

PART I

Entangled Histories

INTRODUCTION

How many times have you exclaimed, “What a small world!”? The speed at which we travel, send goods, and communicate with people in other parts of the world seems to erase the tremendous distances that separate us. Historically, distance and lack of comfort in travel did not compel Africans to remain bound to one location or dissuade others from visiting the continent. Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth-century scholar considered the inventor of the social sciences by some, was born in Tunis to a prominent family that ventured from Yemen to Spain before settling in Tunis. Oludamini Ogunnaike’s biographical profile of Khaldun reveals the breadth of the intellectual universe in which Khaldun operated as he received visitors from Andalusia (Islamic Spain) and northern Africa and as he lived and worked in important centers such as Fez and Cairo.

Luxury goods also traveled along the pathways traversed by Khaldun. François-Xavier Fauvelle introduces us to works by Arabic geographers and travelers that document the extensive international trade in which West African kingdoms such as ancient Ghana participated. Gold lubricated this trade between the eighth and fifteenth centuries that linked elites as well as Christians and Muslims and crossed the Sahara, Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean. Thus, Africa has long belonged to shifting multiregional networks through which products, ideas, and people flowed. In the process, different African societies have been entangled in the development and histories of other parts of the world and vice versa.

“Entangled Histories” offers rich examples of these networks at different historical periods and illuminates how people lived and experienced them.

The Sahara is a desert, but it is not a lifeless place, as some dictionaries inform us. To help us understand the experiences of those whose lives crosscut the Sahara, E. Ann McDougall introduces us to three women whose trans-Saharan crossings were profoundly shaped by the big “isms” of our time—colonialism, capitalism, and nationalism. The linkages that connected the lives of these women to global processes were pioneered in an earlier period when glory seekers ventured across the Atlantic. The transatlantic trade opened a new geopolitical era sustained by the wealth of the slave trade and slave labor. People of African descent were on multiple sides of this process. Some were among the colonizers from the Iberian Peninsula who laid claim to the “new” world. Leo J. Garofalo explores the life of one such itinerant, Diego Suárez, an actor who journeyed to Mexico and Peru as a member of the conquering forces. Others were among the millions of bonded laborers whose toil inscribed the landscape with their presence. Only traces are left of the places where enslaved Africans worked and lived in seventeenth-century Mexico City. Nonetheless, by mining wedding records, Frank Trey Proctor III reveals how enslaved Africans simultaneously held on to aspects of home while they created new families and new lives in this cosmopolitan city. The experiences of Pedro Sánchez and Mariana, who appeared at the Metropolitan Cathedral in 1640 to apply for a marriage license, also remind us that the institution of slavery varied considerably.

The formal end of slavery did not create equal citizens in former slave societies. The promises of reconstruction after the American Civil War were largely overturned by the end of the nineteenth century. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan and legalized racial segregation generated many parallels in the histories of the United States and South Africa. Their shared histories supported transnational politics as African Americans and Black South Africans traveled across the Atlantic engaging in spiritual and political fellowship. Benedict Carton and Robert Trent Vinson introduce us to the transatlantic Pan-African crusade of Charles Morris, a black Baptist missionary and protégé of Frederick Douglass. The alliances Morris helped to forge during the nineteenth century would become even more urgent in the twentieth century as African communities both continental and diasporic struggled to purge democracy of white supremacy.

Africa did not only populate slave societies across the Atlantic. Enslaved Africans were taken to the Arabian Peninsula and to the Indian subcontinent. Renu Modi reminds us of the long-standing relations between India and the African continent. Slavery was one small facet of a relationship that

is being reinvigorated as the Siddis, the descendants of enslaved Africans in India, establish ties to African countries and to African diasporic communities in other regions, and as the Indian government expands political, social, and economic ties with African governments. Collectively the chapters in part 1 reveal the dynamic and enduring entanglements that put Africa at the center of world history.

PROFILE

IBN KHALDUN: THE FATHER OF
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Oludamini Ogunnaike

Abstract: Ibn Khaldun has been called the father of economics and sociology, and his ideas and methods anticipate developments in European thought five centuries after his death. He applied his extensive political experience and learning to understand how societies rise and fall, and is still studied and cited today by economists, politicians, and sociologists.

Keywords: Islam, economics, sociology, political philosophy, North Africa, Arabic

In the Prolegomena (Muqaddimat) to his Universal History he [Ibn Khaldun] has conceived and formulated a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.

—BRITISH HISTORIAN A. J. TOYNBEE

ABŪ ZAYD ‘ABD AL-RAḤMĀN IBN Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn al-Ḥaḍramī (1332–1406 CE), better known as Ibn Khaldun, has been called the father of economics, the father of sociology, the inventor of the social sciences, and the forerunner of Western intellectual giants such as Machiavelli, Vico, Weber, Durkheim, Keynes, and Marx. But Ibn Khaldun and his ideas are far more than a foreshadowing of developments in European thought centuries later; he was a shrewd statesman, a gifted writer, an adventurer, a political theorist, a philosopher, a theologian, and a remarkably creative and original thinker and student of the human condition. In his work, he sought to synthesize and describe the numerous branches of knowledge that had been developed in Western lands of the Islamic world, and bring them all to bear on the questions, How do human societies work? What makes them rise and fall?

THE MAN

Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis to a prominent family of scholars and court officials who had migrated from Yemen in the eighth century to settle in Seville and then migrated to Tunis shortly before Seville fell to Christian forces in 1284. At the time, families like Ibn Khaldun's maintained their status, and lucrative administrative and judicial posts in the courts of Andalusia and northern Africa, through their erudition. As such, Ibn Khaldun received a first-rate education, memorizing and studying the Qur'an, the Arabic language, Arabic rhetoric and poetry, Islamic jurisprudence, logic, mathematics, and Islamic theology, political theory, and philosophy. However, when he was only seventeen, Ibn Khaldun lost his parents and many of his teachers to a widespread outbreak of the plague.

After a brief, boring stint in Tunis as a calligrapher of royal decrees, he left to join his philosophy teacher and mentor in Fez, which was the political and intellectual center of the Maghreb. In his autobiography, Ibn Khaldun recounts his delight at meeting the many scholars from Andalusia and North Africa who passed through the city. However, he felt that the new positions open to him in Fez were still "beneath those to which his ancestors had aspired," and so he leapt into the turbulent political intrigues of court politics in the hopes of winning a high position for himself and reforming society according to his philosophical ideals.

These political maneuvers cost Ibn Khaldun his job several times and landed him in jail for two years. He even had to flee for his life a few times as he moved from court to court in northern Africa and Andalusia. He often carried out diplomatic missions among the Arab and Berber tribes of North Africa on behalf of his patrons. After alienating nearly every major dynasty in the region, he took advantage of these relationships to take something of a sabbatical from the intrigues of political life, retiring to a remote fortress under the protection of the Banu Arif tribe for four years (1375–79). During this time, he wrote his groundbreaking *Muqaddimah*, or introduction to his ambitious larger work of the history of Arabs and Berbers in northern Africa, the *Kitāb al-'ibar*, or "The Book of Lessons." He also reflected upon his repeated failures to cultivate and create the ideal philosopher-king and state as described by Islamic philosophy and political theory. And so, following the example of earlier Islamic philosophers, he redirected his ambitions away from reforming society through political means and toward investigating, discovering, and formulating the true governing principles of society through scholarly means.

After completing the *Muqaddimah*, in which he outlined his new philosophy and approach to history, Ibn Khaldun briefly returned to Tunis before leaving for Cairo in 1382. In Cairo, he found work as a judge and attracted a number of students eager to learn his new science of society (*‘ilm al-‘umrān*). He also completed his massive world history (*Kitāb al-‘ibar*) (which he expanded to include the history of the Middle East) and his autobiography. When the Mongol conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) besieged the city of Damascus in 1401, Ibn Khaldun bravely went out to meet and study the conqueror who seemed to prove so many of the scholar’s theories about power and social organization. In his autobiography, Ibn Khaldun records that the Mongol leader was very impressed with him and his ideas, which Timur saw as explaining and legitimating his own military and political successes. According to Ibn Khaldun, both men learned a great deal from each other during the month they spent together. Timur even tried to recruit Ibn Khaldun to his own court, but Ibn Khaldun made his excuses and returned to Cairo, where he died just a few years later, in 1406.

By the time of his death, Ibn Khaldun had completed a few works on logic, arithmetic, philosophy, and Sufism, but he is most famous for his autobiography and his magnum opus, the *Kitāb al-‘ibar*—especially its introduction, or *Muqaddimah*. This large work (seven volumes in most modern printings) is divided into three books: the celebrated *Muqaddimah*, which outlines Ibn Khaldun’s new theory and approach to historiography and the science of human social organization (*‘ilm al-‘umrān*); a history of the Arabs from pre-Islamic days to the present and of neighboring peoples and dynasties (such as the Persians, Turks, Greeks, etc.); and a history of the Berbers of North Africa.

THE IDEAS

What distinguished Ibn Khaldun from earlier historians was his development of a critical approach to history that combined philosophical reasoning and analysis with empirical observations. In the beginning of the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun explains that one must have an understanding of the “laws of history”—why and how historical events occur—in order to critically evaluate historical accounts and data. But one must also have recourse to historical data in order to discover these “laws of history,” just as one needs data from the natural world in order to formulate the “laws of nature.” He writes, “The inner meaning of history, on the other hand,

involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things, and deep knowledge of the how and why of events. [History,] therefore, is firmly rooted in philosophy. It deserves to be accounted a branch of [philosophy].”

Ibn Khaldun criticized the shortcomings of earlier historians. He argued that they had failed to take into account the biases of sources, relied on implausible accounts, and, most important, failed to rationally and systematically determine why and how historical events occurred. In contrast, his new approach to history included a new science of human social organization that could explain how and why historical events occurred. On the basis of this science, he argued, one could logically and rigorously distinguish the necessary, possible, and impossible in the course of human social organization, and thus judge the plausibility of historical data about human societies.

According to Ibn Khaldun, man is by nature a social creature, and differences between peoples and their social organizations can be explained by different physical environments and related ways of making a living: “It should be known that differences of condition among people are the result of the different ways in which they make their living. Social organization enables them to cooperate toward that end and to start with the simple necessities of life, before they get to conveniences and luxuries.”

He then develops a dialectic between Bedouin societies—those tribal societies that live in the wilderness and desert and maintain a subsistence-level existence with few luxuries—and settled or urban, sophisticated societies in which luxuries, social hierarchies, and specialized labor and fields of knowledge proliferate. Bedouin societies are characterized by strong *‘aşabiyah*—a key term in Ibn Khaldun’s thought that can be roughly translated as “group solidarity”—because it is necessary for their survival in such difficult conditions. On the basis of his own experience, Ibn Khaldun also notes that the conditions of Bedouin life tend to make its members more brave, tough, vigilant, hardworking, and pious than their urban counterparts. Thus, Bedouin societies give rise to strong tribal dynasties and militaries. Out of desire for security, tranquillity, and luxury, once they become strong enough, these dynasties either found their own cities or, more commonly, invade and take over already existing cities.

In perhaps the most famous discussion of the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun explains how and why these dynasties usually decline within three or four generations. The founder of the dynasty is a stereotypical tough man of the desert who maintains the Bedouin virtues that led to his success, while his

generation maintains the strong *‘aşabiyah* (group solidarity) that brought them into power. The second generation learns these qualities and virtues from their parents, and maintains them to a certain extent. They are also the first to master and excel in the urban arts of administration and bureaucracy. But, raised in a more luxurious environment, they are one step removed from the Bedouin qualities that brought their parents to power. The third generation is even further removed from these qualities, and maintains them as “tradition,” not as practical necessities, as in the first generation, or lessons learned, as in the second generation. Under the rule of law and relative ease of urban life, the self-sufficiency, courage, group solidarity, and general toughness of the third generation are much weaker than their predecessors’. They begin to focus more on the pleasures and luxuries of urban life than on pursuing glory and greatness. As a result of their decreased group solidarity and toughness, the rulers of the second and third generation must increasingly rely on mercenaries from outside their dynasty to maintain their rule and fend off rivals within their own dynasty. This further diminishes group solidarity and increases the resentment of the ruler among the other members of the dynasty.

By the fourth generation, the members of the dynasty have become accustomed to easy living and luxuries, which they take for granted, having lost the memory and the qualities of their ancestors’ struggle that led to their acquisition. The group solidarity and strength of the earlier generations have all but vanished as this fourth generation abandons itself to the pursuit of pleasures, and the dynasty “progresses toward weakness and senility.” As the rulers become more inept and pay more attention to their own hedonistic pursuits than to the supervision of their kingdom, they appoint more sycophantic and inept administrators, and in the absence of oversight, corruption and mismanagement set in. The result is the eventual collapse of the dynasty, usually at the hands of a new Bedouin dynasty that sweeps in from the desert to take over and reinvigorate the state.

In summary, Ibn Khaldun argues that Bedouin life precedes and leads to settled, urban life, which will, in turn, decay and collapse under the weight of its own sophistication, returning to the simplicity of wilderness life—unless it is revived by an influx of fresh Bedouin spirit from the wilderness.

Ibn Khaldun developed and “proved” his theory not only through logical demonstration and philosophical reasoning, but also by citing numerous examples from North African and broader Islamic history, demonstrating how his theory models and explains the mechanisms of state formation, expansion, and decline. After establishing these and other general theories of

human social development and decline, Ibn Khaldun applies them to judge the plausibility of various historical accounts and to suggest causal links between, and general principles that can be adduced from, the various events he records in his history of the Arabs, the Berbers, and neighboring peoples (books 2 and 3 of his *Kitāb al-'ibar*).

Although the *Muqaddimah* contains many other original discussions of topics—such as government (which he famously defined as “an institution that prevents injustice other than such as it commits itself”), various modes of labor, profit and taxation, religion and religious propaganda, different intellectual disciplines and their pedagogical methods and roles in societies—it is the dialectic outlined above for which the work and its author became most famous.

THE CONTEMPORARY LEGACY

Although Ibn Khaldun first became known to the Western world in the seventeenth century, his work was not widely read in Europe until the nineteenth century, when it was translated into German and French. (Ibn Khaldun's history of North Africa and its peoples may have been of particular interest to the French at this time, as they were in the process of colonizing northern Africa.) Scholars throughout Europe soon took note, characterizing him as a “genius ahead of his time,” whose ideas and methods anticipated developments in the Western social sciences by several centuries.

These positive appraisals of Ibn Khaldun led to a revival of interest in his work in the Arab and broader Muslim world, which in turn led to an appreciation of Ibn Khaldun not only as a source of historical data and a forerunner of Western social theorists, but as a thinker whose ideas have contemporary relevance. His theories have been used to explain contemporary politics and conflict in the Middle East (such as the rise and decline of contemporary monarchies and regimes), patterns of immigration, and street gangs and cartels. Former president Ronald Reagan even invoked him to defend his supply-side economics (much to the chagrin of scholars), and a recent article in the *Atlantic* employs Ibn Khaldun's theory of dynastic decline to explain the slide of retail giant Walmart's share prices.

Ibn Khaldun's impressive legacy demonstrates that Africa is rich not only in natural resources, but in intellectual ones as well. His writings are a rich mine of theories and ideas, many of which have yet to be explored. Scholar,

statesman, and theorist, Ibn Khaldun and the work he did in fourteenth-century northern Africa continues to shape and influence our world and the ways we understand it. This is exactly as he hoped, as he wrote in the conclusion of his *Muqaddimah*: “We have dealt—as we think, adequately—with the problems connected with [the nature of civilization]. Perhaps some later [scholar], aided by the divine gifts of a sound mind and of solid scholarship, will penetrate into these problems in greater detail than we did here.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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