* — the subject of a new science that some modern commentators call *sociology*. His understanding of social fact spanned multiple domains: the emergence of cities, the nature of political power, the distinct characteristics of Bedouin and sedentary civilizations, and cultural expressions such as art, poetry, literature, and philosophy. Particularly notable is his definition of politics as being fundamentally rooted in protection: "The politician must be just to the people, inform them of their rights, defend them […], and allow them to live in peace." Central to this is his conception of justice: "Injustice is not merely the act of expropriation without compensation or justification. Certainly, that is the common interpretation, but it is something broader: it is unjust to take someone's property, force them to labour, demand more than what is due, or impose an illegitimate obligation." For Ibn Khaldûn, injustice ultimately results in "the destruction and ruin of civilization, and, in the end, the extinction of humanity."

He illustrated this issue vividly through the example of property taxes. Emphasizing the need for their fair and equitable distribution among *all taxpayers*, including the wealthy and the nobility, Ibn Khaldûn invites us to reflect on contemporary societies plagued by clientelism, nepotism, and gross inequality in the distribution of burdens. He also addressed a problem that remains central to political debates: the use of *public funds*, which, according to him, should be devoted to the general welfare.

Among the many topics Ibn Khaldûn explored with originality, he emphasized the clear roles assigned to warriors and scholars: "The pen and the sword are both instruments the prince uses to manage his affairs." The prominence of one over the other depends on the state's stage—whether it is emerging, establishing itself, flourishing, or in decline. The sword bolsters the state during its formative and declining phases, while the pen comes to the fore when stability prevails. However, Ibn Khaldûn did not anticipate that a glance at later, modern, and contemporary periods would quickly reveal that even firmly established political authority often continues to wield the sword.

The interest that an honest man of our time can have in a historian like Ibn Khaldûn lies in the modernity of his approach, his analyses and his conclusions. The Arab-Muslim world is often perceived as lagging behind the history in motion—a view not entirely without basis. Yet, this same world nurtured the idea of self-improvement, central to Ibn Khaldûn's thought, to achieve self-transformation. It also embraced the notion that engaging with other worlds, civilisations, knowledge systems, and beliefs arises from genuine curiosity and cultural interest, tied, surely, to the need for political reflection, rather than being driven by economic imperatives. "Culture is the goal of civilisation," Ibn Khaldûn declared. Utopian? Mere intellectual speculation? He was, and still is, correct. If Arab intellectuals and politicians today remain confined to theoretical abstraction or evade the challenges and aspirations of society and its citizens, change will not come. Respect for the individual, the citizen, men, women, freedom, and justice—in short, democracy—demands a renewal for which Ibn Khaldûn offers a key. Why not put it in the lock?

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[ii] Cited passages: translated by Vincent Mointel. *Mûqaddima (Prolégomènes)*, Paris, Actes Sud, 1997.

[iii] RICOUER, P. *Temps et récit III. Le temps raconté*. Paris, Le Seuil, 1985.

[iv] Cf. LIBERA, A. de. *Penser au Moyen Âge*. Paris, Seuil, 1991.