

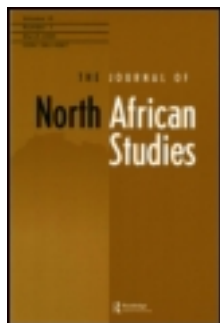
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Ronald A. Messier<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of History, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA

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# The worlds of Ibn Khaldun: introduction

Ronald A. Messier\*

*Department of History, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA*

Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun died in Cairo on Wednesday, 17 March 1406 (25 Ramadan 808). He was arguably one of the greatest thinkers of all times, enough so that he is claimed as father of the disciplines by historians, sociologists, economists, philosophers, and educators. In the prologue of his magnum opus, *A history of the Arab peoples*, the late Albert Hourani summarises the life of Ibn Khaldun. He does so because the life of Ibn Khaldun, he says, is the story of the world in which he lived, a world full of reminders of the frailty of human endeavours; a world of unstable alliances of interests on which dynasties relied to maintain their power; a world in which, especially outside of cities, order was precarious. But it was also a world which had a unity that transcended divisions of time and space, a unity provided by the Arabic language and a body of knowledge that preserved a moral community, even though rulers changed, a unity based on a belief in one God who created and sustained the world and who could give meaning to blows of fate.

For four days in June of 2006, the American Institute for Maghrib Studies met at the American Legation in Tangier, Morocco to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the death of Ibn Khaldun. Papers centred around three themes: the world in which Ibn Khaldun lived; a universal world in which the paradigms, dichotomies and nuances of Ibn Khaldun's far reaching thought strive toward universal application; and today's world in which Ibn Khaldun serves as sort of a distant mirror allowing us to better understand the world in which we live.

Ibn Khaldun was first and foremost a man of the fourteenth century; so assures us Khalid Chaouch in his article 'Ibn Khaldun, in spite of himself'. He was an extraordinary man of his time, nonetheless, very much a product of his time. Yet, because of his extraordinary genius, Ibn Khaldun is torn between his own world and ours. Our contemporaries deny him the right to think like a fourteenth century intellectual. Specifically, for example, they classify Ibn Khaldun in a long list of 'enlightened' thinkers, says Chaouch, so they claim that his submission to the religious order that reigned in his day is at best superficial. At the other end of the spectrum, Ibn Khaldun's own contemporaries deny him the right to transcend the intellectual confines of his own time. They criticise him, for example, for listening too much to female singing and for associating too much with the young presumably, says Chaouch, because those were morally corrupting activities. Chaouch cautions us that it is only in avoiding the pitfalls of anachronism that Ibn Khaldun's genius can be fully appreciated.

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\*Email: [ronald.a.messier@Vanderbilt.Edu](mailto:ronald.a.messier@Vanderbilt.Edu)

Ibn Khaldun's knowledge of the world, that is, his knowledge of geography, was certainly shaped by geographical knowledge of his time. Tariq Kahlaoui shows how the scope of the *Muqaddimah* evolved over time which included a move toward a universal history, and that evolution corresponded with an evolution toward a world geography. That is why he ultimately decided to include the entire structure of Idrisi's text including the addition of an Idrissian world map. Kahlaoui uses the term 'Idrissian world map', suggesting that it may have appeared as part of an Ibn Khaldun manuscript before it appeared in any manuscript of Idrisi's own work, thus helping 'in the transmission of one of the major markers of Islamic cartography'.

A significant fault line in North African history is the tension between Arab and Berber. The conquest of North Africa by the Arabs was one of the longest and bloodiest episodes in the extraordinary expansion of Islam. Ibn Khaldun says that even after the Muslim religion had been established among them, they went on revolting and seceding, and they adopted dissident (Kharijite) religious opinions. He adds that that is what is meant by the statement that *Ifriqiya* (the medieval name for what is now Tunisia and eastern Algeria) divides the hearts of its inhabitants. The statement is a play on words connecting *Ifriqiya* with the Arabic root *f-r-q* 'to divide' (Khaldun, 1958, p.333). Moshen Hamli contends in his article 'Demystifying Ibn Khaldun's version of al-Kahena' that Ibn Khaldun consciously omits vital elements of the story of this Berber/woman/Jewess leader which Hamli cites from several other authors precisely because of this bias. 'In spite of his call for objectivity', says Hamli, 'Ibn Khaldun premeditates ignoring facts about al-Kahena that his reliable predecessors (Abdelhakam and al-Raqiq al-Kairawani) confirm to have happened'.

Ridha Boukraa, in his article 'The Khaldunian concept of *Umran/Ijtima* in the light of the current paradigm of post-modern society', agrees that Ibn Khaldun was a 'traditional' man of the fourteenth century, but one who is also recognisable as a modern man and even as a post-modern man. He is modern, according to Boukraa, because his work is based on modern rational science. He was 'traditional' in the sense of a Renaissance man, a man who could reconcile rational science on the one hand with religious belief on the other. He would have been comfortable even in the post-modern world, according to Boukraa, as he anticipated an anthropology of the magical-mystical, which is actually a return to a kind of medievalism.

If Ibn Khaldun is to have relevance to our times, let alone universal application, it is essential, according to Djamel Chabane, to discover the meanings of the terms that Ibn Khaldun uses first in their own context, meanings, that is, that go beyond literal meanings or translations. Only then can the concepts be correctly transferred to a different context. In his paper 'The structure of *'Umran al-'Alam* of Ibn Khaldun', Chabane translates *'umran* as 'urbanisation' or 'town planning' in the sense that this term is used by social scientists in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to describe their scientific approach to understanding society.

Laroussi Amri proposes a different way of looking at Ibn Khaldun's concept of *'umran*. He, too, stresses the importance of definitions. In fact, the first part of his paper is a philological explanation of the term *'umran* and its etymology. From there, Amri looks at how Ibn Khaldun applied the concept to the world that he observed, to describe movement from rural (*'umran badawi*) to urban (*'umran hadhari*). It becomes clear to Amri that Ibn Khaldun saw *'umran* not as something static, a product, but rather as a dynamic process. That is precisely the value of Ibn Khaldun's sense of *'umran* to our understanding of the 'social' today, one in which finality does not necessarily reside in the city.

Jack Kalpakian's article focuses on Ibn Khaldun's influence on current international relations theory and on international relations as a discipline. Kalpakian examines three concepts in the *Muqaddimah*: *'asabiyyah*, the cycle of the rise and fall of dynasties, and the relationship

between religion and power. Kalpakian shows how those three Khaldunian concepts are echoed in the work of several social scientists in the discipline of international relations. He then pleads the case for Ibn Khaldun to have a significant place in the foundational literature of that discipline.

Stephen Cory applies the Khaldunian cycle of the rise and fall of dynasties specifically to the history of Morocco where the cycle seems to apply quite well until the sixteenth century. The sharifian Sa'di and 'Alawi dynasties ended the cycle by adding the dimension of sharifianism (the ruler's claim of descent from the prophet Muhammad) to the concept of *'asabiyah*, a combination that is both new and distinctly Moroccan. Cory argues that sharifianism contributed significantly to the Sa'adians' ability to coalesce a sense of Moroccan identity in the face of a mounting European threat. And, although they lasted no longer than earlier dynasties in the Khaldunian cycle, they laid the foundation for the current ruling 'Alawi dynasty which has been in power in Morocco now for over 300 years.

Diana Wylie applies the Khaldunian cycle and the concept of *'asabiyah* to two twentieth century cases: Algeria and South Africa. But first she uses a series of paintings by the American painter Thomas Cole to offer a modern, western description of the Khaldunian cycle. She finds that *'asabiyah* is flexible and subject to rational calculation and can be redefined most successfully in situations of prosperity or when state institutions have the capacity to check and balance executive power. She concludes her paper by thinking about these Khaldunian concepts in her own national context. She asks whether group identity in the United States is based on a loyalty to core institutions or on a sense of shared prosperity and what the consequences of one or the other might be.

None of the papers in this collection present the final word on Ibn Khaldun. By the very person that he was and the very nature of his work, Ibn Khaldun remains for us today an open question, as one of the authors so aptly put it, a 'heuristic knot'.

## Reference

Ibn Khaldun, 1958, *The Muqaddimah, and introduction to history*, Vol. 1, translated from Arabic by F. Rozenthal. New York: Pantheon Books.