Ibn Khaldun and the Revelation from the Desert

Irene Coltman Brown

Tacitus, the historian of the Roman Empire, would have recognised his kinship with the fourteenth-century North African historian, Ibn Khaldun, who also made the moral tension at the heart of imperial rule the centre of his history of the Islamic Empire.

It is now 1400 years since the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, where, in a cave outside the city, in AD 610 he received the first of his divine revelations which together make up the Koran. Although Mecca was a trade centre, and focus of pilgrimage to the Kaaba and the sacred idols of its shrine, Muhammad was also familiar with the stony wilderness of the Arabian deserts. Almost destitute nomads wandered across this harsh world in a complex tangle of clans, loosely held together by the intense kinship demands that result from what Ibn Khaldun was to call asabiya – the power of their group consciousness and by the imperious duty of the blood feud.

Warlike and restless, they were never sufficiently united to be formidable beyond the desert, but Muhammad’s austere ethic challenged the greedy merchants of Mecca with a desert purity. In 621, by the Christian calendar, there was a secret nocturnal meeting between the Prophet and twelve of his disciples on the mountain pass at al’Aqaba. They pledged loyalty to this new faith and the next year returned to swear to defend that faith as fiercely with their swords as they would protect their families and their honour. In The World of Late Antiquity Peter Brown argues that in human terms the message of Muhammad evolved as a remedy for Bedouin imperfections. His puritanism imposed restrictions on Bedouin licentiousness but liberated the Bedouin nomad from his narrow social loyalties. Islam meant ‘submit’ and Muslims surrendered to the transcendent demand of Allah that broke through the constraining obligations of kinship and the blood feud to the eternal feud between the Muslim Umma community and the unbeliever. The Holy War against the old Empires began when Muhammad sent three thousand men to attack the frontier of the great empire of Byzantium, and by 647 the Arab army, driving across the desert, had appeared on the frontiers of Tunisia.

The Arab conquest of the Maghreb began in 670, when Uqba ibn Nafi established Qairawan, in what is now Tunisia, as a stronghold. Dragging one wretched enemy behind him in chains Uqba set off to the west and, according to legend, raiding through Algeria and the Moroccan Rif to reach the Atlantic coast, he rode into the sea because he said, he could go no further. Imperial Rome seemed to have come again to Africa, especially under the steady hand of Musa ibn Nusair, who also conquered a realm in Spain, which became during Islamic rule the most civilised state in western Europe and a centre of art and learning.

The family of the extraordinary political thinker, Ibn Khaldun, came from Yemen in South Arabia to Spain during the eighth century, in the early years of the Muslim conquest, and settled in Seville where they and the other Muslim merchant dynasties established a formidable local oligarchy that produced generations of learned scholars and astute politicians. By the thirteenth century, however, mounting Christian pressure made this talented people feel that it was time to leave. Before the actual fall of Seville in 1248, the family fled en masse to North Africa. Islamic power fell into the hands of the new dynasties of the Hasfids in Tunisia and the Merenids in Fez, both of whom Ibn Khaldun later served. Three hundred years of social, economic, and political decline had weakened the Maghreb before Ibn Khaldun’s birth. These heirs of Islam’s declining empire set up faded copies of the brilliant civilisation that had been lost in Spain. Ineffective rulers, they clung to local power in towns sealed off from the Berber countryside laid waste by the terrible nomadic raids of the eleventh century when the Egyptian Fatimids let loose their turbulent nomads to the west ‘like locusts’ as Ibn Khaldun said.

However, the Muslim refugees from Spain had in this unstable region influential friends and relatives involved in the rising fortunes of the new dynasty of Hasfids. The patrician grandfather of Ibn Khaldun held minor political office with them but Ibn Khaldun’s father led the private life of a gentleman-scholar, studying the Koran and the law until, like a character in Camus’ The Plague, he died in the Black Death which came to Tunisia, as to England, in 1348. His son was then seventeen for Ibn Khaldun
4. MOSLEMS AND BYZANTINES

Abu Zayd was born in Tunisia on Ramadhan 1, 732 or, by the Christian calendar, on May 27th, 1332.

At twenty, Ibn Khaldun was given a significant court position. Although his only formal public duty was to write the words 'Praise be to God' in large letters to head the text of official documents, he could have become an important political adviser in Tunisia, but in 1352, he went absent without leave from the Tunisian army camp during a local campaign, and, with the help of his wide circle of connections, slowly made his way west. Two years later he accepted an invitation to Fez where Abu Inan, the new Merinid ruler of Morocco, had seized the throne and was gathering an imposing circle of intellectuals around him. Suspicions of his total loyalty and of family friendship with the Tunisian Hasids placed Ibn Khaldun under a cloud. When Abu Inan embarked on an invasion of Tunisia, Ibn Khaldun was incarcerated in a grim medieval version of preventive detention. However, after he had been in prison for twenty-one months, he was released when Abu Inan died.

In July, 1359, a candidate of his became ruler of Morocco and as a reward for his support Ibn Khaldun was made secretary of state until his patron was killed in a coup after only two years.

Ibn Khaldun had a strong cultural nostalgia for the lost Muslim greatness in Spain and for its brilliant Andalusian culture that had been one of the wonders of the world and took this opportunity to work in Granada, the only important Muslim state left there.

Yet love and friendship wear away, as well as dynasties, and it was a quarrel with the Vizier of Granada, the poet and historian and his close friend, that made Ibn Khaldun return again to Africa in February, 1365. Another old friend had just come to power in Bejaya in Algeria and handed over to him the still dangerous task of collecting taxes from the Berber clans in the mountains. This ruler also died and, once more, Ibn Khaldun felt insecure and undecided, and repelled by 'the morass of politics' as he called it. Nowhere in the excitement of politics was there time or peace of mind for the complex scholarship for which Ibn Khaldun knew he was born; and in 1375 he retreated to a small village in Algeria, in the province of Oran. He stayed there for almost four years while he started to write a universal history of the world and to put in order his intoxicating ideas for its introduction or Prologomena to its marvellous Muqaddimah. Before he returned to Tunisia so that he could use its large libraries he had laid the foundations of a masterpiece but his original method aroused the opposition of duller teachers of law and jealous court officials, who incited the Sultan against him, and Ibn Khaldun declared that he was going on a pilgrimage to Mecca and safely left Tunisia. In October, 1382, he sailed to Alexandria but he did not go on to Mecca, if indeed he ever intended to. Instead he went on to Cairo which made a grandiose impression on him, not only for the wealth and prosperity brought to the city by the Nile, whose waters seemed to flow like the river of Paradise, but still more for 'the moons and stars shining among its scholars'.

His first meeting with the Fatimid Sultan Barquq resulted in an immediate rapport and friendship. Ibn Khaldun had all the easy access, the private conversation and public smiles which are the fortunate lot of the friends of the powerful, and soon the Sultan tried to do him a still greater favour. The Sultan of Tunis had refused to let Ibn Khaldun's wife and children leave Tunis after him in order that he would be forced to return. At Ibn Khaldun's request the Sultan of Egypt wrote to the Sultan of Tunis to let them go.

The family sailed for Egypt and Ibn Khaldun's wife and five daughters were drowned in a violent storm near the harbour of Alexandria. Although he still had two living sons, this was a terrible blow that enhanced his ever present sense of isolation and insecurity and although he must have savoured introducing visitors from the Maghreb to the Sultan, this emphasised his expatriate status as did wearing Maghrebi robes in court, not rising for the Egyptian judges and slapping his secretaries until their necks were red. He was appointed a university professor and Malikite Chief Cadi in Cairo. His inaugural lecture was a triumph and Taki-ad-Din-al Maqtria, a famous Malite historian who had attended his lectures on the Muqaddimah, said, 'Nothing like it has been done before and it would be difficult for anyone who might try to achieve something like it... it informed about the reality of happenings and events'. He was appointed no less than six times to the office of Chief Cadi, only to find, on each occasion, that as an expatriate it was almost impossible to reform the corrupt local bar. So each time he was denounced and the appointment withdrawn.

In 1389 a rebellion forced Sultan Burquq temporarily out of power and Ibn Khaldun unwisely added his signature to the charges against him so that when the Sultan won back his power Ibn Khaldun was dismissed and could not even get an interview to explain himself or apologise. However soon after the death of Sultan Burquq Egypt was threatened by the Mongols pressing into Africa under their commander Tamerlane, Timur the Lame, who, emulating Genghis Khan, had marched westward to Damascus.

During the negotiation of an armistice Tamerlane asked about Ibn Khaldun and made Ibn Khaldun yet more anxious to meet this powerful Islamic conqueror. Refused permission to leave the city Ibn Khaldun let himself down from the walls of Damascus on a rope and was taken to Tamerlane's camp where he presented the Mongolian with a beautiful Koran and four boxes of Cairo halea for his court. They met more than thirty times talking of heroes, prophecies, and the economic geography of the Maghreb and characteristically Ibn Khaldun wrote a memorandum for Tamerlane about the west and one for the Merinid ruler of Fez about Tamerlane. Ibn Khaldun was invited to stay with the new conqueror but after some equivocation refused. The people of Damascus were not treated so well when they surrendered on payment of a ransom. Tamerlane confiscated a great sum of money from the inhabitants by torture and then gave permission for their houses and goods to be plundered by his army on the grounds that the adverse exchange rate he got for the ransom had depreciated its value. In burning the rubbish that his troops had collected with their loot the Mongol fires spread to the Great Umayyad Mosque of the heroic first years of Islam and its ceiling and walls collapsed. Ibn Khaldun commented, in character, that it was an abominable deed but Allah's will and Mongol pillaging was similar to the customary nomad pillaging of Bedouin Arabs.

Ibn Khaldun had a frightening journey back to Cairo, for he and his friends were intercepted by a band of thieves who robbed them of all they had, leaving them to make their way almost naked to a nearby village. Back at this last home from home he was reappointed and re-dismissed as before from the post of
Malikite Chief Cadi. He was Cadi again for the last time in March, 1406, to die a few weeks later on Ramadhan 25, 808 or March 17th, 1406. He was buried in the Sufi cemetery outside Cairo’s Nasr Gate and, in the Islamic world of learning, his reputation soon became a legend as the scholar intellectual from North-West Africa who in the fourteenth-century Maghreb had founded a ‘new science’ of historical change.

Historians are nomads, wandering through time. Many scholars come to graze on the history of the world but, said Ibn Khaldun, ‘the pasture of stupidity is unwholesome for mankind’. The stupidity of most of what passed for history amongst medieval Muslims came from their uncritical repetition of legends and tales of wonder. They attributed any important event to supernatural marvels and miracles in the absence of any genuine theory of historical change which could provide a more serious explanation. In the introduction to his own history Ibn Khaldun followed what he knew to be a wholly original method and commented on civilisation, or urbanisation, and on the essential characteristics of human social organisation, in a way that explains to the reader how and why things are as they are. But even as he produced his science of social change he was aware that change itself is the great gulf between man and God so that in the Invocation to Allah, with which Ibn Khaldun headed the Introduction and Book One of The World History he said ‘Time wears us out . . . But He lasts and persists’.

The Foreword states his main complaint that often historians merely copy traditional material without explanation in their monotonous chronicles. They do not turn to the beginnings of the city. Nor do they tell why it unfurled its banner and was able to give prominence to its emblem or what caused it to come to a stop when it had reached its term. He intended that his book would try to provide a general theory covering the rise and fall of all dynasties, since in his view the future resembles the past more than one drop of water resembles another. History, he had decided is cyclical, repeating the same pattern through the centuries. ‘It turns out to be a vessel for philosophy’ wrote Ibn Khaldun. ‘Kindness from colleagues is hoped for.’

To Ibn Khaldun history is the history of social order and the different ways by which one group of human beings achieve superiority over another and become a political power.

All collective human achievement, and especially that qualitative leap from the desert to the city which brings in a new power to found a new dynasty, and so lays the foundation of new states, depends upon the emergency of a group with an exceptional asabiyya or corporate will.

This closely knit group consciousness of common interest is in essence the sense of common descent and that compassion and affection for one’s blood relations which God put into the hearts of men, but which men can also feel for those engaged with them in a common political or religious crusade.

Out of the social co-operation that is denied to the other animal species comes civilisation which is any settlement above the level of the plunderer and Ibn Khaldun, like the Greeks, placed civility in the city.

Put more simply, and in the context of the medieval Maghreb, Ibn Khaldun says that desert nomads are more open to saving revelation than city dwellers, but turning to their frugal living he assessed the process by which the Bedouins, by aspiring to the sedentary way of life of the city, lose their virtue. It was essentially a moral distinction with which Ibn Khaldun organised his history and therefore oversimplified the historical realities of North Africa, that should include Berber nomads and settled Bedouins, but what he hoped to expose was a recurrent process of moral renewal and decline.

Like all societies, Bedouin society was shaped by its economic substructure and Ibn Khaldun wished that this was more widely understood by historians. ‘It should be known’, he wrote, as he so often did, in his protracted struggle against ignorance, ‘that differences of condition among people are the result of the different ways they make their living’. Those who live by agriculture or animal husbandry cannot avoid the call of the desert because only the countryside offers the fields and pastures that they need. But the harshness of the countryside acts upon them as a continual restraint. Their social organisation, and the level of co-operation for the needs of life and civilisation that they can reach, do not take them beyond the bare subsistence level.

However, if they should acquire a surplus then ‘They build large houses and lay out towns and cities for protection. This is followed by an increase in commerce and ease which leads to the formation of the most developed luxury customs, bringing culture and corruption.

The civilisation of the city is the rule of law, but this precludes the need for private revenge and personal daring. Its mode of life demands obedience and respect for the law and for authority quite beyond the reach of, but also corrupting, the proud ruffians of the desert, and, at this point, Ibn Khaldun drew particular attention to the spread of education in a civilised culture which is an education for domination that makes the student obedient and passive just as he acquires the skills of the developed economy.

These two modes of life are both antagonistic and intimately connected. The Bedouin nomads go ever deeper into the desert because they do not want the urban militia to mete out justice upon them, to punish them for their predatory raids or as one editor of the text, Bulq, interprets it ‘to humiliate them’. Nonetheless Ibn Khaldun realised that ‘urbanisation is the goal of the Bedouin’. As soon as he has enough wealth to do so he lives a life of ease and submits to the yoke of the city. Conversely the sedentary people of the towns shrink from desert conditions ‘unless they are motivated by some urgent necessity or they cannot keep up with their fellow city dwellers’ and yet just because it is the last stage of civilisation, and the furthest removed from the Bedouin, the luxurious city life is the point ‘where it begins to decay’ and begins to return by necessity to the desert.

Ibn Khaldun’s whole vision of politics rests on the instability of political power as of all things. Time works against the palace as the desert encroaches on the fields. The prestige required to impose political authority lasted, at most, he believed, for four generations in one family because by that time the ruler no longer possesses the qualities that preserve the edifice of power. He no longer symbolises the group unity because he is increasingly remote, as in Spain the Almoravid Ali ibu Yusif had lost touch with the desert and so lost an empire.

If a dynasty at the beginning of its rule is a Bedouin one, said Ibn Khaldun, the ruler is austere and still has the desert attitude of oneness with his clan. He is close to the people and easily accessible. Then, when his power is firmly established . . . he needs to keep away from the people and to remain aloof from his friends.’
4. MOSLEMS AND BYZANTINES

A new ruler comes to power through the help of his own people, but the tough champions of his early days and struggles look out of place in the city and in the palace and they remind him often of incidents and life in the past which he would rather forget. To fight for power and to exercise it demand different qualities. The rough ways of the desert are inappropriate in government offices; the equality of guerrillas must give way to more formal relationships, and the ruler himself is not the man he was.

His relatives, says Ibn Khaldun, 'become sick at heart when they see the ruler firmly established in royal authority' and he, fearful of their resentment, begins to kill them off. The new urban members of his entourage encourage his seclusion. They enjoy exercising their control over him and drawing him into their own orbit and showing him a new style of life. A child, coming to the throne in boyhood becomes their puppet, changing away the idle hours in the women's quarters while palace officials hold the reigns of power. Surrounded by the trappings of power and with flattering whispers, the new sultan begins to hint that deference and obedience are due to him by the very nature of things and that he is better than the rest of his clan. He grows to despise his family and tribe as primitive and uncouth and hatred for him grows until the day comes when they plot to overthrow him and break away from an authority that is no longer founded on common consciousness or asabiya. The leaders of these four generations, he said, can therefore be described as 'the builder, the one who has personal contact with the builder, the one who relies on tradition, and the destroyer.'

At the beginning, said Ibn Khaldun, the dynasty has the ethics of the desert. 'It has the qualities of kindness to subjects, planned moderation in expenditure, and respect for other people's property. Nothing at this time calls for extravagant expenditures' but as the solidarity of family weakens it is replaced by the pomp of power that, by its glitter, conceals the inner hollowness of the régime, and by the increasing resort of the government to force. The army holds the state together and feeling its new power demands more and more money at the very time when money begins to be scarce.

Good government is mild government and therefore it is only in the middle period of the life of a dynasty or kingdom that the city is prosperous. Then it enjoys the benefits of the settled crafts of the city and of peace, while states follow a sound financial policy of moderate taxation and encouraging private economic enterprise.

But when the régime has to rest on an oppressive apparatus it will begin to raise the level of taxes and turn to a pitiless bureaucracy to collect them. The ruler will rely more and more on what his soldiers can do for him, and, most dangerously of all, make use of the nomadic peoples as an instrument of violence to exact the last ounce from the peasant. The luxurious consumption of the ruler and his administrative élite vividly contrasts with the crushing burdens which it lays upon the people and increases their alienation from him at the very moment that he is preparing to make new demands.

As Ibn Khaldun explored the precarious moral equilibrium of the city he argued that the last stage of civilisation is, as he says 'the last stage of evil and of remoteness from goodness' the over-civilised no longer have the virtue to maintain themselves. They lack the courage of the Bedouin and entrust their protection to a paid regular army while the Bedouin, far away from any organised militia, and with no walls or gates to protect them, 'pay attention to every faint barking and noise. They go alone into the desert ... putting their trust in themselves and from their poverty will emerge a new prophet to protest against the corruption of the city.'

Thus dynasties, like individuals, thought Ibn Khaldun, have a natural life span and in four generations they too approach senility and become too lazy and weak to fight for power. The first generation retains the desert qualities of nomad toughness and nomad savagery; the second generation settles down in the new sedentary culture and the people become law abiding until the third has completely forgotten the desert, and their group feeling has been submerged in obedience to the law and for the most part, 'they are more cowardly than women upon their backs'. Having lost the courage of its heroic early days in the fourth generation, that is in about 120 years, the dynasty is swept away.

Ibn Khaldun concluded 'Senility is a chronic disease that cannot be cured or made to disappear because it is something natural and natural things do not change'.

Reform and renewal, though, is like recapturing, at least for a little while, the lost strength of one's younger years, and this is the creative use of intellectual and religious innovation that Ibn Khaldun wished to unite with the Bedouin's un-ruliness. The divine madman, the prophet, can break with customs and introduce new laws or restore old ones that have fallen into disrepute. Muhammed the Holy Prophet, and the other saints of Islam had Divine support and celestial help but each man whether he be religious prophet or an intellectual like Ibn Khaldun who changes the previous values and customs of the dynasty is in a way the builder of a new dynasty and the founder of a new realm'.

Ibn Khaldun believed that he could restore the declining energies of the Maghreb by reviving in one stream the Greek reason of Aristotle's science of politics and the Greek self-knowledge of the causes of one's own historic fate with the militant faith and the frugal desert ethic of the early Caliphate. A militant Islam purged by his new science of superstitious ignorance, could conquer its lost empire. The weak, like the Berber peasant would become strong, and the strong, like the Bedouin herdsmen, would use their strength to maintain instead of undermining the state. The cities would devote themselves to productive crafts instead of to unproductive luxuries, and governments that did not seek first and foremost the protection of their own privileges but sought justice and the law of Allah, would not ruin the economy and let the neglected and oppressed countryside fall into decay.

Unless the régime is dominated by the religious law it is as predatory as any nomad marauders as the state looks with envy upon the wealth of its citizens. Only the gospel of Islam taught by the Holy Prophet was strong enough to transform the Arab and make him, while less bloodthirsty, more powerful even in military strength than before. Emerging out of the Arabian deserts the early Muslims for a short time created the good society of the early Caliphate but, as time went on, their wealth grew and they neglected the faith. Ibn Khaldun records that when these warriors first broke in on the old empires as conquerors they used the camphor which they found in the wardrobes of Persian treasure houses as salt in their dough. Soon they learned to hold weddings of perfect elegance but not how to keep their religious ardour from growing dull. To treat the religious demands of the jihad as a mere metaphor of ancient history was a sign of Islamic decadence. One day
Muslims would again ask the wind ‘to blow against unbelievers’ to conquer the Christian lands of Europe, but Ibn Khaldun’s great reflections on history ended with a warning.

Only militant Islam’s global conquest of the whole world would prevent the rise of new prophets and new states against it but he did not believe that even then a universal Caliphate would last forever. Time lessens on men’s works, and Muhammed expected the Caliphate to last for only thirty years after his death before it reverted to tyrannical monarchical rule. Ibn Khaldun could see no change in human life to arrest that cycle. In every new state, he said, as in the early Caliphate, the faith soon became a matter of mere routine ‘and begins to be taught in a dead way. What had once been a collective passion becomes a branch of formal learning and a profession. It begins to decay since as he said, ‘It should be known that the world of the elements and all it contains came into being and decays . . . Sciences grow up and they are wiped out’. The Prophet would arise, the world would be convulsed and after the years of glory would sink back to sleep again.

Ibn Khaldun expected that his new science would also one day be forgotten for that was the will of God. The fate of all who founded new regimes or reformed old ones was that ‘the dynasty is eventually destroyed. The nations around it push on to gain superiority over it. They then found a new dynasty of their own. And thus befalls what God has destined to befall.’

When society decayed and contracted in the Maghreb ‘Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed . . . it was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction and the world had responded to its call.’ Death calls to life and life answers that call. ‘The entire world is trifling and futile. It ends in death and annihilation’ wrote Ibn Khaldun, the medieval Muslim.

NOTES ON FURTHER READING