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### Reading Ibn Khaldun in Kampala

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# Reading Ibn Khaldun in Kampala<sup>1</sup>

Why would a reading of *The Muqaddimah*<sup>2</sup> by teachers and students in the Ph D program at Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) be of interest to a wider audience? One could put this question differently: why would a reading of a 14th century North African text be of interest to academics in 21st century Kampala? Both questions belong to a wider reflection on the subject of universalization and particularization as aspects of a single process. The universalization of particular modes of thought goes alongside the particularization of other modes of thought. The centuries between the conquest of the Americas and the decolonization movement signified by Bandung witnessed two related movements in the history of thought. On the one hand, Eurocentric thought was elevated to a universal; on the other, non-European modes of thought were containerized as so many “traditions” of no more than local significance.<sup>3</sup> An assessment of the intellectual legacy of this period calls for a double task: alongside a critique of Eurocentrism, an exploration of engagements across various non-European modes of thought bounded as so many discrete “traditions.” This paper hopes to explore the difficulties involved in such an engagement in the period after Bandung.

Let me rephrase the question in line with the dominant African imagination: Why study a late 14<sup>th</sup> century text today, in sub-Saharan Africa? I can think of at least three reasons why a study of *The Muqaddimah* in an African academy is important today. Most importantly, it provides us with a resource to think of an alternative to Eurocentrism. If Eurocentrism claims to give us a universal history of reason anchored in Greece, *the Muqaddimah* offers both a discourse on the human and human reason and calls on us to think of the relation between Greeks and Persians as a way of de-centering Greece-focused Eurocentrism. At the same time, it raises critical questions about Afrocentrism which has come to identify Africa with sub-Saharan Africa, as the product of a singular experience, slavery, but with a historical archive in Pharaohic Egypt, not very different from how 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe fashioned classical Greece into an archive for European civilization.<sup>4</sup> How do we historicize Africa before the Atlantic slave trade? As a continent or as different regions? Both Ibn Khaldun and *The Muqaddimah* suggest that it may be productive to think of Africa before the period of Atlantic slavery in regional rather than continental terms, and that one such

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1 This paper was written for the workshop *After Bandung: Non-Western Modernities and the International Order*, held at Makerere Institute of Social Research, Kampala, May 10-11, 2012

2 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah, An Introduction to History*, tr and intro by Franz Rosenthal, Abridged and edited by N. J. Dawood, with a new intro by Bruce B. Lawrence, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1967

3 The distinction between “modern” and “progressive” Western thought and “customary” and “stationery” modes of non-Western thought was fully articulated in the writings of Sir Henry Maine, the British legal theorist who was a member of the Viceroy’s law council after the 1857 Uprising. See, Henry Maine, *Ancient Society*.

4 Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization (The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985, Volume 1)*, Rutgers University Press, 1991.

regional imagination would bring together the Mediterranean and West Africa in a single history.

Second, *The Muqaddimah* has the potential of broadening our understanding of how to use oral tradition as a resource in the writing of African and regional histories. The use of oral tradition as a source for historical information has been central to debates on the production of a history of Africa. But these debates have remained confined to the history of stateless societies in Africa. Ibn Khaldun's discussion of *isnad* (the chain of transmission) has the potential of connecting it with a scholarship that has been totally set apart until now.

Finally, *The Muqaddimah* is a vital resource for thinking about difference in today's Africa. To be sure, this is a very lifelike resource, with contradictory effects. To begin with, *The Muqaddimah* helps us think beyond conventional post-Enlightenment binaries, in particular religion and reason. Ibn Khaldun's discussion of group feeling (*assabiyah*) in the reproduction of society and the construction of the state invites a reflection on the pre-modern (religion / ethnicity) and the modern (nation). At the same time, *The Muqaddimah* takes for granted another binary, that of the savage and civilization.

I begin with a brief reflection on MISR, the site of this exploration, before proceeding to the main subject matter of the paper.

## The Site of Reflection: MISR

MISR was established as one of three colonial think tanks in British Africa alongside the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Rhodesia and the West African Institute of Social Research in Nigeria, in the period after the Second World War. The object was to make sense of nationalism. Led by a string of prominent social anthropologists – MISR's first director was Audrey Richards – its mandate was to understand the riddle at the heart of post-war nationalism: the "urbanized native." This group of academics produced trend-setting work. At the same time, they assumed that their successors – like themselves – would be trained outside the country. Even though the leadership of the Institute changed hands (or brains) from British to Ugandan academics in the period after independence, this assumption did not change. The *second* period in MISR's existence was defined by a protracted political crisis in the relations between the state and the university over the seventies and eighties. It translated into a fiscal crisis and led to the gradual erosion of a research-oriented academic culture. The fiscal crisis provided the entry point for a World Bank-guided 'reform' which ushered in the *third* period stretching from 1990 to 2010. The Bank pushed for a series of market-oriented reforms. At MISR, this led to the development of a consultancy culture.

I spent a year in 2007 studying the devastating impact of World Bank-initiated 'market-based reforms' on the academic life of Makerere University.<sup>5</sup> As executive director of Makerere

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<sup>5</sup> See, Mahmood Mamdani, *Scholars in the Market Place*, Kampala: Fountain Press, 2008.

Institute of Social Research from May, 2010, I witnessed first hand the damage suffered by the country's premier research institute. Sobered by this realization, a small group of us – a number of colleagues in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences – spent the better part of a year brainstorming how to turn MISR around from a consultancy unit to a research institute. We agreed that nothing less than the development of a process of endogenous knowledge creation, including a full-time, coursework-based, inter-disciplinary Ph D program, would do.

No sooner had we started the program than we were confronted by another challenge: the need to develop a curriculum appropriate to our time and our place. The curriculum at the university was not only strongly present-oriented but was also driven by the language of “crisis” and “transitions,” preoccupied with issues ranging from “development” and “conflict resolution” to “HIV/AIDS” and “identity politics.” It seldom probed beyond the contemporary and, when it did, the tendency was to limit the perspective to the colonial period. How do we reshape this curriculum to make possible a radically historical and humanist inquiry of “Africa” and “African” without dislocating it from the world at large?

Though we started with this ambition, the tendency was to borrow the curriculum from the Western academy – wherever each of us had just taught or graduated from – as a turnkey project. So students in the MISR doctoral program were supposed to take two courses in theory, *Western Political Thought, Plato to Marx* in their first year and another titled *Contemporary Western Political Thought* in their second year. At the same time, *The Muqaddimah* was to be read in a third course titled *Major Debates in the Study of Africa*. It is the students who began to ask whether we could redesign the theory courses so they are less West-centric and more a response to the needs of this time and this place.

It is in this context that we began reading *The Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldun, first in a study group in 2011 and then in a PhD seminar in 2012.

## Locating Ibn Khaldun in a tradition

Ibn Khaldun was a graduate of Al Karaouine (859) based in Fez, Morocco, considered by UNESCO as the oldest ongoing ‘university’ in the world. I put the word in quotes for one reason: the Latin word *universitas* means ‘corporation,’ because they started as “small corporations of students and teachers” who got “the privilege of teaching” from the Church and “exemptions from financial and military services” from the state. In North and West Africa, as in the rest of the Islamic world, there was no counterpart to the Catholic Church. The state “did confer gifts and privileges on important scholars ... but these were individuals or families, not a corporation of teachers or students.”<sup>6</sup> To say this is to state the obvious:

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6 Timothy Cleaveland, “Timbuktu and Walata: Lineages and Higher Education,” in Shamil jeppie and Suleymane Bachir Diagne, *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2008, p. 78

the overall context in the development of what we now know as the “university” was not the same in Africa as in medieval Europe.

Al Karaouine had a distinguished alumni, including at least three illustrious persons. The first was Leo Africanus. Born in Grenada of a family which then moved to Fez, Leo Africanus visited Timbuktu, was later captured during Ottoman conquest of Egypt and taken to Europe, where he wrote a manuscript ultimately published as *A Geographic History of Africa*. It is said that Shakespeare’s Othello was based on the historical person of Leo Africanus.<sup>7</sup> The second was Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Maimonides, head of the Jewish community in Egypt and the great scholar of the Torah. Like many literate Africans of the period who wrote in *ajami*, Maimonides too wrote in the Arabic script. And the third was Ibn Khaldun.

It was significant though not at all unusual that Ibn Khaldun had visited the great educational institution, Sankora, in Timbuktu, for Sankora was very much part of an intellectual world knitted together by a shared script, Arabic. Timbuktu reached the peak of its development under the rule of Mansa Musa (1312-37). Then, this town of 100,000 included a student population of 25,000. According to Ibn Battuta, the libraries at Sankora had 400,000 to 700,000 manuscripts. On the African continent, this holding was second only to that at the library of Alexandria. The continued stability of Sankora was ensured by a pact between the scholars who ran it and the powers who ruled over it: scholars did not interfere in royal rule and the rulers in turn guaranteed the autonomy of scholars and scholarship.

The point of this paper is not simply to provide a summary of key ideas that drive this text. It is also to begin a discussion on why this famous text is relevant to rethinking about Africa today. I sum up key points in this discussion as six *critical engagements* with *The Muqaddimah*. Together, they identify the outlines of a discussion on the contemporary relevance of this text. The *first* engagement was in response to a single question: was Ibn Khaldun part of the African tradition? That question led to others: What was Africa in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when Ibn Khaldun lived and wrote in a place called *Ifriqiyya* (contemporary Tunisia and Western Algeria)? What is the history of the geography we call Africa? Is Islam (and for that matter, Christianity) and Arabic part of the historical African tradition?

If there is one lesson we can draw from the colonial discourse and practice on tradition, it is that there is no single and authoritative – or authentic – African tradition. There is no authoritative – or authentic – tradition, whether African or other. Tradition is best thought of as a set of debates, both roads taken and those not taken.<sup>8</sup> Taken as this, tradition is a totality of resources from which to craft possible futures. Not only are African traditions multiple, but the traditions that inform life of people on the African continent, today as in the past, are also multiple. The African heritage is not just drawn from within the territorial boundaries of the continent. The life of societies on the African continent is informed by a multiplicity

7 For a fictionalized biography of Leo Africanus, read: Amin Maalouf, *Leo Africanus*

8 Talal Asad, See, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam”, Occasional Papers, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, 1986.



of traditions. These include Islam and Arabic. To acknowledge this is to move away from a notion of culture (and tradition) as authentic but frozen to a notion of culture as alive and changing, understood as forms of knowledge of self, the other and the environment.

Research on the written tradition in Africa is relatively recent. Part of the reason lies in the wide acceptance of two assumptions: that Africa is an oral civilization, and that the literature written in Arabic is not part of African civilization. The written tradition in Abyssinia and Ethiopia is said to be exceptional, part of an external Semitic (Asiatic) influence. And yet we know that whereas the world has known hundreds of languages, there have been and are no more than a handful of scripts: Latin, Arabic, Amharic, Chinese, Devnagari, Pali and so on. The written tradition in Africa before Western colonialism was primarily in the Arabic script. Arabic manuscripts were “read and appreciated” in West Africa “since the conversion of rulers to Islam” in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The first chronicle in Ethiopia, composed in early 13<sup>th</sup> century, was written in the Arabic script.<sup>9</sup> Present research suggests that “West Africans began to produce their own manuscripts ... as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>10</sup> The use of the written script for local production was delayed “for practical reasons, notably the lack of paper.” Arabic was also the script of Kiswahili on the East African coast from at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup> and of early Afrikaans in South Africa from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup>

The replacement of the Arabic script by Latin was a consequence of colonization and is an important part of the historical narrative of Hausa,<sup>13</sup> Kiswahili and Afrikaans, among other languages. To consign Arabic, script and civilization, to the category “non-African” is to perform an historical erasure with a triple consequence: the erasure of a millennium-long early cosmopolitanism driven by the Arabic script; its displacement by a claim that Africa lacks a written tradition, that the African tradition is oral, making the story of Ethiopia and the Amharic script another Semitic exception in the African story; and finally, the identification

9 “The chronicle is composed sometime in the beginning of the 13th century and its called Zhikr al tawaraikh. The earliest Christian Chronicle is composed in the 14th century so the Islamic one preceds it by about a century. The chronicle was discovered by Enrico Cerulli, the reknowned Italian Ethiopicist in 1936 and was published by him in 1941. Islamic manuscripts both in Arabic and Ajami have been composed at least since this time and the country has one of the largest manuscripts in the continent. Harar in Eastern ethiopia, Wollo and Shoa in Central Ethiopia and Arsi, Bale and Jima in Oromo country are among the places where such manuscripts are found.” Email from Semeneh Ayalew, MISR doctoral program, June 13, 2012

10 Sheila S. Blair, “Arabic Calligraphy in West Africa,” in Shamil jeppie and Suleymane Bachir Diagne, *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2008, pp. 69-70.

11 Dating is difficult and approximate. Consider the following statement: “In presenting a very preliminary periodisation, one must begin with the poetic cycle by, or about, Fumi Liongo, a figure of anywhere between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, who may have existed or not, and who may have written some, but surely not all, of the poetry ascribed to him.” R. Sean O’Fahey, “Arabic Literature in the Eastern Half of Africa,” in Shamil jeppie and Suleymane Bachir Diagne, *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2008, p. 343

12 Early Afrikaans, developed as a pidgin from both Dutch and Malay. Its writing, pioneered mainly by religious teachers of Malay origin, was in the Arabic script. Over time, the script was modified in parts to suit the needs spoken Afrikaans. The first two written texts in Afrikaans were commentaries on the Qur’an, their publication funded by the Ottoman empire. Suleman Essop Dangor, “Arabic-Afrikaans at the Literature,” *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde*, 45, (1), 2008

13 The contemporary movement known as *Boko Haram* (the book is haram, forbidden) traces its genealogy to the resistance against this shift: the book referred to as haram was the Hausa text written in the Latin script. I am grateful to Tade Aina for pointing this out to me.

of the written tradition in Africa with the dominance of European power, the spread of European languages and overwhelming presence of the Latin script.

To locate Ibn Khaldun and *The Muqaddimah* in an intellectual tradition is to place it in two primary contexts: the first that of the Arabic-writing world, and the second that of the Greek-writing Mediterranean world. To read *The Muqaddimah* is to realize that ancient Greeks were part of the tradition that drove its author.

Ibn Khaldun wrote *The Muqaddimah* in 1377. It was the first of a three-part work. The second part was a history of Berbers and Arabs, Persians, Romans and other peoples; and the third part was autobiography. This second part was published as a translation, *Histoire des Berberes*, in 1854. The translation of *The Muqaddimah* followed in 1858. Well known in late 19<sup>th</sup> c Europe, this translation was read by Emile Durkhiem who considered it important enough to have an Egyptian PhD student working on it.<sup>14</sup>

## On History and Historiography

Ibn Khaldun's known world included Sudanic Africa and the Mediterranean lands. It did not include Africa to the south of Timbuktu, Asia to the East of Persia, or the lands west of Greece and north of Spain. The parameters of his world were defined by the geography of the Mediterranean and Sudanic Africa. There are few places that Ibn Khaldun identifies south of the Saharan belt. One of these is Berbera, lying "south of the Indian Ocean",<sup>15</sup> and the other recalls modern day Lake Victoria and the two rivers, the Blue and the White Nile: "ten days journey" from "Mountains of the Qumr," he writes, lies "a large lake at the equator – two rivers issue from it, one goes through the land of the Nuba thru Egypt, the other due west to the sea."<sup>16</sup>

Writing the history of the world he knew, Ibn Khaldun noted three pitfalls the historian must avoid. From this followed three imperatives: to be aware of knowledge already lost and thus no longer available; to cultivate a critical perspective on available evidence; and, finally, to be alert to the possibility of bias in interpretation.

## Lost Knowledge and Partial Information

"The sciences of only one nation, the Greeks, have come down to us," noted Ibn Khaldun, "because they were translated through al-Ma'mun's efforts [more on this later – MM]. He was successful in this direction because he had many translators at his disposal and spent much money in this connection. Of the sciences of others, nothing has come to our

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14 Abdelmajid Hannoum, "Translation and the Colonial Imaginary: Ibn Khaldun Orientalist," *History and Theory*, vol. 12, no. 1 (February, 2003), pp. 66-67

15 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 51

16 *ibid.* pp. 52-53

attention.”<sup>17</sup> This realization pointed to a larger problem: “There have been numerous sages among the nations of mankind. The knowledge that has not come down to us is larger than the knowledge that has. Where are the sciences of the Persians that ‘Umar ordered to be wiped out at the time of the conquest? Where are the sciences of the Chaldaeans, the Syrians, and the Babylonians, and the scholarly products and the results that were theirs? Where are the sciences of the Copts, their predecessors?”<sup>18</sup>

The students at MISR read Ibn Khaldun following a reading of meta-histories and micro-histories. The section on meta-histories focused on Eurocentric world histories and their critics: the former claimed ancient Greece as the starting point and foundation of both the history of the West and of world history; on that assumption, they either wrote Africa outside that history or wrote it on the margins (e.g., the history produced by Hegel). The critics of metahistory – W. E. B. Du Bois, Cheikh Anta Diop and Martin Bernal – claimed that it was Pharaohnic Egypt and surrounding territories, and not ancient Greece, that should be seen as foundational to world history. With their adversaries, they shared a parochial understanding of “the world” as basically limited to the Mediterranean. Whereas Ibn Khaldun’s world was similarly limited, he did not share their understanding of the pivotal significance of Pharaohnic Egypt in intellectual history. For Ibn Khaldun, the Greeks were more important to the intellectual history of the region, but the Persians were key: “As far as our historical information goes, these sciences were most extensively cultivated by the two great pre-Islamic nations, the Persians and the Greeks (Rum).”<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the Copts [Egyptians] in particular, and their contemporaries, the Syrians, “were much concerned with sorcery and astrology and the related subjects of powerful (charms) and talismans.”<sup>20</sup> Ibn Khaldun considered astrology of little interest or value, at one point even remarking on “the worthlessness of astrology.”<sup>21</sup>

The legacy that is critical to understanding the development of sciences among the Greeks is that of Persians, not Egyptians. “Among the Persians, the intellectual sciences played a large and important role, since the Persian dynasties were powerful and ruled without interruption. The intellectual sciences are said to have come to the Greeks from the Persians, when Alexander killed Darius and gained control of the Archemaemenid empire. At that time, he appropriated the books and sciences of the Persians.”<sup>22</sup> Alexander may have defeated the Persian empire militarily, but the Persians colonized the Greeks culturally. This is how Ibn Khaldun traced the genealogy that linked Greek science to that of the Persians: “The Peripatetic philosophers, in particular the Stoics, possessed a good method of instruction in the intellectual sciences. It has been assumed that they used to study in a Stoa, which protected them from the sun and the cold. Their school tradition is assumed to have passed from the

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17 *ibid.* p. 39

18 *ibid.*

19 *ibid.* p. 391

20 “The Copts especially cultivated those things.” *ibid.* p. 392

21 *Ibid.* p. 409

22 *ibid.* p. 372

sage Luqman and his pupils to Socrates of the barrel, and then, in succession, to Socrates' pupil, Plato, to Plato's pupil, Aristotle, to Aristotle's pupils, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Thelmistius, and others."<sup>23</sup>

For the readers of *The Muqaddimah* in Kampala, a broadening of the notion of the ancient Mediterranean world beyond Greece and Egypt to Persia, in particular, led to a *second* critical engagement. This broader historical vision challenged the assumption that underlay the debate between Afrocentric and Eurocentric. Bringing Persia into the frame undercut the alternatives in the debate – that civilization began in either ancient Greece or in Pharaonic Egypt – and offered a third alternative: in neither. But there is a larger issue here. It may be futile to look for a single origin of civilization. May be the origin of civilization – by which Ibn Khaldun meant the intellectual pursuits, arts and crafts associated with the stability of urban life – is not in a place but in an encounter. From this point of view, the search for a single place, a single origin, appears yet another version of the continuation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century race-based search for purity. The alternative would be to think not in terms of one original inspiration but a plurality of influences, not in a single origin but in confluence.

## Critically Assessing Available Evidence

What is history? At the most elementary level, notes Ibn Khaldun: “History refers to events that are peculiar to a particular age or race [*on the translation of the Arabic original as ‘race’, see later - MM*]. Discussion[s] of the general conditions of regions, races, and periods constitutes the historian's foundation. Most of his problems rest on that foundation, and his historical information derives clarity from it.”<sup>24</sup> This is why “mere blind imitation of former authors” will not work. Those who resort to it “disregard the intentions of the former authors and forget to pay attention to historiography's purpose.”<sup>25</sup>

To begin with, historical narrative requires periodization. Change is normal and a historian who ignores this is sure to be led astray: “A hidden pitfall in historiography is disregard for the fact that conditions within nations and races change with the change of periods and the passage of time.”<sup>26</sup> For an exemplary history that takes into account changes in general conditions, Ibn Khaldun pointed to al-Masudi's account of the plague in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> As demonstrated by Persian history, change at its most basic level affects institutions and customs: “The old institutions changed and former customs were transformed, ... Then, there came Islam. Again, all institutions underwent another change.”<sup>28</sup>

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23 *ibid.* p. 373

24 *Ibid.* p. 29

25 *ibid.* p. 29

26 *ibid.* p. 24

27 *ibid.* p. 30

28 *ibid.* p. 25

If the most basic change concerns a change in institutions and customs, then periodization should be based on an identification of institutional change, so that events may be narrated within each period. Here, the historian needs to beware of two dangers. The first is exaggeration: “It often happens that people are (incredulous) with regard to historical information, just as it also happens that they are tempted to exaggerate certain information, in order to be able to report something remarkable.”<sup>29</sup> The second stems from a failure to verify the reliability of sources, both oral and written. Ibn Khaldun’s focus was mainly on oral tradition. How does the historian go beyond checking the factual truth of the information transmitted to judging its historical credibility? “If he trusts historical information in its plain transmitted form and has no clear knowledge of the principles resulting from custom, the fundamental facts of politics, the nature of civilization, or the conditions governing human social organization, and if, furthermore, he does not evaluate remote or ancient material through comparison with near or contemporary material, he often cannot avoid stumbling and slipping and deviating from the path of truth. Historians, Qur’an commentators and leading transmitters have committed frequent errors in the stories and events they have reported. They accepted them in the plain transmitted form, without regard for its value. They did not check them with the principles underlying such historical situations, nor did they compare them with similar material. Also, they did not probe with the yardstick of philosophy, with the help of knowledge of the nature of things, or with the help of speculation and historical insight.”<sup>30</sup> For examples of those who were so misled, Ibn Khaldun turns, among others, to al-Masudi<sup>31</sup>, to the history of Yemen<sup>32</sup>, and to interpretations of Qur’an.<sup>33</sup>

Ibn Khaldun locates the development of scholarship as a craft within the larger discussion of oral tradition and in particular the discussion of Qur’anic scholarship. His point is that scholarship in the period of the early dynasties of Muslim rule, the Umayyad and the Abbasid, was not a craft. While information was transmitted from one person to another, there was neither the development of norms to check errors in this process of transmission nor the development of a class of scholars: “Scholarship, in general, was not a craft in that [Umayyad and the Abbasid] period. Scholarship consisted of transmitting statements that people had heard the Lawgiver [Muhammad] make.” But then, “[F]ar off nations accepted Islam at the hands of Muslims. With the passing of time, the situation of Islam changed. Many new laws were evolved from (basic) texts as the result of numerous and unending developments. A fixed norm was required to keep (the process) free from error. Scholarship came to be a habit. For its acquisition, study was required. Thus, scholarship developed into a craft and a profession. The men who controlled the group feeling now occupied themselves with directing the affairs of royal and governmental authority. The cultivation of scholarship was

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29 *ibid.* p. 146

30 *ibid.* p. 11

31 *ibid.* p. 11

32 *ibid.* p. 14

33 *ibid.* p. 17

entrusted to others.”<sup>34</sup> Not only did scholarship emerge as the object of specialized study, scholars too emerged as a class specialized and separate from the class that ruled.

## Bias in Perspective

Besides acknowledging lost evidence and the need to evaluate critically all available evidence, Ibn Khaldun noted a third set of dangers that the historian must beware of: “partisanship for a particular opinion or sect,” “reliance upon [unreliable] transmitters” and lack of awareness of the wider significance of an event.<sup>35</sup> These may be summed up under one heading: bias in perspective. Ibn Khaldun warned historians against “unawareness of the purpose of an event”, arguing that knowing “the nature of events and the circumstances and requirements in the world of existence, [it] will help him to distinguish truth from untruth in investing the historical information critically.”<sup>36</sup> This, he noted, was “more powerful than all the reasons previously mentioned.”<sup>37</sup> An additional problem was the tendency of historians to approach “great and high-ranking persons with praise and encomiums,”<sup>38</sup> why history-writing must be the vocation of “critical scholars.”<sup>39</sup>

The focus on oral evidence and on the development of rules and methods to check the accuracy of oral transmission led to a *third* critical engagement among the readers of *The Muqaddamah* in Kampala. Ever since postwar nationalism led to a decolonizing movement among African intellectuals, there had been great stress on the need to rewrite the history of Africa, to seize it from colonial officials and missionaries. In that context, the debate had focused on the question of historical sources, in particular on the reliability of oral evidence. Though this debate has come to be identified with the Wisconsin School and the writings of Jan Vansina<sup>40</sup>, the most perceptive writings on the question came from the pen of Yusuf Bala Usman, the leading historian at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria.<sup>41</sup> Why focus on the reliability of only one source of historical information, the oral? Why not also focus on the reliability of written sources too? Why limit attention to the subjectivity of the one who supplies information, why not also the subjectivity of the author who processes and interprets this information? We may add other questions: Did not such a specialized class, one preoccupied with questions of tradition, its transmission and its adaptation, develop in polities like the Nyiginya kingdom in Rwanda and the kingdom of Buganda next door? The evidence points to one conclusion: surely, a comparative study of oral tradition, including questions of its transmission and adaptation— a query that brings the study of *sunna* and of custom under a

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34 *ibid.* pp. 26-27

35 *ibid.* p. 35

36 *ibid.* pp. 35, 36

37 *ibid.* p. 36

38 *ibid.* p. 36

39 *ibid.* p. 38

40 Jan Vansina, “Oral tradition and its methodology,” *UNESCO History of Africa*, volume I, (142-165)

41 See, Yusuf Bala Usman, “The Assessment of Primary Sources: Heinrich Barth in Katsina, 1851-1854,” in *Beyond Fairy Tales: Selected Historical Writings of Yusufu Bala Usman* (Zaria: Abdullahi Smith Centre for Historical Research, 2006).

single roof – is long overdue. Second, surely a perspective that thinks of oral tradition purely in terms of state tradition – thereby highlighting the distinction between written and oral state traditions – is to ignore the fact that written and oral traditions exist within the same society and polity. As different schools of historians – from social historians to feminists – have found out, oral tradition is a vital resource from which to capture the agency of those groups excluded from the written tradition that is often authorized as history.

## The Nature of Man (the Human) and of Civilization

What distinguishes man from other forms of life? Ibn Khaldun identifies five qualities in particular of the human: "... man is distinguished from the other living beings by certain qualities peculiar to him, namely: (1) The sciences and crafts which result from that *ability to think* which distinguishes man from the other animals and exalts him as a thinking being over all creatures. (2) The *need for restraining influence and strong authority*, since man, alone of all the animals, cannot exist without them. It is true, something has been said in this connection about bees and locusts. However, if they have something similar, it comes to them through inspiration [instinct], not through thinking or reflection. (3) Man's efforts to make a living and his concern with various ways of obtaining and *acquiring the means of life*. This is the result of man's need for food to keep alive and subsist, which God instilled in him ... (4) Civilization. This means that human beings have to  *dwell in common and settle together* in cities and hamlets for the comforts of companionship and for the satisfaction of human needs, *as a result natural disposition of human beings towards cooperation in order to be able to make a living*, as we shall explain."<sup>42</sup> (all italics mine)

## The Ability to Think

For Ibn Khaldun, the disposition to think is natural, and exists among all humans, although to different degrees: "This natural disposition to think, which is the real meaning of humanity, exists among men in different degrees."<sup>43</sup> Whereas it is the ability to think that makes for the quality we call human, no civilization is possible without developing an authority strong enough to exercise a restraining influence. There are only two possible sources of restraint: faith or reason. Restraint is based either on rational politics or on religious law, and rational politics has in turn to be based either on general interest or on the interest of the ruler.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike Aristotle who argued that some were born to be slaves – *natural slaves* – and others acquired reason as they advanced beyond childhood, Ibn Khaldun did not think of the world

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42 *ibid.* p. 43

43 *ibid.* p. 320

44 *ibid.* p. 256-57; at another point in the text, Ibn Khaldun discusses how cooperation may develop through social organization for food, for defence against predators, and as a consequence of the royal authority exercising restraining influence. *Ibid.* pp. 45-47

of humans as divided between those with reason and those without it. The real difference, for him, was between those who lived a settled life under a restraining authority and those who did not. But this distinction, too, was not natural. The case of Bedouins and Berbers demonstrated that humans had the ability to develop civilization, i.e., the capacity to live a settled life under a restraining authority.

According to Ibn Khaldun, the ability to think develops through three stages: from perception (of sense data) to apperception (i.e., using reason to make connections between perceived data) to hypothetical knowledge beyond sense perception. Perception of individual sense data is based on *discerning intellect*, and is acquired in the course of obtaining livelihood and avoiding harm. Thought proper begins with apperception and is the result of *experimental intellect* that gives rise to “scientific perceptions”. Finally, there is hypothetical knowledge of an object, one “beyond sense perception” and “without any practical activity,” which is result of *speculative intellect*.<sup>45</sup>

To reason then is to establish connections between what the senses perceive: “Animals perceive only with the senses. Their perceptions are disconnected and lack a connecting link, since only thinking can constitute such (a link).”<sup>46</sup> Our humanity is our ability to establish a causal chain in the sense data we perceive in the external world: “The degree to which a human being is able to establish an orderly causal chain determines his degree of humanity.”<sup>47</sup> To make the point, he gave the example of a game of chess: “For instance, some chess players are able to perceive (in advance) three of five moves, the order of which is arbitrary.”<sup>48</sup>

Ibn Khaldun says that “sound intuition” led him to “observe in ourselves ... the existence of three worlds.” In the first world, which includes all forms of life, there is no distinction between human and animal: “The first of them is the world of sensual perception ... which the animals share with us.” The distinction between human and animal defines the second world; this distinction arises with the ability to think: “Then we become aware of the ability to think which is a special quality of human beings. We learn from it that the human soul exists. This knowledge is necessitated by the fact that we have in us scientific perceptions which are above the perceptions of the senses.” The distinction between the human and the

45 “The ability to think has several degrees. The first degree ... consists of perceptions. It is the discerning intellect with the help of which man obtains the things which are useful for him and his livelihood, and repels the things that are harmful to him. ... The second degree is the ability to think which ... mostly conveys apperceptions, which are obtained one by one through experience, until they have become really useful. This is called the experimental intellect. The third degree is the ability to think which provides the knowledge, or hypothetical knowledge, of an object beyond sense perception without any practical activity (going with it). This is the speculative intellect. It consists of both perceptions and apperceptions.” *Ibid.* pp. 333-34.

46 *Ibid.* p. 335

47 *ibid.* p. 335

48 *ibid.* pp. 336. “... the ability to think ... through which man is able to arrange his actions in an orderly manner. This is the discerning intellect. Or, when it helps him to acquire from his fellow men a knowledge of ideas and of the things that are useful or detrimental to him, it is the experimental intellect. Or when it helps him to obtain perception of the existent things as they are, whether they are absent or present, it is the speculative intellect.” *Ibid.* p. 339



divine lies in the limits of human reason: given that human experience is limited, human abstraction from sense data is necessarily limited. Only one power is capable of abstracting from the universal: God.<sup>49</sup>

I have already pointed out that though Ibn Khaldun speaks of “degrees of humanity” based on the ability to make connections and abstract from these, at no point does he suggest that the world of humans is divided on the basis of inheritance, into those able to think and those not, as with Aristotle’s “natural slaves.” The distinction in “degrees of humanity” is based, rather, on degrees of comprehension that is in turn the result of different methods of study. From this point of view, the problem is two-fold: memorizing and severe punishment.

Memorizing is a hindrance to understanding: “Some students spend most of their lives attending scholarly sessions. Still one finds them silent. ... More than is necessary, they are concerned with memorizing. Thus, they do not obtain much of a habit in the practice of science and scientific instruction.”<sup>50</sup> Memorizing, which focuses on results at the expense of process, obstructs the practice of science. Ibn Khaldun was at pains to emphasize, first, how not to study and, then, how to study. Any method that subordinated process to outcome was subject to question: “Scholars often approach the main scholarly works on the various disciplines, which are very lengthy, intending to interpret and explain (them). This has a corrupting influence ... For it confuses the beginner by presenting the final results of a discipline to him before he is prepared for them. This is a bad method of instruction.”<sup>51</sup>

As alternative to rote learning, Ibn Khaldun proposed a method of study involving a three-fold reading, seemingly repetitive, but not quite. The *first* reading would focus on a summary identification of the main problems. The *second* reading would focus on full commentaries and explanations that identify main debates. And the *final* reading would expose the student to all: text, commentaries and debates.

It should be known that the teaching of scientific subjects to students is effective only when it proceeds gradually and little by little. At first, (the teacher) presents (the student) with the principle problems within each chapter of a given discipline. He acquaints him with them by commenting on them in a summary fashion. ...

The teacher, then, leads the student back over the discipline a second time. ... He no longer gives a summary, but full commentaries and explanations. He mentions to him the existing differences of opinion and the form these differences take all the way through to the end of the discipline under consideration. ... Then, the teacher leads the student back again, now that he is solidly grounded. He leaves nothing that

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49 “Then we deduce (the existence of) a third world, above us, ... such as volition and an inclination towards active motions. Thus we know that there exists an agent there who directs us towards those things from a world above our world. That world is the world of spirits and angels.” *Ibid.*, pp. 337-38. “All prophets possess this predisposition ... exchanging their humanity for angelicality.” *Ibid.* p. 339

50 *ibid.* p. 341

51 *ibid.* p. 415

is complicated, vague or obscure, unexplained. ...This is the effective method of instruction. As one see, it requires a threefold repetition. ...

many teachers ... begin their instruction by confronting the student with obscure scientific problems. They require him to concentrate on solving them. They think that that is experienced and correct teaching, and they make it the task of the student to comprehend and know such things. In actual fact, they confuse him by exposing him to the final results of a discipline at the beginning (of his studies) and before he is prepared to understand them.<sup>52</sup>

To illustrate the difference between the two methods, Ibn Khaldun contraststwo methods of studying the Qur'an: the Maghribi and the Spanish. The former abstracted the study of Qur'an from context whereas the latter taught it in context: "The Maghribi method is to restrict the education of children to instruction in the Qur'an ... The (Maghribis) do not bring up any other subject in their classes, such as traditions, jurisprudence, poetry, or Arabic philology, until the pupil is skilled in (the Qur'an) or drops out before becoming skilled in it." He contrasted this with the Spanish method: "The Spanish method is instruction in reading and writing as such. ... However since the Qur'an is the basis and foundation of all that and the source of Islam and all the sciences, they make it the basis of instruction, but they do not restrict the instruction of their children exclusively to the Qur'an." And then concluded with a preference for the method employed in Ifriqiyah: "The people of Ifriqiyah combine the instruction of children in the Qur'an, usually, with the teaching of traditions. ... their method of instruction in the Qur'an is closer to the Spanish method (than to Maghribi or Eastern methods) because their (educational tradition) derives from the Spanish *shaykhs* who crossed over when the Christians conquered Spain, and asked for hospitality in Tunis."<sup>53</sup>

As harmful as rote learning, and closely associated to it, is the regime of severe punishment. "Severe punishment in the course of instruction does harm to the student, especially to little children, ..." Like rote learning, severe punishment also deadens the spirit of inquiry and prepares the young for subjugation: "Students, slaves and servants who are brought up with injustice and (tyrannical) force are overcome by it. It makes them feel oppressed and causes them to loose their energy. It makes them lazy and induces them to lie and be insincere. That is, their outward behavior differs from what they are thinking, because they are afraid that they will have to suffer tyrannical treatment (if they tell the truth)." Severe punishment is the lot of a people who fall under tyranny: "Thus, they are taught deceit and trickery. This becomes their custom and character. They lose the quality that goes with social and political organization and makes people human, namely, (the desire to) protect and defend themselves and their homes, and they become dependent on others. ... As a result they revert to the

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* pp. 416-17

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p. 424. Ibn Khaldun also notes al-Arabi's advice that students should begin with poetry, then Arabic philology, then arithmetic, and only then move to the study of the Qur'an.

stage of 'the lowest of the low'. That is what happened to every nation that fell under the yoke of tyranny and learned through it the meaning of injustice."<sup>54</sup>

## On Difference Among Humans

"... differences of condition among people are the result of the different ways in which they make their living." *The Muqaddimah*, p. 91

*The Muqaddimah* identifies three groups as outside the pale of civilization: Negroes<sup>55</sup> of the forest, Slavs of the cold regions and Bedouins of the desert. There are a few isolated references to the Slavs, but there is a lengthier discussion of Negroes in *The Muqaddimah*. For information on how they live and associate, Ibn Khaldun is dependent on other sources – which he seems to take for granted. Whereas the information on how Negroes live and behave is not subjected to a critical discussion. The debate in *The Muqaddimah* focuses on the *possible causes* of their behaviour: Is the cause biology (inheritance) or geography (climate) or history (custom)?

Consider the following account: "It has even been reported that most of the Negroes of the first zone dwell in caves and thickets, eat herbs, live in savage isolation and do not congregate, and eat each other. The same applies to the Slavs. The reason for this is that their remoteness from being temperate produces in them a disposition and a character similar to those of dumb animals, and they become correspondingly remote from humanity. The same also applies to their religious conditions. They are ignorant of prophecy and do not have a religious law, except for a small minority that lives near the temperate regions."<sup>56</sup> This small minority is identified as Abyssinians who are Christians and the inhabitants of Mali, Gawgaw and Takrur who are Muslims.

At another point, Ibn Khaldun writes that Negroes are "in general characterized by levity, excitability and great emotionalism" – as, he says, are coastal peoples like Egyptians in contrast to the inhabitants of Fez in the Maghreb.<sup>57</sup> Two pages later, he adds nomadic Arabs to this list of the uncivilized: "Another such people are the Arabs who roam the waste regions."<sup>58</sup> There is no doubt that the statement most offensive to a modern sensibility concerns Negroes, and not Slavs, nor Bedouins: "the Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because (Negroes) have little that is (essentially) human and possess attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals, as we have stated."<sup>59</sup>

Ibn Khaldun takes these claims for granted. His concern is not to verify them but to question

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54 *Ibid.* pp. 424-25

55 In his discussion of this paper at the Kampala workshop, Salah Hasan raised the question as to which Arab word Rosenthal had translated into 'Negro'.

56 *ibid.* p. 59

57 *ibid.* p. 63

58 *ibid.* p. 65

59 *ibid.* p. 117

those who explain them as the consequence of biological inheritance. The butt of his criticism is directed at two sources: the first is al-Masudi, and the second the Bible. He flatly disagrees with al-Masudi's claim that "levity, excitability and emotionalism" in Negroes is the result of "a weakness of their brains which results in a weakness of their intellect."<sup>60</sup> "This," he says, "is an inconclusive and unproven statement."<sup>60</sup>

In opposition to the Biblical account known as the Hamitic Hypothesis – that Noah's son, Ham, was cursed, which is why he and his progenies have remained black and have been cursed to serve others – he proposes a counter-thesis based on "the true nature of heat and cold and of the influence they exercise upon the climate and upon the creatures that come into being in it." He thus goes on to claim: "The black skin common to the inhabitants of the first and second zones is the result of the composition of the air in which they live, and which comes about under the influence of the greatly increased heat in the south."<sup>61</sup> White skin, too, is the result of climate.<sup>62</sup> Simply put, the argument is that color is a consequence of climate.

Ibn Khaldun divides the world into different climactic zones: the "1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> zones are excessively hot and black." He attributes "very little civilization" in these areas to "excessive heat"<sup>63</sup> – and cites as support those philosophers whose views are based on observation and continuous tradition and not speculation.<sup>64</sup> He further claims that Negroes who settle in the North tend to turn white and the color of whites who settle in the South tends to blackness: "This shows that color is conditioned by the composition of the air."<sup>65</sup>

The account of "savagery" in *The Muqaddimah* focuses on two groups in particular: Negroes and Bedouins, the former inhabitants of the forest and the latter of the desert. Whereas the account of forest Negroes is wholly negative and one-sided, that of Bedouins of the desert is not. Bedouins are "closer to being good than sedentary people" because "sedentary life constitutes the last stage of civilization and the point where it begins to decay."<sup>66</sup> There is an upside to savagery: "since desert life no doubt is the source of bravery, savage groups are braver than others."<sup>67</sup> But there is also a downside: "It is their nature to plunder."<sup>68</sup> Indeed, savage domination spells the doom of civilization: "Under the rule of Bedouins, their subjects live in a state of anarchy, without law. ... It is noteworthy how civilization always collapsed in places the Bedouins took over and conquered, and how such settlements were

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60 *ibid.* p. 64

61 *ibid.* p. 60.

62 "Genealogists think difference is due exclusively to descent. Thus the claim that Noah's three sons gave birth to three races: Negroes of Ham, those in the north of Japheth, and those in the temperate nations descendants of Shem. But distinctions also caused by 'geographical location and physical marks,' 'custom and distinguishing characteristics' besides 'descent'." *Ibid.* pp. 61-62.

63 *ibid.* p. 57

64 *ibid.* p. 57

65 *ibid.* p. 60

66 *ibid.* p. 94

67 *ibid.* pp. 94, 107

68 *ibid.* p. 118

depopulated and laid in ruin.”<sup>69</sup> In Ibn Khaldun’s account, the Berbers are the Bedouins of North Africa: “The inhabitants of Eastern Spain [who] were expelled by the Christians and moved to Ifriqiyah ... and the Maghreb did not find there any old tradition of sedentary culture, because the original population had been Berbers immersed in Bedouin life.”<sup>70</sup>

The discussion of ‘difference’ in Ibn Khaldun was the focus of a *fourth* critical engagement. What sense should one make of the use of the term ‘race’ in the 14<sup>th</sup> century? At the same time, one could not ignore obvious connections between Ibn Khaldun’s description of forest Negroes and much of the racist literature of the centuries that followed. The first question led us to an exploration of the politics of translation.

In an illuminating article on the subject, Abdelmajid Hannoum points to how William de Slane’s translation into French of *The Muqaddimah* (1858) and *Histoires des Berberes* earlier (1854) deeply influenced subsequent translations, including that in English. At issue is De Slane’s translation of two key words: *jil* and *umma*.<sup>71</sup> Hannoum points out that Ibn Khaldun used *umma* to mean a historical community, and *jil* to mean either (a) a group defined by a common phenotype (with strong implications of climate changing the color of one’s skin) and (b) culture that is the result of economic activity.<sup>72</sup> De Slaney translated *jil* and *umma* as ‘race’ and ‘nation.’ So did Franz Rosenthal in the English translation!<sup>73</sup> Ibn Khaldun’s use of *jil* and *umma* lays great stress on diversity – deeds (*hasab*) do not last more than four centuries, and deed and nobility in turn shape inheritance – there is no such focus on internal diversity in De Slaney’s translation of these words.<sup>74</sup>

Was Ibn Khaldun a racist? Were his views on group behavior no different from the ethnocentrism characteristic of his generation and his times? I do not think so. Consider this insightful paragraph in *The Muqaddimah*, in which Ibn Khaldun discusses how to understand the those who use color to describe others:

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69 *ibid.* p. 119

70 *ibid.* pp. 266, 283-84

71 Abdelmajid Hannoum, “Translation and the Colonial Imaginary: Ibn Khaldun Orientalist,” *History and Theory*, vol. 12, no. 1 (February, 2003), pp. 73-75. I am thankful to Fatima Harrack for introducing me to this article.

72 The English word for *jil*, claimed Salah Hasan at the Kampala workshop, is really generation.

73 *ibid.* p. 75ff

74 William de Slane’s translation of the second part of Ibn Khaldun as *Histoires des Berberes* not only became “the source of French knowledge of North Africa.” It also deeply influenced subsequent translations, including that in English, and became, from 1930 on, the foundation of nationalist historiography of North Africa. The result was to present the story of Berbers and Arabs as a history of two races, with the Arabs foreign conquerors and Berbers an indigenous conquered people. The implication was that Berbers, an indigenous white people, though primitive, represented “past Europeans”, whereas Ibn Khaldun’s story was that Berbers and Arabs were two sections of the same group, of same origin, but with different migrations. De Slaney wrote in the opening page of his translation: “The task of the translator is not limited to the exact reproduction of ideas uttered in the text that is the subject of his translation. There are other obligations as well. He should rectify the errors of the author, clarify the passages that offer some obscurities, provide ideas that lead to the perfect understanding of the narrative and give the necessary assistance to make the book better understood.” (p. 1 of translation) Hannoum comments that the translation domesticated the foreign text, not only the interpretation of it, but it actually made for the production of an entirely new text. *ibid.* pp. 75, 77, 61-62, 65, 73, 78.

“The inhabitants of the north are not called by their color, because the people who established the conventional meanings of words were themselves white. Thus, whiteness was something usual and common to them, and they did not see anything sufficiently remarkable in it to cause them to use it as a specific term.”<sup>75</sup>

There is much that is objectionable in the uncritical way in which *The Muqaddimah* repeats received descriptions of group behavior as accepted truth. At the same time, Ibn Khaldun does not make generalizations about all Negroes, but about forest Negroes, as he does about desert Arabs. In both instances, the rationale is the same: that each lives in a particular climactic zone which conditions group behavior.

## The Development and the History of the Sciences

The *Muqaddimah* is both a history of science and an attempt to transform history-writing from a craft to a science. In writing the history of science, Ibn Khaldun separates the material from the metaphysical. An understanding of the material world the domain of reason; the capacity to reason is common to all humans.<sup>76</sup> But the same can not be said of the metaphysical. As Ahmad Dallal has pointed out, Ibn Khaldun “rejected the assertion by Muslim philosophers that prophets are a logical necessity for human societies.” For Ibn Khaldun, religion is not “a logical necessity”: “social and political life does not need religions or prophets, as countless forms of social order not predicated on religion attest.” What is necessary is group solidarity (*asabiya*), of which religion is but a special case, and coercive power.<sup>77</sup>

Civilization for Ibn Khaldun was essentially urban. Referring to the Greeks, he wrote approvingly: “The adjective ‘political’ refers to the ‘town’ (polis), which they use as another word for human social organization.”<sup>78</sup> Part of civilization is the development of sciences and crafts. The precondition for both is the availability of surplus labor.<sup>79</sup>

Ibn Khaldun divided the sciences into two kinds: the traditional sciences and the philosophical sciences. The former are based on the authority of religious law of one kind or another, and

<sup>75</sup> *The Muqaddimah*, pp. 60-61

<sup>76</sup> “The intellectual sciences are natural to man, inasmuch as he is a thinking being. They are not restricted to any particular religious group. They are studied by the people of all religious groups, who are all equally qualified to learn them and to do research in them.” *The Muqaddimah*, p. 371

<sup>77</sup> Ahmad Dallal, *Islam, Science and the Challenge of History*, The Terry Lectures, Yale University Press, 2010, pp. 109, 146

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* p. 336

<sup>79</sup> “When civilized people have more labor available than they need for mere subsistence, such (surplus) labour is used for activities over and above making a living. These activities are man’s prerogative. They are the sciences and the crafts.” *Ibid.* p. 343

are given to “some kind of analogical reasoning” which both “reverts to” tradition and “is derived from it.” In contrast, the latter are based on research and speculation.<sup>80</sup>

At the heart of the conventional sciences is jurisprudence, a science that teaches right and wrong [philosophy] based on laws of God derived from two original sources, the Qur’an and the Sunnah [tradition]. Early Muslims “unavoidably ... differed in its interpretation,” making for a contradictory legal content in different interpretations. In addition, “there are new cases which arise and are not covered by the texts. They are referred by analogy to things that are covered by the texts.” Legal decisions were the prerogative of men “called ‘readers’, that is, men (able to) read the Qur’an since the Arabs were an illiterate nation.” Ibn Khaldun credits “constant occupation with the Qur’an” for the disappearance of illiteracy among the Arabs. As literacy grew, the Qur’an readers became jurists and religious scholars.<sup>81</sup>

Over time there developed different approaches to jurisprudence among the jurists: “One of them was based on reasoning and analogy. It was represented by the ‘Iraqis. The other was based on traditions. It was represented by the Hijazis.”<sup>82</sup> This is how the debate between the two schools developed: “Ash-Shafi’i was the first to discuss, and briefly to describe, the legal arguments based on the working (of the traditions). Then, the Hanafites appeared and invented the problems of analogical reasoning and presented them fully.”<sup>83</sup>

Though there was agreement on the basic sources of legal evidence – the Qur’an, the traditions (*Sunnah*), general consensus, and analogy – differences arose: “Difference of opinion results from the different sources they use and their different outlooks, and are unavoidable.”<sup>84</sup> Then came the study of the meaning of words.<sup>85</sup>

The rules of argumentation derived from Socrates. “In time, the science of logic spread in Islam. People studied it. They made a distinction between it and philosophical sciences, in that logic was merely a norm and a yardstick for arguments and served to probe the arguments of the (philosophical sciences) as well as (those of) all other (disciplines).” Al-Ghazzali was “the first scholar to write in accordance with the new theological approach.”<sup>86</sup>

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80 “The sciences ... are of two kinds. ... The first kind comprises the philosophical sciences. They are the ones with which man can become acquainted through the very nature of his ability to think ... so that he is made aware of the distinction between what is correct and what is wrong in them by his own speculation and research, ...

The second kind comprises the traditional, conventional sciences. All of them depend upon information based on the authority of the given religious law. There is no place for the intellect in them, ... they need to be related (to the general principles) by some kind of analogical reasoning. ... Thus, analogical reasoning of this type reverts to being tradition itself, because it is derived from it. *Ibid.* p. 344

81 *Ibid.* p. 413

82 “The leader of the ‘Iraqis ... [was] Abu Hanifah. The leader of the Hijazis was Malik b. Anas and, after him, ash-Shaf’i.” ... Later on, Zahirites ... restricted the sources of the law to the texts and the general consensus. They considered obvious analogy and causality suggested by the texts as resting in the texts themselves. ... The leaders of this school were Dawud b. ‘Ali and his son and their followers. *Ibid.* pp. 345-46

83 *Ibid.* p. 413

84 *Ibid.* p. 348

85 “After that comes the study of the meaning of words.” *Ibid.* p. 347.

86 *Ibid.* p. 352

The essence of logic is abstraction: “Man is distinguished from the animals by his ability to perceive universals, which are things abstracted from the *sensibilia*.” The object of logic is the universal: “The mind then compared the individual objects that agree with each other, with other objects that also agree with them in some respects. ... In this way, abstraction continues to progress. Eventually, it reaches the universal (concept), which admits no other universal (concept) that would agree with it, and is, therefore, simple.”<sup>87</sup>

Ibn Khaldun credits Aristotle as one who “improved the methods of logic and systematized its problems and details”: “He assigned to logic its proper place as the first philosophical discipline and the introduction to philosophy. Therefore, he is called ‘the First Teacher.’ His work on logic is called ‘the Text’.”<sup>88</sup> Al-Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes later wrote commentaries on it.<sup>89</sup> Avicenna opposed Aristotle on most problems of Physics, whereas Averroes did not.<sup>90</sup>

Ibn Khaldun warns the reader against becoming infatuated with logic, especially early in one’s period of study: “One knows what harm it can do. Therefore, the student should beware of its pernicious aspects as much as he can. Whoever studies it should do so only after he is saturated with the religious law and has studied the interpretation of the Qur’an and jurisprudence.”<sup>91</sup>

## Faith and Reason

Properly understood, argues Ibn Khaldun, logic must lead its student to affirm the oneness of God, the creator of all. For logic leads to two conclusions. The first is to acknowledge that complete knowledge is not possible for man: “God’s creation extends beyond the creation of man. Complete knowledge does not exist in man. The world of existence is too vast for him. ... Thus, the intellect cannot comprehend God and his attributes. It is but one of the atoms of the world of existence which results from God.” The second is to recognize the limits of sense perception: “If this is clear, it is possible that the ascending sequence of causes reaches the point where it transcends the realm of human perception and existence and thus ceases to be perceivable.” Ibn Khaldun cites Ali, “the master of those who are truthful” as follows: “The inability to perceive is perception.”<sup>92</sup> And earlier still, Plato: “Plato said that

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87 *Ibid.* p. 382

88 *Ibid.* p. 399

89 *Ibid.* pp. 382-85

90 *Ibid.* pp. 385-86

91 *Ibid.*, p. 405

92 *Ibid.* pp. 350-51



no certainty can be achieved with regard to the Divine, and one can state about the Divine only what is most suitable and proper – that is, conjectures.”<sup>93</sup>

The argument for the oneness of God is identical with recognition of limits of human perception and thus the inability of abstract thought to comprehend the oneness of creation. For Ibn Khaldun, there is no objective knowledge – for man at least. Put differently, objective knowledge is the attribute of God. God is the power that stands above all creation, and is testimony to the oneness of creation: “Now, the power combining everything without any particularization is the divine power. ... It appears that what the Sufis say about oneness is actually similar to what the philosophers say about colors, namely, that their existence is predicated upon light. When there is no light, no colors whatever exist. ... because particularization ... exists only in perception. If there were no perceptions to create distinctions, there would be no particularization, but just one single perception, namely the ‘I’ and nothing else. They consider this comparable to the condition of a sleeper.”<sup>94</sup>

To affirm the oneness of God and the unity of creation is to understand the limitations of every human endeavor. For Ibn Khaldun, this included underlining the limits of Prophetic power: “Muhammad was sent to teach the religious law. He was not sent to teach us medicine or any other ordinary matter.” Thus, Ibn Khaldun insisted, Muhammad’s pronouncements on matters other than religion must not be taken as having prophetic sanction. The example he used was that of medicine: “The medicine mentioned in religious tradition is of the Bedouin type. It is in no way part of the divine revelation. (Such medical matters) were merely part of Arab custom and happened to be mentioned in connection with the circumstances of the Prophet, like other things that were customary in his generation. They were not mentioned in order to imply that religious law stipulated particular ways of practicing medicine. None of the statements concerning medicine that occur in sound traditions should be considered as (having the force of) law.”<sup>95</sup>

The distinction between the religious and the secular, and the relationship between the two, was the subject of the *fifth* reflection that followed the reading of *The Muqaddimah*. For Ibn Khaldun, faith and reason should lead us to two mutually reinforcing conclusions: the first probing the limits of every religious authority, including that of prophetic powers, and the

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93 *Ibid.* p. 402. The relationship between deductive reason and revealed texts (faith) was a key question for scholasticism and its underlying philosophical system, neo-Platonism. The Gnostic reconciliation of reason and faith spanned three centuries, from the Mutazilites (the Kalam) discourse of the 3rd Islamic century to Ibn-Rushd in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The Mutazilites reject formalized submission to ritual and opted for the Hellenistic solution: God operates by means of laws of nature that he has established and does not bother himself with details; he is loathe to think of ‘miracles’. He allows for a distance from the laws. The way is opened for figurative interpretation of sacred texts, a tendency that culminated in the work of Ibn Rushd. Ibn-Rushd, who died in 1198, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas lived around the same time, and read one another. Thomas Aquinas [1225-1274] read Ibn Rushd’s polemic against al-Ghazzali with passion and interest. His successors, Christian scholastics, reproduced the same arguments as between the Mutazilites and the Asharites, as to whether human reason incapable of determining good and evil. Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, pp. 42-45.

94 *Ibid.* p. 364

95 *ibid.* pp. 386-87

second acknowledging the limits of sense perception, questioning the possibility of objective knowledge for humans.

For Ibn Khaldun, it is, above all, the Sufis who affirmed the limits of sense perception and laid stress on the need to rely on the spirit, and not the senses and abstract thought, to affirm the oneness of God: “The Sufis ... attempt to kill the bodily powers and perceptions through exercise, and even the thinking power of the brain.”<sup>96</sup> Over time, “the Sufis came to represent asceticism”: “They developed a particular kind of perception which comes about through ecstatic experience. ... Very few people share the self-scrutiny of the Sufis, for negligence in this respect is almost universal. Pious people who do not get that far perform, at best, acts of obedience.”<sup>97</sup>

Sufism became a specialized branch of Islam with the development of settled life, the increase in worldly aspirations and the development of the sciences. It also connected Islam with the African and the South Asian worlds. This was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> [8<sup>th</sup>] century: “At that time, the special name of Sufis was given to those who aspired to divine worship.”<sup>98</sup> Islam developed two kinds of religious laws, that of jurists and muftis on the one hand and that of Sufis on the other. Over time, the Sufi tradition drew from the African and the South Asian practices and traditions. It is al-Ghazzali who dealt systematically with the laws of asceticism and imitation of models. “The science of Sufism became a systematically treated discipline in Islam. ... Mystical exertion, retirement and spiritual exercises are as a rule followed by the removal of the veil of sensual perception. ... When the spirit turns from external sense perception to inner perception, the senses weaken, and the spirit grows strong. ... It had been knowledge. Now, it becomes vision.”<sup>99</sup>

## Civilization and Savagery

Civilization for Ibn Khaldun is identical with human social organization. It is urban, not rural. Dynasty and royal authority are necessary for the building of towns, such as Baghdad which he says had 65,000 public baths.<sup>100</sup>

Early Arabs were uncivilized: “A small or Bedouin civilization needs only the simple crafts. ... The Arabs, of all people, are least familiar with crafts. The reason for this is that the Arabs are more firmly rooted in desert life and more remote from sedentary civilization.”

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96 *Ibid.* p. 403

97 *Ibid.* pp. 358-59

98 *Ibid.* pp. 358-59

99 “... the science of the religious law came to consist of two kinds. One is the special field of jurists and muftis. ... The other is the special field of Sufis. ... Al-Ghazzali, in the *Kitab al-Ihya*, dealt systematically with the laws governing asceticism and the imitation of models.” *ibid.*, p. 360. The gist of Islamic and Christian metaphysics is that there is no inherent contradiction between reason and faith. Samir Amin has argued that it is the limits of deductive reason led to the influence of Indian asceticism, and thus of intuition as a third source of knowledge – thus the emergence of Sufism. Budha from this point of view was a wise sage, not an inspired prophet. Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, pp.

100 *ibid.* pp. 35, 263-64

The contrast with their neighbors in the Mediterranean could not be sharper: “The non-Arabs in the East and the Christian nations along the shores of the Mediterranean are very well versed in (crafts), because they are more deeply rooted in sedentary civilization and more remote from the desert and the desert civilization.”<sup>101</sup> Arabs were relatively new to settled life, unlike the Persians who “had had a period of thousands of years, ... The same was the case with the Copts, the Nabataeans, and the Romans ... and the Jews and others.” No wonder “the buildings and constructions in Islam are comparatively few.”<sup>102</sup>

Savagery for Ibn Khaldun is not synonymous with pre-Islamic darkness [*Jahaliyya*] and civilization with Islamic Enlightenment. This is not a conventional Islamic history which divides time into pre-Islamic and Islamic. The savage, the other, belongs to the desert and the forest and to cold, wintery zones.<sup>103</sup> He and she are defined by environment: “The non-Arabs in the West, the Berbers, are like the Arabs in this respect, because for a very long time they remained firmly rooted in desert life.”<sup>104</sup> The savage is the Negro, the Bedouin and the Berber, and the Slav. What, besides climate, prevented development of civilization in the forest and the desert but facilitated it in the city? As one student asked: Why does savagery have no history? The *final* critical encounter with *The Muqaddimah* explored its analytical limits: unlike civilization, savagery had no history.

## Arab response to civilization

The early Arab response to civilization was savage. Ibn Khaldun drew a contrast between two conquests of Persia, the Greek and the Arab, as conquests by two powers at different levels of civilization. Unlike the relatively more advanced Greeks who incorporated and built on the scientific advances of the Persians, the relatively backward Arabs destroyed these: “However, when the Muslims conquered Persia and came upon an indescribably large number of books and scientific papers, Sa’ad b. Abi Waqqas wrote to ‘Umar b. al-Khattab, asking him for permission to take them and distribute them as booty among the Muslims. On that occasion, ‘Umar wrote him: Throw them into the water. If what they contain is right guidance, God has given better guidance. If it is error, God has protected against it.”<sup>105</sup> Thus the Muslims threw them into the water or into the fire, and the sciences of the Persians were lost and did not reach us.”<sup>106</sup> Similarly, “Al-Ma’mun [?] tried to tear down the pyramids but failed.”<sup>107</sup> In a like manner, Roman emperors who had embraced Christianity showed

101 *ibid.* pp. 315, 317

102 *ibid.* pp. 271, 283

103 “The Arabs, of all people, are least familiar with crafts. The reason for this is that the Arabs are more firmly rooted in desert life and more remote from sedentary civilization, the crafts, and the other things which sedentary civilization calls for. The non-Arabs in the East and the Christian nations along the shores of the Mediterranean are very well versed in (crafts), because they are more deeply rooted in sedentary civilization and more remote from the desert and the desert civilization.” *Ibid.* p. 317

104 *ibid.* p. 317

105 This is a variant of the famous legend, according to which ‘Umar ordered the destruction of the celebrated library in Alexandria.

106 *Ibid.* p. 372

107 *Ibid.* p. 266

apathy towards the Greek sciences: “When the Greek dynasty was destroyed and the Romans emperors seized power and adopted Christianity, the intellectual sciences were shunned by them, as religious groups and their laws require.”<sup>108</sup>

It is when Arabs developed a sedentary culture that, over time, they developed a civilized response to external developments: “Eventually, ... the Muslims developed a sedentary culture, such as no other nation had ever possessed.” The same Muslims who had savagely put paid to Persian culture in the infancy of their rule reached out to incorporate Greek culture into their own civilization: “Abu Ja’far al-Mansur ... sent to the Byzantine emperor and asked him to send him translations of mathematical works. The Emperor sent him Eucalid’s books and some works on physics. ... Later on, al-Ma’mun came. He had some (scientific knowledge). ... He sent ambassadors to Byzantine emperors; they were to discover the Greek sciences and have them copied in Arabic writing; he sent translators for that purpose. As a result, a good deal of the material was preserved and collected.” On this foundation prospered the great Muslim philosophers: “Abu Nasr al-Farabi and Abu ‘Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and the wazir Abu Bakr b. as-Sa’igh (Avempace) in Spain, were among the greatest Muslim philosophers.”<sup>109</sup>

## Non-Arab<sup>110</sup> contribution to Islamic civilization

Muslims were illiterate at the time of Muhammad. Islamic scholarship began with jurisprudence, a response to the need to define tradition (*Sunnah*) in a context where religion was spreading and practice was taking a variety of forms. With the proliferation of commentaries on the Qur’an and the *Sunnah*, there was great need to assess the reliability of transmitters. The more non-Arabs took to speaking Arabic, the greater was the need for grammatical rules for the Arabic language lest it be corrupted.<sup>111</sup>

The scholars who responded to these needs were mainly non-Arabs: “It is a remarkable fact that, with few exceptions, most Muslim scholars both in the religious and in the intellectual sciences have been non-Arabs.” This is true even when a scholar is of Arab origin” for “he is non-Arab in language and upbringing and has non-Arab teachers. This is so in spite of the fact that Islam is an Arab religion and its founder was an Arab.” The reason, once again, was the lack of civilization among the Arabs: “The reason for it is that at the beginning Islam had

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108 *ibid.* pp. 372-73

109 *ibid.* p. 374

110 When Ibn Khaldun distinguished between Arabs and non-Arabs in Islam, the distinction was based on descent, not culture: “non-Arab’ meant non-Arab by descent. ... Being non-Arab in language is something quite different.” Those Arab in language, he called “Arabicized non-Arabs.” *Ibid.* pp. 433, 439

111 “By the time of the reign of ar-Rahid, (oral) tradition had become far removed (from its starting point). It was thus necessary to write commentaries on the Qur’an and to fix the traditions in writing, because it was feared that they might be lost. It was also necessary to know the chain of transmitters and to assess their reliability, in order to be able to distinguish sound chains of transmitters from inferior ones. Then, more and more law as concerning actual cases were derived from the Qur’an and the *Sunnah*. Moreover, the Arabic language became corrupt, and it was necessary to lay down grammatical rules.” *Ibid.* pp. 428-30

no sciences or crafts, because of the simple conditions and the desert attitude. ... Illiteracy was general at the time among the men around Muhammad, since they were Bedouins.”

The non-Arab scholars were mainly Persians. The reason was obvious to Ibn Khaldun: “Now, the only sedentary people at that time were non-Arabs. ... sedentary culture had been firmly rooted among them from the time of the Persian Empire. Thus the founders of grammar were Sibawayh and, after him, al-Farisi and az-Zajjaj. All of them were of non-Arabic (Persian) descent. ... Most of the hadith scholars who preserved traditions for the Muslims also were Persians, or Persian in language and upbringing, because the discipline was widely cultivated in the ‘Iraq and the regions beyond. Furthermore, all the scholars who worked in the science of the principles of jurisprudence were Persians. ... Only the Persians engaged in the task of preserving knowledge and writing systematic scholarly works. Thus, the truth of the following statement by the Prophet becomes apparent: ‘If scholarship hung suspended in the highest parts of heaven, the Persians would attain it.’”<sup>112</sup>

Ibn Khaldun remarked of a growing division of labor between Arabs and non-Arabs with the development of literacy. Whereas literate Arabs were preoccupied with power and rule, non-Arab scholars developed scholarship, even if those in power viewed it with contempt.<sup>113</sup> If the first sciences were directly connected with religion and jurisprudence, this was not case with the intellectual sciences which were the next to be developed: “The intellectual sciences, as well, made their appearance in Islam only after scholars and authors had become a distinct group of people and all scholarship had become a craft.” The intellectual sciences, too, “were then the special preserve of non-Arabs, left alone by the Arabs, who did not cultivate them.”<sup>114</sup>

## Significance of Ibn Khaldun

Ibn Khaldun’s analysis is driven by a focus on change and dynamism. Differences between civilizations are not explained on the basis of fixed characteristics – e.g., color – but on the basis of dynamic changes. Whereas early Arabs retain much of the characteristics shaped by nomadic life, these change with the establishment of civilization, i.e., sedentary life. This is why the very state that in its infancy was responsible for the destruction of the Persian heritage became central to salvaging the Greek heritage, particularly in mathematics, sciences and philosophy, as it became a custodian of sedentary life and order.

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<sup>112</sup> *ibid.* pp. 428-30

<sup>113</sup> “The Arabs who came into contact with that flourishing sedentary culture and exchanged their Bedouin attitude for it, were diverted from occupying themselves with scholarship and study by their leading position in the ‘Abbasid dynasty and tasks that confronted them in government. ... In addition, at that time, they considered a lowly thing to be a scholar. ... The final result, however was that ... Scholars were viewed with contempt, because the men in power saw that scholars had no contact with them and were occupying themselves with things that were of no interest to the men in power in governmental and political matters. This is why all scholars in the religious sciences, or most of them, are non-Arabs.” *Ibid.* pp. 428-30

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.* pp. 428-30

To read Ibn Khaldun is first of all to become acquainted with a different narrative of the history of ideas. It is to go beyond contemporary nationalist debates that seek to identify a single fountain of human civilization. It is also to question several assumptions prevalent in modern scholarship.

The *first* is the nationalist dogma that naturalizes contemporary geography – overlooking its history – and identifies intellectual tradition with a fixed geography, as its necessary attribute. From this point of view, Ibn Khaldun belongs to another tradition – for some Arab, for others Berber – but not a third, African. The *second* is an assumption that intellectual thought develops in a linear way. If Ibn Khaldun acknowledges the Greek foundation of Arab philosophical thought, especially when it comes to logic, he at the same time lays great stress on Persian foundations of Greek thought. This broadening of the historical landscape helped the Kampala group cut through the sterile debate between Afrocentrists and Eurocentrists on the place of ancient Egypt in the origin of civilization.

The reading of Ibn Khaldun also had a *third* effect for us. The focus on oral evidence and on the development of rules and methods to check the accuracy of oral transmission raised a set of questions. As I have noted, debates around how to assess the accuracy of oral tradition are not new in African historiography. Ibn Khaldun's account of the development of a specialized class preoccupied with questions of tradition, its transmission and its adaptation, raised a related question: had not such a class developed in African contexts like that of Nyiginya kingdom in Rwanda and the kingdom of Buganda? Would not a comparative study of *sunna* and custom under a single subject focused on the transmission and adaptation of tradition, bring forth a valuable yield for all?

A *fourth* critical discussion focused on the description and explanation of 'difference' in Ibn Khaldun. It led to an appreciation of the politics of translation, but also to obvious connections between Ibn Khaldun's description of forest Negroes and similar descriptions in much of the racist literature of the period of the slave trade and formal colonization of Africa.

A *fifth* effect of reading *The Muqaddimah* was a reflection on how its author relativizes the distinction between the religious and the secular. Ibn Khaldun not only probes the limits of religious authority (in particular, that of Prophet Muhammad) but also the hard division between reason and faith, equating faith in God with belief in objective knowledge. *Finally*, to read Ibn Khaldun was to become aware of the limits of his own thought – alongside its strength. If the latter lay in his understanding of civilization, the former lay in his failure to historicize and probe savagery. What, besides climate, prevented development of civilization in the forest and the desert and facilitated it in the city? As one student asked,<sup>115</sup> why does savagery have no history in Ibn Khaldun?

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115 The comment came from Fred Guweddeko.



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