

Recognising the Importance of Ibn Khaldun

Interview with Abdesselam Cheddadi

The geographer and political thinker Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis in 1332 and died in Cairo in 1406. Whilst his thought's influence on the Arab-Muslim world is open to debate, he is widely recognised to have been one of humanity's major thinkers. This dialogue between Olivier Mongin, who is the editorial director of the journal *Esprit*, and Abdesselam Cheddadi supplies us with an introduction to Ibn Khaldûn's thought and major concepts; it also provides an opportunity to think about the ambiguities inherent in the act of translating. In its introduction to the interview, *Esprit* states: 'Reading Ibn Khaldun today allows us to take stock of a major non-European thinker and suggests that we should adopt a comparative approach in order to get away from the idea that there is a gulf between cultures and the intellectual traditions that sustain them.'

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ESPRIT: What degree of recognition does the work of 'Abd al-Rahmân Ibn Kaldûn now enjoy in the Arab-Muslim world? And what recognition does it enjoy in the American and European world and, more specifically, in French-speaking countries? Is his work seen as something specific to or characteristic of a particular geographical region, or has it led historians in both the Arab-Muslim and European worlds to adopt a universalist, rather than a culturalist approach? And is the recognition of Ibn Khaldûn's work related to historical science? To what extent is Ibn Khaldûn recognised as the founder of historiography?

ABDESSELAM CHEDDADI: It all depends what you mean by recognition. Ibn Khaldûn is famous, and the recent publication of a translation of his masterpiece *Kitab al 'ibar* (*Le Livre des exemples*; 'The Book of Examples') in Gallimard's prestigious 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade' collection confirms his fame in Europe and France, where he was rediscovered in the early nineteenth century. This is a first step towards recognition and it is an important one, but it remains very superficial as what the general public know about Ibn Khaldûn rarely extends beyond his name. As I myself have been able to verify on numerous occasions, this is the case in the Arab-Muslim world in general. It may also be the case in Europe and America, but he has found a much smaller readership there. As is only to be expected, historians, sociologists and anthropologists with a specialist interest in the Arab-Muslim world do recognise his full importance. Paradoxically, serious studies of Ibn Khaldûn's work are more common in the West in general—and in Japan, where three translations of the *Muqaddimah* were published in the twentieth century—than in the Muslim world. This reflects the very undeveloped state of the social sciences in the region. If, however, we look at specialists in the social sciences in general, we find an almost complete ignorance of the work of Ibn Khaldûn; it is obvious that neither his social and political theories nor his historical theories are discussed.

We can therefore reasonably conclude that Ibn Khaldûn has not really been approached from a universalist perspective, even though it is true that anthropologists specialized in Muslim societies in both the Arab-Muslim world and the West do discuss his anthropological and political theories in the same terms that they discuss those of modern anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists. I think there are two reasons for this. On the one hand, epistemological studies of the work of Ibn Khaldûn are not very advanced, and the comparisons that have been drawn between his conceptions and those of various ancient and modern thinkers remain quite superficial. On the other, what we do know about his thought has not been fully integrated into general accounts of the history of ideas or the history of the social sciences. I must, however, state that I myself have been able to consult at least two American studies of the history of anthropological ideas that devote a little space to Ibn Khaldûn. It also has to be said that Ibn Khaldûn is best known as the author of the *Muqaddimah*. This is the introduction to his historical work, and in it he describes the science of society and civilisation as a prolegomena to the study of history.

Although the historical side of his work and especially his work on the Maghreb, has been intensely exploited by all the region's historians, Ibn Khaldûn's theory of history remains relatively unknown and has, in general, been misunderstood. The discussion is restricted to what the author says about it in the *Muqaddimah* and it is generally thought that the method he expounds is not actually applied in his historical work. This view stems from a real misunderstanding. Ibn Khaldûn is the author of an original theory of history which both departs from traditional Arab historiography and in sense extends it. To that extent, he rediscovers and develops the spirit of the Greek historiography that we find in Thucydides or Polybius. Ibn Khaldûn's theory of society and his theory of history complement one another, as the understanding of one implies an understanding of the other.

How did you come to be interested in the work of Ibn Khaldûn? How did you approach and interpret it and what gave you the idea of translating it? In more concrete terms, is he an author who is read in secondary schools in Morocco and the Maghreb, or has he been marginalised?

When I was in my *classe de philosophie* in 1962, we did not study Ibn Khaldûn, or any other Arab or Muslim philosophers for that matter. My extra-curricular interests included Hegel, Marx, Freud, Bergson and Sartre, but I knew nothing at all about Ibn Khaldûn. At that time, news of his fame had yet to reach students in the *lycées*, and none of his work was being taught. It was some fifteen years later that I began to get to know the work of Ibn Khaldûn for the first time. I had completed my philosophy degree in France and had begun my research on education in the Muslim world. I read the various chapters of the *Muqaddimah* that deal with the sciences and education in medieval Islamic societies and was fascinated by the breadth and relevance of the information, and by the quality of the analysis and reflection.

Some time later, my friend Abdelwahab Meddeb, who was then working with the late Pierre Bernard, the editorial director of Editions Sindbad, suggested that I should translate the *Autobiography* (*Al Ta'rif*) into French. One thing led to another and I began to study his work as a whole and wrote my doctoral thesis on it. A few years after my translations of the *Autobiography* and selections from *Le Livre des exemples* were published, I had the good fortune to become involved in discussions with Gallimard, where I had met an editor through Professor Jamal-Eddine Bencheikh, and they asked me to translate and edit a two-volume edition of *Le Livre des exemples* for the 'Pléiade' collection. My acquaintance with Ibn Khaldûn is therefore the result of a long-standing personal interest and some happy accidents. But all this is purely anecdotal.

What about the French translations? What are we to make of them? And what about the use that is made of Ibn Khaldûn's work in colonial historiography?

In academic terms, I encountered two kinds of difficulty as my studies of Ibn Khaldûn progressed. They related to the editing of the Arabic text and to the translations. The work of Ibn Khaldûn has had a chequered history. In his day, it was on the whole widely respected and distributed, at least in the Orient, even though it was not really understood there. This is especially true of the *Muqaddimah*, which is the theoretical part. In the Ottoman Empire, it enjoyed a certain vogue between the late sixteenth century and the eighteenth century, but it was not widely read in the Maghreb at that time. It was then discovered in France and Europe in the early nineteenth century, probably as a result of Turkish influence. Fifty years later, there was so much interest in it within the scientific community that a lot of extracts were published, followed by an edition and translation of the whole of the *Muqaddimah*, including the historical sections that deal with Egypt. His complete works were published in Egypt at much the same time.

The work of Ibn Khaldûn's editors and translators was remarkable, but it was neither sufficiently accurate nor scientifically rigorous. Slane's translation of the *Muqaddimah*, which was published in the mid-nineteenth century, was a great scientific event in its day, but it has since become dated. On the one hand, the discovery of new manuscripts has made it possible to establish a text that is more complete; on the other, the French language itself has changed since then. We now have better tools at our disposal and a better understanding of the book's cultural and historical context. Vincent Monteil's attempt to provide a modern translation was not really successful. On the other hand, Franz Rosenthal's English translation, which came out before Monteil's, represented a major advance. The text is more complete and the translation is more rigorous, if a little stiff. Above all, it is very erudite.

My new translation has obviously benefited from all the work that has been done over the last two hundred years, but it also attempts to take it a little further, mainly by providing a text that takes into account all the manuscripts that are now available. In linguistic terms, I have attempted to combine conceptual rigour and accuracy with a style that is not too off-putting. My translation adopts a broader perspective and introduces both the theoretical and the historical aspects of the work. By adopting this perspective, I hope to help to challenge the idea, which has been deeply rooted since the time of Gaston Bouthoul, that there is a gulf between the theoretical and historical aspects of the work, and to open up new lines of research into Ibn Khaldûn's overall approach. Because he adopts a new approach to history and has an in-depth knowledge of his subject, he outlines a very rich theory of society and human civilisation.

An Original Work

Let us now turn to the content of the work and, therefore, to its guiding concepts. First of all, does the Arabic language valorise- in the sense of giving them their full significance- politics and the vocabulary of power? Is Ibn Khaldûn an imaginative writer or an inventor of concepts? And isn't his language a problem for the translator?

Like any cultural region in which political power is centralised and where a bureaucracy has grown to a certain size, the Arab Empire of the classical period (the eighth to ninth centuries and the eleventh and twelfth centuries) did develop a technical vocabulary relating to power and state administration. That vocabulary is used in political and historical literature, and in the legal sphere corresponding to what we would now call public law. Ibn Khaldûn obviously exploits that heritage when he expounds his political and social theory, and especially when

he describes institutions. This vocabulary is, however, inadequate when we move to a truly sociological level.

In order to express his own conceptions, Ibn Khaldûn resorts to a technique that was familiar to theorists from the Ancient philosophers onwards. He displaces words from current usage, gives them a more limited technical meaning and, more rarely, invents new terms. Examples include the concepts of *ijtimâ' insâni* (human society), *mulk* (power), *'umrân* (civilisation), *tawahhûsh* (life outside or far from urban conglomerations), *ta'annus* (life in or near urban centres), *'asabiyya* (solidarity, esprit de corps, social power), *wâzi* (constraining power), *badâwa* (rurality, rural way of life, rural civilisation), *a'mâl* (labour), *malaka* (habitus, aptitude acquired through learning), and so on. This conceptual armature is very important and unless we have a rigorous grasp of its precise meaning, there is a danger that we will quite fail to understand the whole of Ibn Khaldûn's political and social theory.

Could we look for a moment at some of the fundamental concepts that have been mistranslated? To begin with the concept of mulk. Ibn Khaldûn explores this notion at several different levels. To what extent is the concept universal, and what field does it cover? What is the link between the concept of power (mulk) and the civilisational approach? Aren't there two ambivalent sides to power: the pursuit of the general interest and the satisfaction of personal egoisms? What is the relationship between this concept and that of royalty? And what about its theologico-political dimension?

Yes, let us look for a moment at these different concepts. *Tawahhûsh* is usually translated as 'savagery' or 'the life of savages', as opposed to *Ta'annus*, which is translated as 'life in society' or 'sociability'. Now the notion of savagery, which we automatically contrast with that of civilisation, is something specific to the modern West from the sixteenth century onwards, and it is quite alien to the thought of Ibn Khaldûn and, more generally, to Islamic culture's view of human beings. In the *Muqaddimah*, the word *tawahhush* means 'living in isolation and away from urban conglomerations', whilst *ta'annus* means quite the opposite. The populations or tribes that Ibn Khaldûn describes as *mutawahhisha* are not 'savage'. *Tawahhûsh* tends to have positive connotations to the extent that it allows the preservation of social and political qualities such as solidarity and courage.

The terms *'umrân badâwi* or *badâwa* and *'umrân hadâri* or *hadâra* have, for their part been translated as 'life in the desert' or 'nomadic life' and 'sedentary life'. This is a blatant misunderstanding, as the *Muqaddimah* contains a passage in which Ibn Khaldûn gives explicit and unambiguous definitions of both terms. If we look at that passage, we find that *hadâra* and *badâwa* refer, respectively, to urban and rural life, and not to nomadic and sedentary ways of life. This is an important nuance because, when we move to the level of Ibn Khaldûn's overall conception, the problem he is raising is not that of relations between nomadic and sedentary populations, but the more general and, in historical terms more significant, problem of relations between agrarian-pastoral civilisation and urban civilisation.

As for the term *mulk*, both French and English translators usually render it as 'monarchy', 'royalty' and 'royal power'. Whilst it is true that Ibn Khaldûn does sometimes use it in that sense, its basic meaning for him is 'power in general'. In this content, the concept of *mulk* is bound up with his political theory, which holds that there can be no social order without a form of power based upon constraint and domination (*qhar* and *ghalaba*). Ibn Khaldûn also emphasises the essentially ambivalent character of power, which corresponds to a vital social need –the formation of a political order which is the only thing that allows human society to survive. At the same time, it is something men seek in order to satisfy their selfish needs. The ambivalence of power is one of the keys to understanding the process of the rise and fall of *mulk*.

If *mulk* is almost systematically translated as ‘royal authority’ or ‘monarchy’, as in Vincent Monteil’s translation of the *Muqaddimah*, we will have a very muddled understanding of Ibn Khaldûn’s political and social theory. The concept of *mulk* is indeed central to his theory, and it is closely associated with the concept of ‘*umrân*. According to Ibn Khaldûn, there can be no civilisation (‘*umrân*) without power and a political order, and there can be no real power or political order without civilisation. To borrow a metaphor from Marx, *mulk* is, for Ibn Khaldûn, the motor of history. The cyclical nature of civilisation and history simply reflects the cyclical nature of power itself. It comes into being, develops and dies. And then a new cycle begins.

We can therefore clearly see that the concept of *mulk* is not reducible to ‘royalty’ or ‘monarchy’; those terms refer to a particular form of power and to a particular political regime. In specific political and religious contexts, *mulk* can obviously take the form of monarchy, royalty or tyranny. But it can also take the form of a caliphate. It is a strictly political concept and, as such, does not have any theological dimension. This is extremely important, as it allows Ibn Khaldûn to conceptualise the political independently of the religious. In this context, the religious conception of power (the caliphate, of example) is one form of power amongst others. The thinkers who came after Ibn Khaldûn also conceptualised the political in non-religious terms, but only within the restricted sphere of what is known as the literature of ‘the mirrors of princes’. In that context, the political is seen in purely practical terms. The political philosophy outlined by Ibn Khaldûn has no equivalent in Islamic culture, either before or after him.

‘Asabiyya is another concept that has given rise to a lot of misunderstandings. What does it refer to? Is it a form of solidarity but also a form of power? What is its contemporary relevance, given that it was this concept that led some writers (such as Ernest Gellner and Michel Seurat) to rediscover Ibn Khaldûn?’

The misunderstandings surrounding the concept of ‘*asabiyya* stem from the fact that it has been divorced from other basic concepts such as *mulk*, ‘*umrân* and above all, from relations between ‘*umrân hadarî* (urban civilisation) and ‘*umrân badawî* (rural civilisation). It is usually translated as ‘clan spirit’, which is how Vincent Monteil translates it, because it is thought to refer primarily to ‘Bedouin’ or ‘nomadic’ societies. It has come to crystallise a number of negative connotations. The concept of ‘*asabiyya* is in fact a counterpart to that of *mulk* and it must therefore be first understood in a general sense. Whereas *mulk* has, as we have seen, a very general meaning and refers to the use of power and coercion to bring a political order into existence, the concept of ‘*asabiyya* refers to the social force without which *mulk* cannot come into being. For Ibn Khaldûn, ‘*asabiyya* is, in other words, a *sine qua non* for the existence of *mulk*. If we understand it in that sense, we can translate in two ways: as ‘solidarity’ or ‘esprit de corps’ or, in certain specific contexts, as ‘clan spirit’. It is in a sense the external or subjective manifestation of ‘*asabiyya*. It therefore means ‘social force in general’ or, in certain specific situations ‘clan strength’ or ‘tribal strength.’ It is the objective aspect of ‘*asabiyya*, which is a determinant factor in the formation of any power, no matter what its nature may be.

To give a more complete idea of the way in which Ibn Khaldûn conceives ‘*asabiyya*, we must now go back to his analyses of its origins in ‘rural civilisation’, of its development in the process of the conquest of power, and of its dissolution in the context of urban civilisation. We must in other words follow the overall theoretical argument of the *Muqaddimah* as a whole. We can then begin to see the complexity of a concept which is usually grasped only in partial terms. This is particularly true of Ernest Gellner, who retains only those aspects of ‘*asabiyya* that fit in with his theory of segmentary society.

Ibn Khaldûn's Anthropology

How are we to describe the nature of Ibn Khaldûn's project? Do we have to describe it as a philosophy of history? In what sense is it comparable with the work of Hegel or Marx? Or do we have to see it as an anthropological project and run the risk of emphasising its cultural aspect and perhaps its relativism?

Ibn Khaldûn himself describes his project as an attempt to found a 'science of society and civilisation'. From that point of view, his preoccupations are much the same as those of Saint-Simon, who was, in the mid-nineteenth century, the first in Europe to express himself in those same terms. There are both similarities and major differences between Ibn Khaldûn's 'science of society' and modern Western anthropology, and we will have occasion to discuss them. Having said that, the *Muqaddimah* does contain a philosophy of history and an outline political philosophy, but Ibn Khaldûn does not expressly formulate them as such. Ibn Khaldûn's philosophy of history does bear comparison with those of Hegel and Marx. It is based upon a thorough knowledge of history and outlines a schema for the evolution of human history. It is, however, less ideological and closer to what we can now see as the real course of history than that of either of those European thinkers.

To describe it very briefly, the schema centres on the idea that great historical processes are both social and political, and that they are structured around a cyclical movement that take societies from a rural order (*badâwa*) based upon agriculture and stock breeding and characterised by its technological and political simplicity, to an urban order (*hadâra*) based upon crafts and trade in which technology and political organisation reach a very high level of complexity. It is the contrasting but complementary nature of the urban and rural poles of civilisation that explains the cyclical movement. Whilst this schema is not, as Ibn Khaldûn believed, universally valid, the most recent historical and anthropological studies confirm that is relevant to most medieval Islamic societies and to many other premodern societies.

Be that as it may, anthropology, like the philosophy of history, does have a universal dimension. In what sense does Ibn Khaldûn's philosophy have a universal dimension?

Ibn Khaldûn's approach is universalist in that he looks at human society in all its spatial extension and temporal depth. Whatever the quality of his findings, his approach is valid in itself to the extent that it is the first example of a systematic and complete study of human society as such. But there is more to it than that. Whilst Ibn Khaldûn's general hypothesis about the evolution of civilisation and history is debateable, it still represents one of the first attempts to provide a rational explanation for human history in its entirety. At a less general level, Ibn Khaldûn's science of society supplies models that explain the workings of society and power which are still relevant today. It forges, lastly, concepts of society (*itjimâ*), civilisation (*'umrân*), *'asabiyya* (esprit de corps, clan spirit, solidarity, social force), power and sovereignty (*mulk*) that have a place in the history of anthropology and the epistemology of the social sciences.

Islam and the Political Role of Religion

This philosophy foregrounds the decisive role of Islam. Why? Is it related to the ambivalent concept of power (I know what you are going to say: power refers to the possible rationalisation of action on the one hand, and to the most narrowly-defined interests on the

other)? Is not the reconciliation of these tendencies a task for religion? How are we to understand this, and to what extent does Islam have a specific role to play? Is religion being asked to moderate the political, or to make the people fear it (the fear of God) so as to make power less tyrannical (Napoleon and Portalis)? Is it the unification of the spiritual and the worldly that is the ideal?

Religion does indeed play a major role at various levels in Ibn Khaldûn's social and political theory, but it appears only at a certain stage in the analysis. When Ibn Khaldûn does introduce it, he refers to religion in general and not to Islam as such. When he looks at the political function of religion, he, unlike Muslim philosophers, concludes that there is no need for religion. To prove his point, he argues that history demonstrates that societies can function perfectly well without any religion. Ibn Khaldûn accepts that religion does play a role in the foundation of power and States, but only insofar as it makes social forces more powerful and only to the extent that, insofar as it is an ideological fermenting agent that can unite men around a lofty ideal, it is a supplementary force. Having examined how, in its pure state, the natural interplay between social and political forces affects the formation and workings of States, he then demonstrates that, in historical terms, those forces interact within a specific institutional framework. That framework, which defines the rules of government, is, he says, founded upon either a purely human and rational basis, or a religious and divine basis.

It is at this point that Islam intervenes. Ibn Khaldûn's preference is for a religiously-based institutional framework. He does not explicitly explain why this should be the case, and does not dwell upon what he calls 'rational politics', although he does cite the example of the Persian monarchy. We can assume that the explanation is that religion has a transcendental power and authority that no human agency can have. The divine law is, from the outset, superior to particular interests and individual egotism, and it supplies absolute values that transcend human divisions. In that sense, religion supplies the political with fair and lasting solutions, whilst its moral ideals can distract men from their penchant for oppression and tyranny. Ibn Khaldûn regards the ideal unification of the political and the religion as a beautiful utopia. There was a very brief period (thirty years, according to tradition) in the history of Islam when it really did exist, in the time of the 'Rightly-Guided Caliphs'. He explains the objective reasons, which are inscribed in both human nature and the nature of power, why that ideal can no longer work. Ibn Khaldûn demonstrates that, in the course of the history of Islam, the royal regimes that existed in most Islamic societies reached a compromise between the application of religious law and the natural needs of society and power.

I am still trying to understand the process described by Ibn Khaldûn. Could you be more specific about how Islam compares with the other monotheisms? Why aren't relations between the spiritual and the temporal similar in all three religions? If the Muslim religion is best at organising the political, why does the evolution of Christianity lead to a regime in which the spiritual is divorced from the temporal? And if Ibn Khaldûn's thought does have a universal value, how are we to conceptualise the status of the political in non-Muslim societies? And, finally, can a society exist without a religion?

When he describes Jewish, Christian and Muslim institutions, Ibn Khaldûn refers to the common framework of what he calls a 'prophetic vicariat' (*khilat al-numuwwa*). Christians were familiar with the notion of a vicariate (from the papacy of Leo the Great [440-461] onwards, the Pope was known as 'Peter's Vicar and, from 495 onwards, even as the 'Vicar of Christ'), but there is no reason to suppose that Muslims borrowed it from them. In Ibn Khaldûn's view, the defining feature of Islam is that it unites the religious and the secular,

whereas the Jewish and Christian religions separate the two. This is a historical error on his part. The comparison he draws between Islam and the other two religions is approximate and, at one level, false. On the one hand, he claims that Islam has a universal mission, or in other words that it is addressed to all men, who are under an obligation to follow it. In his view, this leads to the institution of 'holy war', which is a religious obligation. There is therefore no distinction between the religious and the secular, or between the caliphate and temporal power (*mulk*). On the other hand, the fact that Jews and Christians do not have a universal mission and do not regard 'holy war' as a religious obligation results in the separation of the religious and the secular.

Ibn Khaldûn never really expands upon his explanations as to why Islam, unlike the other two monotheistic religions, has a universal mission in the relevant passage of the *Muqaddimah*, and the argument does not appear anywhere else in his work. Be that as it may, whilst it is true that, there was always considerable tension between the universalist and particularist tendencies within Judaism, the particularist current became dominant in the Jewish communities of the Middle Ages. A strong universalist strand was present in very early Christianity and the Crusades demonstrate that Christian universalism could at times, just like its Muslim equivalent, resort to arms.

In Judaism, the relationship between the priesthood and political power is historically complex. We know, for example, that at the time of the Hasmoneans, the high priest was not just a religious leader or spiritual guide, and became a king as well. We also know that Herod's accession to the throne marked the real divorce between political authority and the priesthood. As for Christian institutions, whilst it has been established that the spiritual was originally separated from religion, the history of Christianity is full of struggles for political power between the Papacy and the Empire and other kingdoms and principalities. From the eighth century onwards, the Papacy attempted to form a temporal State and to establish itself as a 'monarchy' (especially after 1050). At the end of the twelfth century, it proclaimed itself to be the 'head of all Christendom in matters spiritual and temporal.' We also know that there was the very different tendency known as 'Caesaropapacy'. This tendency was particularly pronounced in Byzantium from the reign of Leo III ('Leo the Isaurian', 717-740) onwards; he regarded sovereigns as both priests and emperors.

As for 'holy war', it has to be emphasised that, no matter what Ibn Khaldun claims, it was not unknown in either Christianity or Judaism, and that, at certain times and in certain contexts, both Jews and Christians did regard it as a religious obligation.

Could you comment on the relationship between Ibn Khaldûn's model and the 'disenchanted world' tradition, which is specific to Western societies? How do their status and representation of the political differ?

There was in fact a general tendency to make the political autonomous from the religious at a very early stage in the history of Islam, and from the late Middle Ages onwards in Christian Europe. Ibn Khaldûn clearly identifies and describes this tendency in the case of Islam. The separation of the two is a late phenomenon that occurred in Europe and not in Islam. This has to be related to phenomena that go far beyond the religious context in the true sense of the word, and to the overall revolutionary process that affected society, science and technology from the European Renaissance onwards. The first great phase in that revolution continued until the eighteenth century.

The European tradition of the disenchantment of the world is a product of both the social and political revolutions and the modern industrial and scientific revolutions that began in the sixteenth century. The upheavals caused by the rapid development of the means of communication, information technologies and the biological sciences in the twentieth were

continuations of those revolutions. The nature of religion has changed. Whilst it can still be recuperated at certain levels, there is no longer any need for religion to provide a conceptual framework for the theory of the political, and it simply cannot provide a framework for a conceptual worldview. Ibn Kaldûn's model is obviously very far removed from this problematic. Whilst he does envisage the possibility that there could be a non-religious political system that (by asserting that religion = monotheism), the underlying implication is that nations that view their political systems in that way know nothing about 'true religion'. What is more, whilst there was a tendency within Islamic societies to grant the religious a certain autonomy from politics, Ibn Khaldûn thought that this was the result of human weakness and of men's inability to alter the natural laws of the political. Ibn Khaldûn lived in a world in which belief in the Creation was beyond question. Because they have no subjective experience of the various revolutions that have occurred in Europe, modern Muslims still live in much the same world as Ibn Khaldûn and are unlikely to abandon it unless there is far-reaching a cultural revolution.

The Conquest of Power and the Theory of Cycles

How important is the theory of cycles chez Ibn Khaldûn? Does it apply only to cities?

The theory that the evolution of societies and civilisation is cyclical is of fundamental importance to Ibn Khaldûn. It has to be related to two aspects of his thought: first, he takes the view that social models (the organisation of society into families, tribes and nations), technology, sciences and religions remain essentially stable once they are fully developed. Only minimal and superficial changes will take place. Second, he sees civilisation as a bipolar phenomenon, with a rural pole (*badâwa*) and an urban pole (*hadâra*). The two poles both contradict and complement one another. It is therefore the civilisational system in its entirety that is cyclical. Both cities and the rural, agrarian or pastoral world are affected. The cyclical transformations do not, on the other hand, affect either the foundations of the human order itself or its social and cultural models.

Could you describe Ibn Khaldûn's theory of the urban cycle? How does it relate to the rural world, and to what extent is it still pertinent (see Michel Seurat). Can we go so far as to compare it with European cities, which gave rise to the communalist tradition, but which also required citizens to bear arms and to be prepared to defend their city (without, as in Ibn Khaldûn, having to rely on groups from outside)?

As we have just seen, the cyclical theory is concerned with the civilisational system in its entirety. Cities are not independent of the rural world: they need the rural world to provide a military force and power itself, or in other words to provide them with the means to establish and preserve their internal order, to protect themselves from aggression and all kinds of threats from the outside world, to ensure that the roads are safe and to organise large-scale trade networks. Power comes into existence in the rural world, and then develops, flourishes, declines and dies in the urban world.

Muslim cities, which played a central role in the economic life of the empires and kingdoms that developed in the region dominated by Muslim civilisation as a result of its commercial vocation its ability to mediate between the three worlds of Asia, Africa and Europe, rapidly became enormous composite conglomerations that were difficult to manage and govern. Their social composition, which Ibn Khaldûn describes very clearly did not, except in exceptional cases, allow them to develop their own military forces or their own political organisations. That, together with their structural weakness and –in the long term—

their relatively low level of capital-accumulation, made them very different to the European cities that emerged in the late Middle Ages. The latter were able to develop autonomous political systems, militias and, at a relatively late stage and, it is true, in only a few cases, armies made up of citizens.

An Incomplete Reception

Let us now go back to Ibn Khaldûn the historian. How was his truly historical work received in Europe, and what use has been made of it?

Ibn Khaldûn's historical work has been used as intensely as his theoretical work. As I have already said, his work of history was discovered first. Slane produced editions and translations of those parts of the *Kitab al-Ibar* that deal with the history of the Maghreb in the mid-nineteenth century, and they were commissioned by the French Ministry of War. But even today, Ibn Khaldûn is still not fully appreciated as a theorist of history to the extent that, whilst the originality and power of the historical method expounded in the *Muqaddimah* is recognised, it is almost always claimed that, strictly speaking, he does not use it in the historical sections. There is a real failure of recognition here, and it does not do Ibn Khaldûn justice.

But let us look first at how the historical sections -- the history of the Maghreb, or that of the Egypt of the Mamelukes, Spain and Syria—have been exploited. We can, without exaggeration, state that Ibn Khaldûn is both the best source of information for modern European historians working on North Africa, and their theoretical guide. His periodisation of history, the main problems he deals with and the global meaning he extracts from them have had a decisive influence. In more general terms, whilst it is true that his synthetic history of the Arab world as a whole has not really been exploited, the *Muqaddimah*'s accounts of political and religious institutions, of the emblems of power, of the history of the sciences and of education have been exploited to the full. In a word, we can therefore say that the modern history of Islam is enormously indebted to Ibn Khaldûn.

As for the method used by Ibn Khaldûn in his account of the history of the Arabs in general and of the Arabs and Berbers of the Maghreb in particular, it takes a certain blindness—which, I admit, I do not understand—not to see that it corresponds point for point to the method expounded in the *Muqaddimah*. First, there is the simple fact that, unlike traditional Arabic historians, Ibn Khaldûn writes a history of 'nations' (*unam*) and not a history of dynasties (*duwal*). Because he defines a nation as an entity characterised by its origins and genealogy, its territories, its habits and customs and especially by the role power plays in its history, he actually constructs the nation, almost in the sense in which we now speak of the construction of a historical object. In that sense, it might be said that he constructs the Arabs and Berbers as objects of history, and that he attempts to apply the same method to ancient 'nations' such as the Copts, the Jews, the Persians and the Rumi (Greeks, Romans and Byzantines). We then have to remember that, in accordance with his theoretical model, he describes the history of what was then the known world as a history in which power circulates from nation to nation: the great nations of the world were once marginal and existed in the primitive conditions of rural society (*badâwa*), but they conquered power one after the other. At the same time, they were transformed as they adopted urban civilisation and turned it to their advantage. This materialist and naturalist vision of history, which sees political power as the motor of history, is very different to both the vision of traditional Muslim historiography, which takes a neutral stance and refuses to give history—or at least history after the coming of Islam-- a meaning—and the vision of Christian historiography, which is centred on the idea of salvation and God's plans for man.

Deterritorialised Islam

Does Ibn Khaldûn's 'science of civilisation' do anything to help us understand Islam today and, in particular, its relationship with the phenomenon of globalisation?

The theory that Ibn Khaldûn elaborates in order to explain the social and political system of the Muslim societies of the Middle Ages is still the most complete and pertinent system we have to date. Modern historians have adopted it and sometimes refined it and enriched it with facts that were unknown to Ibn Khaldûn but, basically, they have done little more than him to further our understanding of those societies. Although the social structures, political institutions, economies and cultures today's Muslim societies have, like those of every society in the world, obviously undergone far-reaching transformations, they have not really cut the umbilical cord that binds them to the past, if only in subjective and cultural terms. Today's Muslim societies are perhaps more *nostalgic* about the past than other societies. This does not mean that they are more attached to the past than other societies, but it does mean that they have a poor understanding of both their past and their present, and that they have not resolved their problems with either of them. In that context, Ibn Khaldûn can be of great use to them. It must, however, be said that, apart from the fact that he gives them a reason to be proud, they do not study him to any great extent and do not read him correctly. He finds more sympathetic readers in, for example, Europe, the United States and Japan. Muslim societies have not been able to undertake a new reading of his work, and they fail to see how they can use him to understand the roots of their contemporary problems.

The greatest obstacle standing in the way of change in today's Muslim societies is closely bound up with their assimilation of political notions such as 'State', 'citizen' and 'freedom', which are products of a different social and political system. If they are to overcome that obstacle, they must first understand the difference between the Muslim social and political system, and the modern European system. An intelligent and in-depth reading of Ibn Khaldûn could help them to do so. They will not find ready-made answers to the problem of the globalisation we are now experiencing, but they will find a different way of conceptualising the global and the universal in the medieval Muslim context, and that will allow them to take a more relativist view of today's globalisation, and to stop seeing it as something exceptional.

Abdessalam Cheddadi was interviewed in Rabat by Olivier Mongin

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