

IBN KHALDUN

the maghribi master of the muqaddimah



written & illustrated by
LUQMAN NAGY

Ibn Khaldun

The Maghribi Master of Muqadimmah

By: Luqman Nagy

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PREFACE

Historians agree that the ‘golden age’ of Islamic civilization peaked during the period of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258). Its capital, Baghdad, was the wealthiest and most prosperous city outside of the borders of China. It had been the centre of an ‘information explosion’ in the 9th century, when the caliph Ma’mun inaugurated the Bayt al-Hikmah (‘House of Wisdom’), the renowned translation academy whose mission was to preserve the entire corpus of Greek scientific learning in Arabic translation. Arabs learned the secret of papermaking from the Chinese, and by the end of the 8th century, Baghdad had a street with a hundred paper sellers: the suq al-warraqin)

The discovery of inexpensive paper – replacing the more costly papyrus and animal skin parchment– improved literacy throughout Dar al-Islam. Muslims became avid readers of compilations of Ahadith (‘traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him)) and the historic, scientific and literary works being published in important centres of Islamic scholarship such as Bukhara, Damascus, Cairo, Qayrawan, Fez and Cordoba. Islamic culture was now synonymous with the high civilization of a ‘book culture’. Even before the destruction of the ‘Abbasid capital (and demise of the caliphate) by the invading Mongols in 1258, splinter dynasties had begun to break away and rule independently of Baghdad. Regional dynasties sprang up in Central Asia and all across North Africa and Muslim Spain.

By the 14th century, the Ilkhan Mongols ruled Iran; the Mamluks controlled Egypt, Syria, and the Hijaz; and local Berber dynasties ruled the lands in northwest Africa. The once unified Spanish Umayyad Caliphate was a distant memory. Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) was slowly being ‘reconquered’ by Christian armies. The 14th century was a tumultuous time in Islamic history. The vast expanse of Dar al-Islam was fractured and many regional governments held power for only three or four generations, or about a century.

In 1332, Ibn Khaldun was born in a quiet quarter of old Tunis. The gifted and very inquisitive boy became an even more ambitious adult who travelled across North Africa in pursuit of knowledge and lucrative government positions. He led a full and adventurous life in a very fluid and politically unstable world: He observed the loss of Muslim Spain to the Christians, the rise and fall of Berber governments, the expansion of the new Ottoman Turkish state and the contraction of the Byzantine one. Ibn Khaldun attempted to identify specific causes for all these historic events, eventually formulating a theory for the predictable rise and fall of civilizations. His unique philosophy of history was eloquently laid out in the Muqaddimah (‘Introduction’), a book that, in the words of the British historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, is “undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.”

This book is an introduction to the life and times of Ibn Khaldun, the Maghribi master of the Muqaddimah. Insha’Allah, it will enable readers to better understand and appreciate his innovative contributions to the study of history that made Europeans dub him both the ‘Father of Sociology’ and the ‘Father of Economics’.

CHAPTER 1

The Arabian Peninsula was the home to many ancient civilizations. Kingdoms, such as those of Saba, Qatab and Himyar, thrived centuries before Islam. Indeed, the Noble Qur'an mentions the Prophet Sulaiman (Peace be upon him) and his correspondence with Balqis, the Queen of Saba (Sheba), who was invited to worship Allah, the One True Lord.

وَصَدَّهَا مَا كَانَتْ تَعْبُدُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنَّهَا كَانَتْ مِنْ قَوْمٍ كَافِرِينَ ﴿النمل: ٤٣﴾

"And that which she [Balqis] used to worship besides Allah has prevented her (from Islam), for she was of a disbelieving people." An-Naml: 43

These Arabian civilizations were located in southern Arabia, in present-day Yemen. In the remote eastern part of that country, there was a secluded valley: the Wadi Hadhramawt. All southern Arabia, including this valley, was an important supplier of incense, an extremely valuable commodity in ancient times. Incense, such as frankincense and myrrh, were exported north to Egypt, Byzantium and Rome.

During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him), the message of Islam was conveyed beyond the borders of Arabia. Invitations to the new religion were sent to the Negus of Ethiopia, the Byzantine emperor and the Persian king. Within a century of its inception, Islam had spread east to the borders of China and west to the shores of the Atlantic ocean.



In the remote eastern part of south Yemen lies the secluded valley of the Wadi Hadhramawt. Mud skyscrapers towering nine to ten storeys have been built there for centuries. Ibn Khaldun traces his descent to a family from this region.

Among those Muslim families who migrated west and settled in Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain and Portugal) were members of tribes from the Wadi Hadhramawt. Ibn Khaldun, the subject of this book,

traces his descent to one such family that settled in Seville in the 8th century CE.

Before Seville was retaken by the Spanish Christians in the middle of the 13th century, the Banu Khaldun fled the city and moved south to safer lands. They eventually settled in Tunis, where Ibn Khaldun's great-grandfather and grandfather worked at the court of the local ruler. Ibn Khaldun's father, however, avoided politics and chose the life of a fafiq, an expert in Islamic law. Although Ibn Khaldun was born into a family of scholars, politics was also to play a major role in his long and adventurous life.

Ibn Khaldun was a product of his times; to fully understand his immense contributions to world knowledge, one must first understand how the historical events he witnessed affected him. This is precisely what will be discussed in the following pages of this book.

CHAPTER 2

Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad bin Khaldun al-Hadhrami, or Ibn Khaldun, was born in Tunis in 1332 CE. This part of the Maghrib had become part of Dar al-Islam during the first Islamic century when Uqba ibn Nafi, the famous Arab commander, established an encampment at Qayrawan in ca 670. Present-day Tunisia, parts of eastern Algeria and western Libya were known as Ifriqiyah.

The area around Tunis, of course, had been the heart of the ancient Punic civilization with Carthage as its capital. Even though the city had been razed by the Romans almost fifteen centuries before his time, Ibn Khaldun must still have been impressed at the ruins of the once mighty Carthage. Throughout his life, Ibn Khaldun was to travel extensively across all of northwest Africa. The many Roman ruins he found there were constant reminders of the transience of political power. Such observations were, in later years, to play a major role in the shaping of his original philosophy of history.

Starting in the 13th century, Tunis began to receive many Jewish and Muslim émigrés from parts of Al-Andalus. The Christian reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula had begun and, in later centuries, all of North Africa would continue to welcome Jews and Muslims fleeing the persecution of the Spanish Inquisition. Ibn Khaldun's own great grandparents had fled Spain and had sought asylum in Tunis. As a boy, he grew up in a bustling, multi-cultural city that became an important centre of Islamic scholarship.



Ibn Khaldun resided with his family in the quarter of town known today as the Khalduniyyah. His home was not far from the famous Al-Zaytuna Mosque, the foremost seat of learning in all of Tunis.

Ibn Khaldun resided with his family in the quarter of town known today as the Khalduniyyah. His home was not far from the famous Al-Zaytuna Mosque, the foremost seat of learning in all of Tunis. When the city was occupied by the Moroccan Marinid sultan, many scholars from the city of Fez migrated to Tunis. These gifted and experienced teachers enhanced the learning environment and enriched the pool of knowledge from which the young Ibn Khaldun was educated.

Although Ibn Khaldun's ancestors had all been very politically active, his father was, by choice, apolitical and devoted his time to the education of his son. There was always tension, however, between those in power and the general populace. As a child, Ibn Khaldun witnessed political upheavals that he would experience again and again throughout his life. He lived in turbulent times; short-lived regimes came and went. Islamic civilization had already reached its zenith and Ibn Khaldun bore witness to its slow decline.

CHAPTER 3

Ibn Khaldun received a traditional, 'classical' education and was tutored by the best teachers in Tunis. His father also personally tutored his son and monitored every aspect of his education, which began with a sound foundation in the Arabic language and an in depth study of the Qur'an and hadith of the Prophet (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him). Even at a very young age, Ibn Khaldun was encouraged to memorize the Noble Qur'an. This was not difficult to do as public and private recitations of the Noble Qur'an were part of one's daily life. Experienced Qur'an masters were hired and before reaching his teenage years, Ibn Khaldun had become a hafidh al-qur'an, a memorizer of the entire Qur'an.

In later life, Ibn Khaldun identified some features unique to the educational system in the countries of the Maghrib. In his most important work, the Muqaddimah ('Introduction') to his Kitab al-'Ibar ('History of the World'), he concluded that the educational methods employed in northwest Africa resulted in increased proficiency in the Arabic language there.

The Maghribi method is to restrict the education of children to instruction in the Qur'an and to practice, during the course [of instruction], in Qur'anic orthography [the study of letters and spelling] ... The Maghribis do not bring up any other subjects in their classes, such as hadith, fiqh, poetry, or Arabic philology, until the pupil is skilled in [the Qur'an], or drops out before becoming skilled in it. ... Consequently, [Maghribis] know the orthography of the Qur'an, and know it by heart, better than any other [Muslim group].



Even at a very young age, Ibn Khaldun was encouraged to memorize the Noble Qur'an. Experienced Qur'an masters were hired and before reaching his teenage years, Ibn Khaldun had become a hafidh al-qur'an, a memorizer of the entire Qur'an.

Ibn Khaldun's education proceeded on course. As a young teenager, he began attending lectures given by the foremost scholars of the day. This enabled Ibn Khaldun to widen his views on many religious and literary topics. He soon was given his ijazah (official certification) in all the subjects he studied.

Before the age of 17, Ibn Khaldun witnessed two traumatic events. First, the horrific bubonic plague, or Black Death, reached Tunis. This contagious disease, originating in the East, quickly ravaged the