

Encounters with Ibn Khaldun

Among the scholars of the Islamic Middle Ages, by far the most original and thought-provoking was the great Fourteenth century Andalusian/North African Arab historian Abdur-Rahman Ibn Khaldun who has been described as the “father, or one of the fathers, of modern social science and cultural history.” In the attention he paid to ways in which small social groups coalesce and interact, he was a harbinger of the French *Annales* historical school; the English historian Eric Hobsbawm remarked, “I take my stand with that great and neglected philosopher of history...” and sees his analysis analogous to Marx’s emphasis on the social and economic basis of events; and Arnold Toynbee lauded his study of history as “undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.” But, despite the brilliance of his analysis and the influence he had on a few Western historians, he remains surprisingly little known outside of the circles of Orientalists. Even there what he had to say has been little utilized or appreciated. The reasons are partly mechanical and partly cultural.

The fundamental reason is that Ibn Khaldun not only wrote in medieval Arabic, which itself is relatively complex, but drew upon a cultural tradition that is rich, difficult of access and involuted. Few western historians could follow the allusions he makes to pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, the religion of Islam as it had evolved by the Fourteenth century or the politics of the rise and fall of the Islamic dynasties. Contrariwise, while Arabists have, from time to time translated his *Muqaddimah* or Introduction to History, they have rarely been concerned with his ideas. In the Oxford University program of Oriental Studies, for example, the man recognized as the world’s foremost Arabist, Professor Sir Hamilton Gibb, gave a series of courses on Ibn Khaldun without once

mentioning his ideas on society, culture or history; like most Orientalists, Gibb used Ibn Khaldun's writings as exercises in grammar and syntax, arguing that before one could seriously address his ideas, the student had to be able fully to comprehend not only the text, itself difficult enough, but also the wide-ranging allusions. His point was well-taken, indeed it was Orientalist dogma, and few scholars even attempted to sally beyond the formidable cultural barrier.

The second reason for the lack of appreciation of Ibn Khaldun was that he was analyzing a society which seemed to most western historians irrelevant or merely quaint. To dispute this patronizing view is consequential, I believe, precisely because at first glance, it appears to be true. After all, Ibn Khaldun lived in and wrote about a world which is triply alien to modern Western experience -- he was a medieval Muslim reacting to a tribal society.

Today, very few of us have any direct relationship with any of those attributes. Most of the Asian and African vestiges of the medieval world have long since been swept away by the flood tide of modernization; Islam today is staging a resurgence but most observers, concentrating on its "fundamentalist" or extremist (*al-mutatarrafah*) wing, see it as a movement that is far from the cosmopolitan, intellectual religion known to Ibn Khaldun -- as far, one might say of Christianity, as Pat Robertson is from St. Francis of Assisi; and finally, there is that curious word, tribalism.

Few "mainstream" historians have knowledge of the nomads who roamed and ruled the areas known to medieval geographers as "the Third Zone," the vast semiarid sweep of lands that runs from the Atlantic along the North African coast through the Middle East into Central Asia and on to the Pacific. Today, nomads are an endangered

species who have nothing to do with the "important," that is European and American, areas of the world.

This is, of course, a shallow view of history. Even if we examine only European history, we see that nomads swept into the continent from inner Asia on their newly domesticated horses about 4,000 to 5,000 years ago to create the "ancient" world. Then, over the next two millennia, wave after wave of tribal peoples -- Celts, Avars, Lombards, Goths, Visigoths, Franks, Huns and hundreds of others whose names are now forgotten -- overturned the classical world, destroyed the Roman empire, gravely wounded its eastern Christian successor, Byzantium, set the pattern for medieval society and laid the basis for the modern nations of Europe.

Among other civilizations, nomads also played formative roles. The early Chinese state (the Shang dynasty) grew out of and in reaction to its nomadic neighbors; the nomadic challenge, one of the major themes of Ibn Khaldun, is perhaps the most visible thread running through the tapestry of Chinese history from the Shang right down to the Jürchen tribesmen or Manchus who founded the Qing dynasty that ruled China until 1912. In India, the ancient Dravidian civilization which is known to us from one of its Indus River sites as "Harappan" was destroyed by Indo-European-speaking nomadic Aryans whose heritage shapes modern Indian language, religion and society. A similar invasion by Semitic nomads overthrew its great contemporary, the Sumerian civilization of Mesopotamia, and, somewhat later, other groups of foot-loose warriors overwhelmed Middle Kingdom Egypt. Then, of course, there are the Arabs, Berbers and Turks who dominated western Asia, North Africa and some of south Europe during the Middle Ages and with whom Ibn Khaldun was concerned.

Even when historians overcome their parochialism, most retain what might be termed a “peripheral” perspective. That is, when they venture into Asia, they only skirt its edges. Arabists, Turcologists and Iranianists deal with West Asia; Indianists, with South Asia; and Sinologists and Japanologists, with East Asia. Very few have attempted to find how, when and by whom the shores of Asia were linked or even what experiences they shared. It is particularly about this much neglected aspect of the human record, the restless nomadic societies, that Ibn Khaldun has much to tell us.

But there is more: in his time and for centuries hereafter, “history,” as conceived not only in Africa and Asia but also in Europe, was little more than a chronicle of the doing of kings. Ibn Khaldun was a pioneer in the search for a broader and more concrete view of the evolving pattern of human affairs. In this sense, he is not only “modern” but “universal.”

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Born in Tunis in 1332, Abdur-Rahman Ibn Khaldun came from an Andalusian Arab family which, about a century before his birth, had emigrated to North Africa as the Christian *Reconquista* began to menace Seville. In Tunis and elsewhere, the young Ibn Khaldun acquired a classical Arabic education, indeed, more or less the Orientalist syllabus taught at Oxford, with emphasis on the Qur'an, the Traditions, poetry, philosophical and historical writings and the literary language.

His first job consisted of the routine task of inscribing invocations on official documents. His career might have been stuck there, but Ibn Khaldun, presumably unauthorized, began to read the documents and to ponder their contents. The contrast between the dull chore he was expected to do and what he thought he might be able to do

was so unsettling that he ran away to the more cosmopolitan city of Fez to join the intellectually exciting circles of that city's new rulers.

In Fez, Ibn Khaldun continued his studies and then served for a while as secretary to the ruler. Falling under suspicion, possibly for opposing the ruler's expansionist policy against Tunis, he was put into prison for nearly two years. His life might have ended there since prison life was not healthy and prisoners had an unfortunate proclivity to fatal "accidents," but youth was on his side and, fortuitously, it was the prince, not he, who sickened and died. In the Muslim principalities as in the city-states of contemporary Italy, rulers rarely bequeathed secure regimes, and as he emerged from his cell Ibn Khaldun watched the collapse of the ruling establishment. The events he witnessed were his first glimpse into the decline and fall of dynasties, a theme that was later to figure prominently in his analysis of history.

The man who became ruler of Morocco in 1359 carried Ibn Khaldun from the dungeon to the palace. But, once again he fell afoul of intrigue, and, deciding that this time he could not count on the ruler's ill-health to get him out of prison, he determined to get away while he could. Since conditions were unfavorable in other directions, he went north to the land of his ancestors, *al-Andalus* (Muslim Spain), to live for two years in Granada whose ruler he had met while that man had himself been in exile in Morocco. It must have seemed to Ibn Khaldun that everywhere he turned, there was turmoil; no ruler and no regime seemed secure; not surprisingly, he came to see that change itself was central in the historical process.

When he had returned from Spain to North Africa in 1364, Ibn Khaldun was again drawn into government and again was thrown into prison when yet another new

ruler of Fez was overthrown. Narrowly escaping execution, he was lucky to be sent on a mission to effect a truce among the nomadic tribes then living around the oasis of Biskra, southeast of Algiers. Reading between the lines, one suspects that the assignment may have been a sort of internal exile of the kind familiar to us today as Third World successful rebels pack off defeated rivals and inconvenient supporters to be ambassadors or military attachés abroad.

The experience at Biskra, which Ibn Khaldun probably at the time regarded as a derailment of his career, was formative of what was to become perhaps his most important insight into history, the interaction of civilized (urban) and wild (nomadic) peoples.

Again a sojourn in urban North Africa proved disquieting, and again Ibn Khaldun tried to escape to Spain. But, by then, he was too well known to pass inconspicuously, and, at the request of the ruler of Fez, he was arrested in 1375 and extradited to Morocco. Luckily for him, the ship taking him back to face punishment or death was blown off course and landed him in an outlying province whose ruler gave him sanctuary.

Sanctuary was a right to be freely claimed but it came at the price of service to the benefactor. By then known to have been successful in dealing with the troublesome nomadic tribes, he was once more sent on a mission to the desert, this time to Berbers living in the hinterland of Oran. It was there, camped out in a little village, stringing together the impressions of his already remarkable, varied and turbulent exposure to urban life in North Africa and Spain and what he had observed among the nomads, that he began to write his “Introduction to History,” the *Muqaddimah*.

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The portion of the Islamic world then known to Ibn Khaldun was composed of scores of Lilliputian city-states ruled by families whose fortunes rose and fell with startling speed. One would not do violence to the contemporary reality to compare them (as indeed he did) to a Moroccan market where little assemblies gathered around stall-keepers, jugglers, *gulla-gulla* men, snake charmers and other mountebanks. Sometimes the onlookers and hawkers jostled one another, but each performer had his own space. As one set up his act, others were closing theirs; separated by the twists and turns of the streets and the blind alleys they rarely clashed and, despite their diversity, they evinced an overarching unity: all belonged to the market. So it was among the North African village-, town- and city-states of the Fourteenth century where Ibn Khaldun wandered from one performance to another, entertained by each actor, each *king, amir, dey or pasha*. He probably felt as much “at home” in any one of the little states as in another. (“Patriotism” was a concept for which an Arabic word would not be coined for another four centuries.) As he moved from place to place, he knew that hospitality was incumbent upon hosts and that gratitude was expected from guests, but these were conventionally accepted to be finite both in time and amplitude. In practice, they depended on self-interest. Both patron and dependent were opportunistic. So Ibn Khaldun was welcomed when he was useful, sent away when he was inconvenient and imprisoned when he might be dangerous.

The experience of living in city after city was occasionally hazardous, but it was certainly exciting. Ibn Khaldun approvingly quotes Aristotle on the Greek belief that life in all of its dimensions could be led only in a city. In his *Muqaddimah*, he uses the closest term available in Arabic for a city man, *madani*, to translate Aristotle's term "a dweller in

a *polis*" – a phrase which often is translated into English as a "political animal." But *madani* in medieval Arabic does not mean just "city man." Rather, it means something more profound, a "man of *the City*," that is, *the city* of the Prophet Muhammad where the Islamic community was born. So it takes something of the sense of "the heavenly city" of the medieval Christians.

Heavenly or not, the city had negative aspects. First, as he had painfully experienced, its pleasures sometimes came at the cost of loss of freedom. Thus, whereas contemporary Europeans had coined the expression *Stadtluft macht frei* ("city air makes [men] free"), Ibn Khaldun observed that even the wild men of the desert soon lost their freedom when they migrated into urban centers. More significant as his concept of politics began to take shape, he came to see that city life also exhausted and corrupted its inhabitants.

It was in his virtual exile in the little Algerian village, far from any library, that Ibn Khaldun began to put all these experiences, observations and reflections into the book we know. For him, it was a time of tremendous excitement with "words and ideas pouring into my head like milk into a churn..." As he put his pen to paper, the "milk" began to divide before his eyes into two major themes, the impermanence of urban societies and the wild power of the nomads, and from his observations and reading he began to discern a process: ruling families (*dawlahs*) often arose from non-urban origins, seized power, consolidated their rule and then, becoming corrupted or weakened by urban life, declined in vigor and, in turn, in his choice of a colorful phrase from the Classical poetry, "dismounted to their encampment."

Ibn Khaldun's choice of the phrase from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry brings to the

fore another aspect of his thought and writing. As educated men of his time were, he was steeped in the canon of Arabic literature. His choice of words, his allusions and even the process of his analysis can hardly be understood apart from this fact, and that is what makes translating his work so difficult: words conjure images that are usually alien to the western reader. Under the hand of a master, and Ibn Khaldun took great pride in his literary skill, the text appears at two levels. Beneath the obvious meanings, key words become “triggers” that fire concrete and vivid images in the mind of the educated reader. To miss these allusions, which are often drawn from the Classical poetry and are drilled into the consciousness (and unconscious) of pupils and students by years of memorizing texts, is to bowdlerize his thought. It is largely the awesome challenge of crossing that barrier, as I have said, that has rendered him so difficult of access to Western historians.

For example, Ibn Khaldun presaged the Enlightenment philosophers by positing a “natural” condition for humans, but whereas Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau were influenced by explorers who were discovering primitive peoples, and their imagery takes off from this concept of a “state of nature,” Ibn Khaldun, whose “primitives” (the bedouin nomads) were at hand, uses a very different image.

He probes mankind’s original condition), using a word (*fitrah*) that when applied to bread means “unleavened.” At the pre-social stage, morally at least, man was unformed “dough.” As the Qur’an puts it, God took a neutral position: He “placed in [the soul both] what is wrong for it and what is right for it.” After being “leavened” by contact with other men, what any man becomes is mostly a function of his upbringing. In the Islamic tradition, nurture triumphs over nature: it is the leavening process that forms him. “Man is the son of his customs and his habits, not of his nature and constitution.” He

writes. Often, he suggests, this comes down in part to how a person earns his living and, by extension, to the kind of society in which he lives. Some forms of society turn the “dough” into people who are loyal, brave and virtuous. These are the poorer (mainly nomadic) societies; in richer (settled) societies where life is easy and temptations are strong, men become corrupted by materialism or "acceptance of the [physical] world.”

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Ibn Khaldun was aware that the task he had set himself was easy to misunderstand or to understand only superficially. As he wrote,

The art of history is among the arts that...people bandy among themselves...Both the learned and the ignorant consider themselves alike in understanding it since, on the surface, it consists of little more than accounts of battles and dynasties with happenings from past centuries [presented by means of] colorful expressions and proverbs. Audiences are entertained with it...But, [to get at] its deeper meaning [history requires] vision, ascertaining concrete facts, repeated examination of the causes of reality, since the origins [of contemporary situations] are but faint tracings, and [it also requires] theoretical knowledge of the "howness" (*al-kaifiyah*) of events, since their ways are deep. For this reason history [must be considered] a branch of philosophy...

In an unconscious echo of Ibn Khaldun, the great French historian Marc Bloch also spoke of history as “a knowledge of...tracks...which some phenomenon, in itself inaccessible, has left behind.” Indeed, Bloch

Also picked up a theme which I have emphasized in speaking of the impact of imagery and the choice of words on Ibn Khaldun’s thought: “each science has its appropriate aesthetics of language. Human actions are essentially very delicate phenomena [and] Properly to translate them into words and, hence, to fathom them rightly (for can anyone perfectly understand what he does not know how to express?),

great delicacy of language and precise shadings of verbal tone are necessary.” For Ibn Khaldun, this “delicacy of language and precise shadings of verbal tone” is the heritage of the great poetry of the pre-Islamic nomadic culture. It is the imagery there set forth and constantly repeated in the corpus of the education to which all Arabic speakers were then (and still today are) schooled that set not only the “verbal tone” but the very matrix of his historical thought.

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Ibn Khaldun has often been compared to Giambattista Vico, Thomas Hobbes, Niccolò Machiavelli and Edward Gibbon; I have made those comparisons myself. But it would be a mistake to fall into easy analogies or to judge him by how well his ideas “fit” our heritage, our thoughts or our philosophy. We are willing to listen to the Chinese Sun Tzu or the Indian Kautilya when they sound like *our* Machiavelli, and so are “relevant,” but their categories of thought derive from very different backgrounds. Thus, the great Chou dynasty Chinese historian Sima Qian is read, not for his view of the human parade, but merely for his recounting of events. To really appreciate such writers, we must make the not inconsiderable effort to comprehend the context in which they wrote.

So too, I suggest, we must take Ibn Khaldun for what he was, a man who grew in a tradition which, while very different from ours, was coherent, long-lasting and rich in experience and to which he reacted with penetrating and provocative insights. His aim was to help his colleagues and successors understand that culture. If, in addition, he offers us “general” -- by which, if we are honest, we mean “relevant to the Western experience” -- insights, as Eric Hobsbawm, Arnold Toynbee and others have found he did, so much the better, but that was not his intent and should not be the criterion by which we

judge him. So, while he may be compared in some ways to Vico, for example, the Italian world in which Vico lived three hundred years later set different questions to which Vico gave different answers.

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For Ibn Khaldun L.P. Hartley's aphorism "the past is another country" was literally true. Not only was it alien to our European heritage, but his North Africa was also beyond the frontiers of the great Islamic centers of civilization -- Umayyad Spain and its various successors, Fatimid Egypt and its Mamluk successors and the Abbasid East and its Turkish successors. It was in those areas that most of what Muslim scholars had thought of as "history" took place. In Ibn Khaldun's time, seven centuries since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, a rich literary, religious, legal and scholastic culture had grown and spread. But, communication with the great centers was sporadic. North Africa was a backwater, regarded by the people of the cosmopolitan areas much as Englishmen used to regard Australia. So, although as scholars everywhere do, he stakes out his claim as a discoverer, he says, as though reacting to the anticipated challenge that he is a rustic, far from the mainstream of contemporary sophisticated thought,

I am not aware of any discussion along these lines by anyone, but I do not know whether [my predecessors] simply overlooked [these insights] and the thought did not occur to them or [whether] perhaps their writings on these matters and their deep studies of them simply did not reach us. After all, academic fields are numerous and there have been many sages among the various nations, and much more has not reached us than has.

Where, he asks in confirmation of this, is the vast trove of learning of ancient nations? Lost to his times and place, he realizes, are the rich lodes of thought of the Persians, the Chaldaeans, the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Ancient Egyptians. Luckily, some

Greek philosophical writings came to the Arabs (and he alludes to Aristotle's *Politics* with respect), but the little he saw was mostly in a corrupted form. Lamenting how little was available, he resignedly quotes the Qur'an, "And you were given but little knowledge."

Little knowledge was, indeed, then the norm at least where Ibn Khaldun lived. His contemporaries were uninformed about all but the most recent and the most nearby events. Worse, what little they heard was exaggerated or given bogus interpretations. Ibn Khaldun lived (as Iris Murdoch later and with less reason wrote of our times) "in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality." For North Africans in his time, this was a daunting task as they had no news gathering organizations (as to some extent the Church bureaucracy then was in Europe); consequently, he had to provide rather more information than a modern historian would think necessary and often had to give it on very slim authority and in the face of both the authority of accepted tradition and the tradition of accepting authority.

So rational, at times, was he that we are brought up short when we hear him talk, for example, about astrology. That he believed in the preternatural should not surprise us since even the men we so much admire in the European Renaissance held similar beliefs. Ibn Khaldun was no less rational than, for example, Isaac Newton. But, while not denying the reality of a hidden world containing *jinn* and other marvelous creatures and accessed by soothsayers, necromancers and astrologers, he sought more perceptible causes than they provided for human events. For them, he wanted his readers, as he wrote, to "throw off from your hands the fetters [of silly stories] and ground yourself firmly on [a knowledge of political] affairs." Whereas today historians routinely tone

down or even dismiss medieval accounts, because we have the means, Ibn Khaldun could not easily do so because he did not have the sources of information.

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Such books as were available to him dealt not with contemporary affairs and certainly not with his area but with the “important” period of early Islam. Early Islam was taken to be the stable center of the Islamic world, but that stability was little more than a memory, virtually in fact, a myth, already many centuries old. This presented a special and difficult problem for Ibn Khaldun. While he was virtually obligated to respect the traditional authorities, he had to break free of them. The means he chose was simple: arguing that the texts then available had been corrupted. While the “heroes among the [Islamic] historians,” he wrote, “dug out for themselves the reports of events, assembled them and wrote them down on the pages of books and stored them away, subsequent writers padded them out with the spurious nonsense, with which they concerned themselves, or [even] invented and with fanciful tales and discredited reports.” Compounding the problem of sloppy or mendacious authors was their audience: not only are “error and imagination are close kindred and mingled with [real] information but gullibility is a basic trait of all mankind.”

To counter this weakness, Ibn Khaldun could not resort, as later European scholars did to “diplomats” or the study of the authenticity of documents since he had no access to the originals. Rather, he had to develop a system by which all inherited information could be evaluated. That is what he did in his *Muqaddimah*.

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The *Muqaddimah* is not a long book, at least weighed in the scales of a Gibbon.

A modern Arabic printed edition runs to about 450 pages. The most complete translation into English, together with notes, runs to roughly three times that many pages. By modern tastes, it often rambles into areas not central to the main theme so it has occasionally been abridged.

The Muqaddimah opens with the assertion that human beings necessarily gather together. Then alluding (without attribution) to Aristotle, Ibn Khaldun comes as close as Arabic could to his statement that “man is a creature of his small society.” (As I have noted, he translated Aristotle’s man of a *polis* as *madani*, warning the reader that he is treating it as a technical term, with a meaning different from the usual Arabic sense in the same way that North Africans today adopt the French word for “country,” *pays*, to mean “village” or “township.”) While every man must join society, the way he does so leads Ibn Khaldun into a discussion of “human civilization in general” and the setting out of his preliminary ideas. Perhaps both because he lived on the edge of “marginal” land and because the study of geography fascinated him, as it has most historians, Ibn Khaldun begins with considerations of the physical bases of collective life. He then veers off, from our standpoint, into discussions of the effect of natural and occult forces on individuals.

In his second section, he zeros in on nomadic society and lays out what he sees as its major political and military characteristics. Contrasting bedouin society, in section three, he discusses governance of settled areas and here asserts his conclusion that dynasties like individuals have finite life spans. In the fourth section, he turns to an analysis of society and rule in settled areas. Then in sections five and six, he describes and analyzes the way people make their living and the organization of knowledge,

craftsmanship, science and culture. His work on history, *per se*, he treated in other books.

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Medieval and modern Muslim scholars have always sought historical knowledge, but usually in a static and limited way: they were usually not so much interested in history as the account of a process as in a picture of a particular moment, the time of the Prophet Muhammad. To know what Muhammad had done and said (the *Sunna*) was considered to be crucial to the definition of an acceptable moral life. This was not just the assertion of scholars; rather, it was what government required since, by amplifying and clarifying the Qur'an, history helped to separate the legal from the criminal. Consequently, Muslim historians did not have to justify themselves, as Western historians often try to do, by alleging a benefit from their research in achieving an understanding of the present or in helping to predict the future; the exact record of early Islam was universally taken to be the lodestone needed to guide the present.

We might compare the *Sunna* to the thoughts and actions of the framers of our Constitution. For Muslim jurists, however, the task of getting at the record was more difficult than for modern scholars of Constitutional Law. This was true because practically nothing was written about the Prophet and his Companions until long after their deaths; what remained was only a loose body of orally transmitted traditions (*Hadith*) which were subject to the vagaries of memory. Worse, because these traditions acquired so important a contemporary political and legal role, they were vulnerable to misinterpretation, exaggeration or forgery.

Muslim scholars were well aware of these weaknesses and in their attempt to separate

the true from the spurious they developed a technique of evaluation known as "wounding and verification" (*al-Jarh wa't-ta'adil*) which grew into a major field of Islamic scholarship. At the center of this process was the examination of "chain of transmission" (*isnad*) -- the list of people through whose memory each *hadith* was said to have been handed down. The access, reputation, position, etc. of the transmitters were what counted; if the *isnad* was taken to be sound, the substance was more or less blindly accepted, particularly if it fit with contemporary beliefs or desires.

Ibn Khaldun found this canonical form of verification insufficient for the very different task upon which he embarked, not bringing into focus one short span of history but trying to understand the process of change, but even if he had wished to rely upon the traditional means of ascertaining truth, he could not because, apart from the first Islamic century in Arabia, what modern historians think of as primary sources hardly existed; he had no archives, libraries, runs of periodicals or other sources which modern historians take for granted. He had only what we call secondary sources, the accounts of other historians. And much of what they said he found simply ridiculous. So he had to supplement or replace the traditional *ad hominem* method of inquiry with other criteria which he calls "fundamental principles" (*usul*). In this effort, he was far ahead of his time and for it he may justly be ranked as one of the earliest and most important students of society.

He also took a stand on another aspect of Islamic scholarship, the question of free will versus determination. As a devout Muslim, Ibn Khaldun believed that God is omnipotent but that He does not ordinarily intervene in human affairs; thus there is a wide margin of freedom for human action. God, he wrote in his invocation, "raised us

like plants from the Earth as living creatures and arranged us by races and nations on it, appointing us to use it for our benefit by generations.” That is, God set out the parameters of our lives. It followed that man could understand how he was to live within those parameters. Man cannot reach up the hierarchy of knowledge to understand the prime cause, but he can, if grounded in “comprehensive science,” go far enough to acquire what he needs to understand the events of his times.

While morally rudderless, men are not completely “unprogrammed” at birth. God endows them with certain proclivities or "inspirations". Of these Ibn Khaldun emphasizes, as the most influential on history, their intense emotional attachment to their immediate kindred, their fierce desire to avoid incurring shame and their strong sense of aggressiveness. The interaction of these innate characteristics draw men inexorably to their folk since in associating closely with kinsmen to whom they feel an intense attachment, men strive or fight to protect them and to enrich their lives and are naturally anxious to avoid conduct that would bring shame upon them.

These concepts are embodied in classical Arabic poetry in which Ibn Khaldun had been immersed since early childhood. Central to them was shame whose importance in Arabic culture it is difficult to exaggerate. Pre-Islamic poetry is full of references to the desire to avoid the stain of dishonor and, when it was incurred, to the absolute imperative to "wash" it away by vengeance. Even today in Saudi Arabia, for example, when a person commits a crime for which he is to be punished, it is shame more than punishment that he fears; and, when he commits a crime that brings shame upon his immediate kinsmen, it is they, more than the police, he seeks to escape.

Ibn Khaldun’s view of aggressiveness as another one of man's proclivities or

instincts is one of the most striking features of the pre-Islamic poetical canon; Ibn Khaldun sees it as a part of man's animal nature. However, he observes that it is not uniform in mankind, being let free among the nomads (who produced the great traditional poetry) and tamed by settled life; even in settled life, curbing it requires law and government while among bedouin aggression is directed by kinship -- fighting is prohibited among close kindred and turned outward against strangers.

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In addition to implanting in human nature basic proclivities, God also subjected man to change. Instead of creating a world at rest -- as the Qur'an tells us that Heaven will be -- He ordained ceaseless transformation. Man cannot achieve mastery and just settle down to enjoy the fruits of victory. Rather, he is both beset by and is himself the cause of perpetual change. Not only does each human go through a personal process of mutation as he grows from infancy to manhood and ages toward death, but whole societies alter themselves internally, growing and dying like individuals, and fluctuating in their capacities vis-à-vis one another. "With the passing of eras and [even] with the flow of days...their sandals do not tread a single path." Change is the one constant. This was the reality Ibn Khaldun had witnessed and the stimulus to which he reacted. His theories were aimed to answer the question, "How does this turmoil happen in practice?"

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Turmoil, he asserts, is a process which does not end with the victory of the strong. As a group rises, it predictably and inevitably loses momentum and upon reaching its apex begins to fall, losing its capacity to defend itself. Then it becomes the target for others who are themselves on the rise. Thus, history is characterized by patterns that are

neither linear nor cyclical (as many Western philosophers of history have asserted) but oscillating in a wave-like pattern. This pattern does not depend upon chance events, and, over the long run, no society can avoid decline and fall although wise policies will lengthen its natural span.

So Ibn Khaldun turns to an examination of the actors in this drama. Who they are and where they come from are questions virtually answered for him by his choice of words and his literary allusions. Like most Arabs, he divided mankind into two categories: sedentary (*hadar*) and nomadic (*badu*) societies. He regards both forms of social organization as natural or appropriate, each to its particular ecology: the one cultivates vegetables and foodgrains, because that is what the relatively benign climate in its part of the Earth allows, or, settles in villages, towns and cities to engage in commerce and crafts while the other, living in more desolate areas, has to depend upon animals.

Between the settled and the nomadic way of life he sees a stark and fundamental contrast: the settled people are able to aspire to the arts and crafts because they are well fed while the nomads, always hungry, existing barely above the level of starvation, "are the least tamed of all people, living almost like wild animals." In the desert and steppe, only the savage, untamed, self-reliant and mutually supporting survive.

Nomadism, being so wild, so primitive, so animal-like, is, he believed, the oldest form of social organization. We now know this is not true since nomadism is, obviously, dependent upon the domesticated or at least "managed" animals that became available only some thousands of years more recently than humans began to practice rudimentary agriculture. And, far from being "primitive," nomadism requires quite sophisticated techniques.

His essential point remains: life in the harsh conditions of the desert inevitably fails to satisfy the nomads' desires. Driven by hunger, particularly in the frequent periods of drought-caused starvation, or by lust, "each one of them stretches out his hand to acquire his needs, taking them from him who then possesses them." Even when nomads prevail, however, they cannot bring what they have seized from settled peoples to the desert. As they acquire more than they can carry, they must stop being nomads. In the Classical poetry, there is even a word for settling, *qantara*, which means, literally, to acquire a "heavy weight."

Himself a city man, Ibn Khaldun is ambivalent toward the nomads. They are savage or uncivilized but because uncorrupted by the evils of opulence, they are "nearer to the Good" than settled peoples. The desert peoples he came to see as a sort of reservoir from which, carried out on floods of invasion, become human silt to manure the depleted settled societies. In their timing and power their forays are virtually acts of nature.

Inspired by Ibn Khaldun, Western scholars have assigned natural causes for the nomadic invasions. One theory held that they were caused by "desiccation," but there is no evidence of a major climate deterioration during the last two thousand years. However, for Ibn Khaldun's neighborhood there is evidence of long-term human destruction of the environment and much recent evidence of over-grazing by animals. But the more compelling evidence for nomadic invasions points toward political and military causes. These are the causes on which Ibn Khaldun concentrated.

* * *

For extended periods, Asian and African nomadic societies have lived in a sort of dynamic equilibrium. Governed by a barren ecology, a "tribe" could not herd animals,

travel or fight as a group because the available water and grazing resources were insufficient to support large concentrations; the tribe which might number in the thousands was, therefore, a nominal concept. The effective unit was the much smaller part we call a clan. Normally, this group, for which the Arabs have many names and which existed in all ancient and primitive societies including those of our ancestors, was composed of progeny of a single patriarch, usually numbering not more than 50 to 100 people. Bound together by close kinship and by common interest, they were constantly engaged in hostilities with other clans within their own and other tribes. Thus, while tribes were potentially powerful "armies," they were rendered impotent by the fact that their constituent clans were always at one another's throats.

Occasionally, this equilibrium was disrupted. While climate was not *the* cause, it must have played a role. Periodic cycles of comparative wetness and dryness are now documented, and these may have also promoted fluctuations in population. In wet periods, more children would survive and with the return of dry years, hunger would give rise to desperation. Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is full of references to "the blackened faces of starvation." Other causes probably include the spread of the domesticated animals, particularly the horse (first) and (later) the camel, that gave nomads greater mobility, the decline of military power among the neighboring settled peoples, the rise of charismatic figures among the nomads -- men like Attila, Chingis, Timur -- or the arrival of a religious movement.

Focused on the Arabs, Ibn Khaldun produces a vivid turn of phrase to explain what happened with the annunciation of Islam -- "turning their faces in the same direction and causing internal dissension to go away." Islam at least temporarily stopped tribal

warfare by treating all believers as "brothers" (*ikhwan*); that is, as members of the Islamic "clan" whose members could not fight among themselves; their hostilities could be vented only outwardly. So, as each pagan clan joined the Islamic community, its aggressive energies, which were certainly not diminished and indeed were given a new form of encouragement, were turned against non-members. Peripheral, still pagan, groups were thus caught between their traditional rivals, the still-pagan clans who were their near neighbors, and the increasingly numerous forces of the Islamic "super-clan." Unless they rushed to "submit," the meaning of the word *islam*, the pagans were crushed. And, as each group joined, the pressure on the remaining non-members increased still further. Islam spread like wildfire across Arabia.

Pouring out of Arabia, the Arabs first raided and then seized much of the Byzantine empire, conquered Sassanian Persia and within a century had marched deep into Central Asia and across North Africa and through Spain to reach into central France. Ibn Khaldun quotes with approval the *hadith* that says "God sent no prophet except under the protection of his folk." Islam tolerates no prophets unarmed. By adapting the dynamics of nomadic society's clan to his mission, Muhammad had virtually created his own community and ensured its worldly success. He was certainly the prophet armed.

But, as Ibn Khaldun realized, once the conquering nomads had settled down in cities, religion produced quite a different effect: then, instead of justifying and encouraging aggression, it made itself felt through laws and other restraints which tended to rob the previously self-reliant, proud and violent men of those very qualities. In this part of his analysis he can be compared to Edward Gibbon who, looking at Rome, deplored the day when "the last remains of the military spirit were buried in the cloister."

* * *

Ibn Khaldun, as I have pointed out, believed that nomads had a single objective, to leave the harshness of desert life to acquire the good things of life from the settled people. But, for some nomadic incursions, I believe he was wrong. Unfortunately, we have little information on any nomads' motivations *before* they arrived among settled peoples, but for some, particularly on the frontiers of China, we know enough to at least consider another model in addition to aggression -- flight.

The Chinese records, which were not available to Ibn Khaldun, support this model. From at least the Chou dynasty, agrarian and urban China expanded onto traditional grazing areas, and various of the "Warring States" built enormous walls to interdict tribal migrations. Periodically, Chinese forces invaded tribal lands, driving some nomads into the territories of their neighbors; they did this in the south and the west also, but the results were most dramatic in the north. During the Ch'in dynasty, about 220-200 B.C., the Chinese began to push the powerful Hsiung-nu confederation northward, and, as it retreated, it shoved other nomads before it, and they displaced still others and so on right across Asia. In this original example of the "domino theory," one of the groups they evicted, whom the Chinese call the Yüeh-chih, fell upon and routed a people we know as Scythians.

This migration of the "Scythians" (the word which we take to be the name of a particular people simply means "nomads") was but one of many unrecorded convulsions. An earlier one must have been the cause of the "Scythian" attack on Assyria in the Seventh century B.C. which Herodotus describes in similar terms, saying that he was told that the Scythians were *fleeing* from other nomads, known as the "Massagetae, whose

country lies far to the eastward beyond the Araxes [river]."

In the course of their flight westward across Asia, the Yüeh-chih, like hundreds of tribes and clans of Indo-Europeans, Aryans, Celts, Goths, Avars, Huns, Iranians, Medes and other less well known groups, became conquerors. As the Yüeh-chih reached Central Asia, they entered the belt of Hellenistic city-states which Alexander the Great had left behind in Bactria, and having overrun them, they went on to found the Kushan Empire in India.

We do not know much about the Huns, the Avars, the various Celt peoples, the Vandals, the Goths and others before they fell upon the Romans and Byzantines, but it seems likely (as Edward Gibbon thought) that their *pre*-history was also one of flight from forces "from the frozen regions of the north." For thousands of years, deep in Central Asia, far from historians, stampede after stampede had been set in motion by forces then unknown. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, when Europeans heard the Turkish name for the Mongol nomads who then threatened them, *Tatar*, they ascribed their origin to "Tartarus," a Greek name for the Underworld and changed their name to *Tartar*.

* * *

Other than fear and greed, Ibn Khaldun finds another force at work on nomadic society; it is this force for which he is best known. From his reading of bedouin Arabic poetry and from his two periods of residence with tribes in what is today Algeria, Ibn Khaldun distilled the concept of *°asabiyah*. The basic meaning of the word, used of a rope, is "twisted tightly;" in the poetic tradition he would have heard the phrase, "he drew the folk close together" (*°asaba 'l-qawm*). For him the concept comes to mean "that emotional attachment to a group which causes men to overcome their selfish aims to act

in the collective interest." He sees *ʿasabiyah* as the dynamic that gives cohesion and power to societies and argues that the absence of it is the cause of social disintegration. It is, for him, the prime bedouin virtue because, without it, man could not survive in the desert. Writing in an age that knew little of propaganda or even of ideology, he asserted that *ʿasabiyah* could not be inculcated or "manufactured." It comes about naturally among men who belong to a single lineage "since the absolute attachment to one's immediate group of relatives" is the most important of the emotions that God put into the hearts of his creatures." He is not interested in genealogy to assert nobility but only to illuminate "ties of the womb." That is, to establish that kinship is politically and militarily effective.

So as he sees it, tightly twisted together into intensely loyal fighting clans, always hungry, driven by fear of those pressing from still deeper in the wilderness or more numerous, anxious for the plunder of the cities and united by a charismatic leader or a religious mission, the nomads plunge into the settled areas.

* * *

When they arrive among settled peoples, nomads gain access to *material* civilization. At that point, they soon realize that "dominion is a noble calling, full of delights, in which one wraps oneself in all of the worldly excellences, bodily pleasures and personal proclivities." And, being savage, unused to rule, powerful and greedy, they plunder the conquered and fight among themselves for the spoil "because of the tyranny and aggressiveness in [man's] animal nature." When this anarchy becomes intolerable, they turn to a strong man to restore order. This man, being recognized (whether legitimately or fraudulently) for his noble lineage, assumes the position of monarch, a

position that did not exist in egalitarian nomadic society; so he is forced to formulate a radically different concept of dominion. This he bases on his immediate family. He pushes aside many of his former partisans, replacing them with new and unrelated supporters and *their* followers and so on in a pyramid of power. Monarchy thus becomes independent of, indeed antithetical to the *‘asabiyah* that brought it to power; so the new elite no longer shares the profits of conquest with those upon whom they no longer depend.

* * *

Thus are set in motion tendencies that will lead to the ruin of the new regime. Soon the vices of the city --excessive indulgence in food, drink and promiscuity -- spread. The decline in public morals is important in Ibn Khaldun's analysis not so much because of its violation of religious laws as for its political effect. When the society becomes libertine "each one is ignorant of his son since sperm is mixed in the wombs." As "purity of lineage is lost...its fruit, *‘asabiyah*, is wasted and thrown away."

Thus, because of the action of the new rulers and the tendencies of their old partisans, the clock begins to tick. It is only a matter of time before the virtues of the desert are forgotten and the atrophying state falls before new conquerors. Generally, Ibn Khaldun believes, this process of decline and fall takes three generations, Because the first generation retains the desert characteristics, its roughness and its lack of domestication, its harshness of life, its self-sacrifice, nobility and the sharing of glory, the valor of *‘asabiyah* continues to be preserved...

Then in the second generation, in dominion, its circumstances change from bedouin life to settled life, from privation to ease and luxury, from the

sharing of glory to the monopolization of it and from standing tall to crouching subservience; thus the pattern of *asabiyah* is somewhat fractured as [people] become used to gentleness and submission. Yet much remains to them from what they recall of the first generation...

As for the third generation, they forget the era of nomadism and roughness as though it had never existed, and they lose [the taste for] the sweetness of power and *asabiyah*...and [instead of being its valiant warriors] they become a burden on the dynasty...

If the state is a large one, it will fall apart from the outlying provinces first, so that the home province will remain in the hands of the dynasty longer. But, like the tides, the forces of history cannot be denied and in an ever recurring rhythm will flow and ebb beyond the control of any man or dynasty.

* * *

Ibn Khaldun invites comparison to several later historians but the one who, to my mind, bears the closest relationship is Edward Gibbon who lived 400 years later and never heard of Ibn Khaldun. When Gibbon addresses the question of why the Islamic empires declined, he unconsciously echoes Ibn Khaldun:

When the Arabian conquerors had spread themselves over the East, and were mingled with the servile crowds of Persia, Syria, and Egypt, they insensibly lost the freeborn and martial virtues of the desert.

Or, in speaking of the conquest of China by the nomadic Mongols, he writes that The Mogul army was dissolved in a vast and populous country; and their emperors adopted with pleasure a political system which gives to the prince the solid substance of

despotism...One hundred and forty years after the death of Zingis [Chingis], his degenerate race, the dynasty of the Yuen, was expelled...

Gibbon also speculated on what the power of the thrust of nomadism might have accomplished had it been maintained. That is, although he did not imagine the concept, had what Ibn Khaldun called *‘asabiyah* remained vigorous: after the Arab conquest of Spain and the South and west of France in the 8th century,

A victorious line of march had been prolonged above a thousand miles from the rock of Gibraltar to the banks of the Loire; the repetition of an equal space would have carried the Saracens to the confines of Poland and the Highlands of Scotland; the Rhine is not more impassable than the Nile or Euphrates, and the Arabian fleet might have sailed without a naval combat into the mouth of the Thames. Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of Mohammed.

* * *

Much is made of the inspiration Gibbon received from the ruins of Rome but the inspiration (and reward) of Ibn Khaldun's life was less romantic and more political. He had a sort of ring-side seat on some of the great events of his time. While in Spain, still in his early thirties, he participated in a remarkable diplomatic mission. It was to the by-then Christian city of Seville where Pedro I ("the Cruel") offered to take him into his service. Crossing the religious frontier was then common in Spain where the relatively backward Christian rulers often called on the superior technical and managerial skills of Muslims. Pedro had compelling reasons to reach abroad for trustworthy assistants since

his court was riven by hatreds and ambitions among his five illegitimate half-brothers whose mother had been murdered by Pedro's mother. As king of Castile, he was also in bitter conflict with the king of Aragon, Pedro IV, and at daggers drawn with the king of France whose daughter he had married, spurned and then put into prison. As a neutral foreigner, Ibn Khaldun would have been a valuable addition to the ruler's entourage, but, wisely, he declined Pedro's offer.

It is an indication of the richness of his life experience that Ibn Khaldun was thus to meet and exchange ideas with a Christian king in the West and, after spending nearly twenty years in Egypt as a judge, professor at the Azhar University and confidant of the ruler, and then 68 years old, he was to be lowered by rope from the walls of Damascus in 1400 to meet and spend weeks with the great Central Asian Chagatai Turkish conqueror Timur -- known to us in corruption of his Persian nickname, *Timur-i Lang*, ("Timur the Lame") as Tamerlane.

Like many later scholars who have aspired to enlighten statesmen, Ibn Khaldun thought that Timur wanted to ponder his brilliant insights and grand conceptions whereas the wily old soldier appears to have sought him out only to learn the best roads to take on a campaign he planned to conquer Morocco. Perhaps that is the real lesson he has left us.

Sic transit ambitio mens.