

Ibn Kahldun

Ibn Kahldun (Tunis, 27th May 1332 – Cairo, 17th March 1406)

The medieval scholar Edouard Perroy, in his book *Le Moyen Age* (PUF 1955), refers to the chapters devoted to the 14th century as covering "difficult times". The period was difficult for Christian Europe (the 100 years war, famine, the Plague) and also for the Moslem world – the dream of the unity of Islam was gone, and the Empire established by Mohammed and his successors was fragmented into a multitude of rival principalities and caliphates. The Plague had also wreaked damage. Withdrawal was well underway, and the Reconquista was gaining ground. To the east, Arab supremacy was being cut back by the irresistible advances of the Turks. Although this in fact extended the Moslem area, it was at the expense of Arab power.

It is in this rather morose atmosphere, which pervades his work, that 'Abd er-Rahman Ibn Khaldun was to write what is certainly one of the most important works ever written in Arabic, and also a pillar of world literature.

Ibn Kahldun was born to a prominent family belonging to the Moslem aristocracy in Spain which emigrated to Ifriqiya before the advances of the Reconquista. Ibn Kahldun became an orphan in Tunis, where his family was decimated by the Plague, and he was forced to discontinue his studies. However, throughout his long life, he seized every opportunity to gain knowledge and skills. For some fifty years he moved from one court to another across Maghreb and Mashriq, alternating between appointments to important posts and periods of disgrace, and even imprisonment. For instance we find him in Fes as the secretary of the Marinid sultan, then Ambassador for the sultan of Granada to the king of Castile, Pedro the Cruel, and later again a teacher in the great al-Azhar Mosque and the al-Qamhiyya madrasa in Cairo. Following the death of his wife and children in a shipwreck off Alexandria, he relinquished his functions as grand Qadi of the Maliki school in Cairo, and set off on a pilgrimage to Mecca. He encountered the Mongol conqueror Timur at the time of the siege of Damascus, and at the end of his life was once again grand Qadi of Cairo.

This eventful, or indeed adventurous life, often close to political and religious governing circles (which merge in Moslem lands) gave him a realistic or even pessimistic view of men, power and society. It also enabled him to acquire a vast literary, theological, historical, geographical, legal and philosophical culture that pervades his whole work.

This work, on which he embarked in the 1370s in the course of a voluntary retreat of three years, occupied all his time in the last years of his life. It comprises the vast *Kitab al'Ibar* (the book of lessons), which is a universal history, preceded by an autobiography and above all by his most important work, a veritable political anthropology the *Muqqadima* (Prolegomena) which he proudly (but rightly) considered to be a new science, his own invention, "the science of human society".

This suggests that Ibn Khaldun could be an ancestor of sociology. But in the *Muqqadima* there are also striking pages on political science, geography and even geopolitics, and a wide-reaching view of history (in Arabic historiography he is considered to be a historian). What he in fact presents is a social and political anthropology of the Arab-Moslem world, so that geographers can also see him as belonging to their ranks. He had an acute awareness of the relationships between societies and their environments – there are fascinating pages devoted to the differences between nomadic groups, rural societies and urban societies. His central theme is the 'umran, generally translated approximately as "civilisation" but which in fact, according to Abdesselam Cheddadi in his preface to the French *Pléiade* edition of the *Book of Lessons*, should be understood as meaning the fact of "settling" on the Earth, occupying it, caring for it, cultivating it, making it prosperous and fruitful, and building and setting up institutions. Ibn Khaldun thus distinguishes 'umran badawi, the "civilisation" of pastoral and rural societies, and 'umran badari, the urban societies. He gives consideration to political power, which, in pages that could recall Montesquieu, he thinks can only develop from an 'umran badari, where luxury and affluence, which are urban phenomena, prosper. Using his insightful observations of the Moslem states where served and with which he was well acquainted, he returns frequently to the notions of decadence and weakening of power. He also develops the idea of *assabiyyah* (cultural cohesion, solidarity) both a practice and a praxis, and a way of behaving and taking action that is the result of a very strong, exclusive sense of belonging to the group. Ibn Khaldun considers this to be one of the keys and driving forces of the history of Arab and Moslem societies, and it is still today an enlightening notion for the understanding of the Arab-Moslem world. Thus the *Muqqadima* contains powerful reflection on human, social, and political geography in the Arab and Berber world of the 14th century.

The *Universal History* that follows is less interesting for geographers, and sometimes unequal. However *Book III* (*History of the Arabs and Berbers in Occident*, that is to say in Morocco and Spain), is an essential source for the understanding of the history of these

peoples and the States they established.

Ibn Khaldun was a sincere Moslem, and held elevated religious and legal functions with considerable broadness of mind. All his knowledge, science and philosophy (although he did not like philosophers) was rooted in Greek rationality, not to say rationalism. He is clearly Aristotelian, makes explicit reference to the Stagirite, especially of course in chapter XXII in Book IV of the Muqqadima, "The science of logic", but also on numerous occasions throughout his work. He was also Hippocratic and Galenic, and he knew Plato, to whom he refers on several occasions.

A recent controversy (2007-8) arose between advocates of the transmission of Greek culture to the Christian Occident via the Arabs, and advocates of a much more direct filiation. This controversy is groundless with respect to Ibn Khaldun, who was completely unknown to Europeans until he was "discovered" by Silvestre de Sacy at the start of the 19th century. He had no influence on thought in the Renaissance or in the Age of Enlightenment. Today, however, it is impossible for a geographer interested in the history of ideas to neglect this major intellectual, a magnificent product of Arab civilisation before it declined for a long period into a decadence that Ibn Khaldun had quite literally foretold.

For Arabic scholars, there are several editions of the Muqqadima in Arabic. In French, in the Pléiade collection, there is a translation by Abdessalam Cheddadi, professor in Mohammed V university in Rabat, with a remarkable and highly enlightening preface. By the same author, in volume LVII of the journal of the Beirut Oriental Library, Saint-Joseph university, *Mélanges*, there is also a very relevant article entitled "scientific and philosophical tradition in the Muqqadima" (pp. 469-497), and in the same volume "The essential accidents of human social organisation in the Muqqadima of Ibn Khaldun" by Charles Butterworth, professor in the university of Maryland (pp.445-467). We can also note the great admiration of Yves Lacoste for Ibn Khaldun – it is he who made this great intellectual known to numerous geographers. It is thus no longer possible to plead ignorance of the work of one of the greatest minds in Medieval Arab culture, and even in thought in general.

Bibliographie