

## ***HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY IN IBN KHALDUN***

***M.A. THESIS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, 1984***

By Mohamed MAGANI  
Maître Assistant ISIC

My interest in Ibn Khaldûn's thought, owes much, in the first place, to the realization that the discipline of history has a privileged status in present-day Arab societies, and notably in Algeria. Following the post-independence era, Arab intellectuals invested a great deal of energy critically assessing colonial historiography and the basic assumptions and dogmas which underlie it. There was, at the same time, a sustained effort at reconstructing their own past and bringing out all aspects they deemed worthy and decisive to offset the disparagement and debasement of their societies, culture and history, in the works of historians of colonization. Further investigations have showed, in fact, that history has always been of a central concern in Arab civilisation. Its massive practice, particularly since the advent of Islam in the 7th Century lacked, however, a self-reflective capacity. Its assumptions, methods, and purposes were scantily, if not at all questioned. This situation prevailed until Ibn Khaldûn, in the fourteenth century, displaced the historiographic discourse from its solipsistic borrowings to a radical criticism of its practice. This study attempts to address itself to the sociological conditions that rendered the move possible, as it explores the articulation between the production of knowledge and its social genesis in medieval Arab societies. If the first self-critical book appeared in these societies in the field of historiography, it is because, I will argue, of a long tradition of historical writing and practice. The crisis opened by Ibn Khaldûn in historiography reflected, in reality, the crisis medieval Arab Societies were faced with. A masterpiece such as Ibn Khaldûn's *The Muqaddinah*, did not originate in a vacuum. The problematization of historiography was a process whereby the disparity between knowledge and reality gained

saliency and indicated, ultimately, the ideological character of the historiographic enterprise.

The second set of problems I have tried to consider concerns this problematization of historiography, and above all the theoretical construction, Ibn Khaldûn's "new science", aimed to supersede it. Having lost its self-containing, self-reinforcing character or a closed system, traditional historiography was bound to open new paths for itself. Ibn Khaldûn's first task was to question its self-referential presence; he achieved his goal only from the point of view of a general sociology that acknowledges the non-scientific basis of traditional narrative history. The guiding questions in this respect are: how did Ibn Khaldûn move from history to sociology? What are the factors that make it possible for the emergence of a new approach to history in the Arab Middle Ages? Secondly, does Ibn Khaldûn's thought, essentially a sociological investigation, account for the crisis which dominated the Arab world in several aspects? This last question brings us to an important issue over the relevance of Ibn Khaldûn's study of Arab societies. Not all Arab intellectuals share a consensus upon the conclusions the author of *The Muqaddinah* arrived at. Is Ibn Khaldûn's thought an adequate framework for analysing the evolution of Arab societies? Are his conceptual tools – which originate in the very culture of his time – valid concepts? In other words, are medieval Arab societies best analysed and understood by means of an internal, structural, appraisal? The question has a crucial significance and bears upon the problem of underdevelopment. The latter is a phenomenon that has not to be explained only by internal factors. There are also other causes, external, which enter its formatin, the most obvious being colonization.

On the other hand, there is one meeting point around which Arab intellectuals have been in the last two decades arguing against its failacy, namely the reading of Ign Khaldûn by Orientalists and apologists of colonization. This reading essentializes Ibn Khaldûn's thought to a philosophical and cyclical theory of history. In fact, it will be argued that this reading tells us more about theories of colonization than about Ibn Khaldûn's thought. To take issue over it is to advance the understanding of a complex set of factors behind the emergence of a general sociology. It is also

part of an overall argument for the decolonization of history. There is no better starting point, as far as Arab societies are concerned, than the distortions of Ibn Khaldûn's ideas.

This study is divided into four chapters, each one composed of two or more sub-chapters, in turn segmented into shorter units. The first chapter draws a large circle around all the factors which underlie the Arabs' rise to history-awareness, from pre-Islamic century till the eve of the emergence of Ibn Khaldûn's work in the 14th century. It also attempts to trace the origin of the universalist and humanist dimension which developed later in the post-Islamic era in the works of two prominent Muslim historians: Mas'ûdi and Miskawayh. Chapter 2 addresses itself to epistemological issues with an emphasis on historical knowledge. The status of history is examined in the classification of sciences the Muslims took up, first from the Greeks, then in the classification with an Islamic outlook. Finally, its conspicuous "absence" from the discussion on sciences in *The Muqaddimah* is accounted for as Ibn Khaldûn's attempt to disengage it from traditional historiography, in the light of the influence of the Mu'tazilah, a rationalist movement which rose against orthodoxy in the very beginning of Islam.

In the third chapter, Ibn Khaldûn's conception of history is related to the wider social structures of medieval Arab societies. Ibn Khaldûn's central thesis is that the parochialism of traditional historiography cannot advance satisfying answers for the drastic changes in contemporary societies. Hence, I believe, a marked notion of discontinuity and radical rupture from the evolutionist conception of time in Islamic thought. In addition, a particular attention is paid to his criticism of the mythical dimension in traditional historiography. The fourth chapter focuses on Ibn Khaldûn's general sociology, his new science, the "science of Umrân". In this respect, Ibn Khaldûn's essential assumption is that the historical fact cannot be isolated from synchronic conditions. The study of the economic, political, social and cultural aspects of society invest the diachronic narrative history. Therefore, the contingency of historical facts is in many ways questioned. The gist of Ibn Khaldûn's argument is centered around sociological investigation and the claim to founding a new science. Within this chapter two sections deal with Ibn Khaldûn's sociology of the

medieval Maghrib (North Africa). THE first is a political sociology of an area of the Arab world, in which he sees two forces at work in the social dynamics: rural society and urban society. The second critically assesses Ibn Khaldûn's claim to a comprehensive study of the Maghrib and explores some of the neglected areas of his work, a fact which suggests that his thought was not entirely free from the dominant Islamic influence.

The conclusion reviews some of the methodological uncertainties of the study, as it also attempts to highlight the scantiness of theoretical arguments in relation to some crucial issues, such as the notion of "social crisis" in medieval Arab societies or the economy and the division of labour in Ibn Khaldûn sociology. In addition, some guidelines on my future research on the status of history in contemporary Arab thought are considered.

Achévé d'imprimer sur les presses de  
**L'OFFICE DES PUBLICATIONS  
UNIVERSITAIRES**  
1, Place Centrale - Ben-Aknoun - ALGER