



3-2023

### Book Review: Robert Irwin. *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography*

Leland Conley Barrows

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Barrows, Leland Conley (2023) "Book Review: Robert Irwin. *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 88: No. 88, Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol88/iss88/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

**Robert Irwin. *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography*  
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018**

Reviewed by Leland Conley Barrows

Robert Irwin (b. 1946), a British historian, novelist, and essayist, became so enthralled by Arabic Muslim society, politics, language, literature, and culture that while reading modern history at Oxford University in the 1960's, he became a Muslim during his first summer vacation which he spent at a Sufi Alawi foundation in Algeria. In parallel, he developed a fascination for the Tunisian polymath, Wali al-Din 'Abd al Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) who has been variously described as the greatest Muslim intellectual, the greatest social scientist of the Middle Ages, the founder of Sociology and the critical study of history, and a precursor of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and the Laffer Curve. Ibn Khaldun, however, did not view history as a separate discipline, nor himself as a philosopher of history. Rather, he viewed himself as a devout Sunni Muslim and as such an interpreter of history, and his most famous work, the *Muqaddima* (Prolegomena), as 'an entirely original science' (p. ix).

Irwin states that the writing of *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography* was "the culmination of a necromantic pursuit.... [He had spent most of his life] communing with a man who [had] been dead for over six hundred years..." (p. 205). Irwin has not written a traditional biography, for doing so would be impossible given that the personal and human-interest details of Ibn Khaldun's life, essential for a traditional biography, are not available. Rather he has produced a free-ranging study of the ideas and influences that have flowed from Ibn Khaldun's most important written works, first the *Muqaddima* (Prolegomena), intended as an introduction to a second book, the *Kitab al-'Ibar wa diwan al-mubtada wa 'l-khabar* (The Book of Warning and the Collection of Beginnings and Historical Information) known by its shortened title as the *'Ibar*.

The *Muqaddima*, much of which Ibn Khaldun wrote without much in the way of available written sources over a period of four years in a remote desert fortress, (i.e., Qal'at Banu Salama, in Western Algeria), elaborates its author's philosophy of history and social development, particularly the cyclical nature of history. This so-called introduction over-shadows the *'Ibar*, the second and even vaster work, that Ibn Khaldun originally intended as a history of the nomadic Berbers and Arabs of North Africa that would confirm the principles laid down in the *Muqaddima*. Apparently the *'Ibar* only partially achieved its author's objectives even though it covers far more ground than a mere study of the Berbers and Arabs of North Africa, ending up as an attempt at universal history.

Regarding a much shorter third book, *Al-Ta'rif bi Ibn Khaldun wa rihlatihi sharqan wa gharban* (Presenting Ibn Khaldun and His Journeys in the East and the West), Irwin states that it "can be misleadingly described as an 'autobiography'" (p. 21).

It fails, he says, to include much in the way of “self-revelation” (p. xi) and reads more like a curriculum vitae than a biography (p. 101).

The *Muqaddima*, the most famous of Ibn Khaldun’s writings, is the one that many 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers have cited as containing modern elements that reflect not only history and sociology but also anthropology, ethnography, political science, economics (suggesting that Ibn Khaldun is a precursor of Karl Marx), and cyclical theories of history as also developed by Arnold Toynbee who viewed “the *Muqaddima* as ‘undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever been created by any mind in any time or place’” (p ix). Thus, Ibn Khaldun has been viewed as a pre-modern modern thinker whose ideas greatly transcend those of his 14<sup>th</sup> century Maghrebi and Cairene Islamic world.

Irwin gave himself the task of re-situating Ibn Khaldun within his own era and cultural/religious environment. Although Ibn Khaldun might have had flashes of modernity, he was nevertheless a devout Muslim with an unshakable belief that human events reflect God’s will, the purpose of human life being to prepare the individual for salvation in the next life. Thus, one must follow the *Shari‘a*. To study and to understand history including its cyclical nature is to better understand God’s will. Many modern commentators on Ibn Khaldun and writers inspired by him have not perceived his underlying religiosity or have deemphasized it.

Given the large number of books that have been written about Ibn Khaldun, why has Irwin decided to add yet another? His justification is that rather than trying to make the writings of Ibn Khaldun relevant to the modern world, he should make “modern writings relevant to him and his world.... It is precisely Ibn Khaldun’s irrelevance to the modern world that makes him so interesting and important” (p. xiii). Therefore, much of Irwin’s task has been to show the similarities and differences between the thoughts of a selection of modern thinkers and those of Ibn Khaldun, the assumption being that the modern thinkers, who were familiar with Ibn Khaldun, have more or less failed to see how traditional he was.

These thinkers have linked Ibn Khaldun to Vico, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Montesquieu, and Marx, among others. As for the modern thinkers themselves, Irwin cites the example of Arnold Toynbee’s influential twelve-volume *Study of History*, that also presents a cyclical view of history. He cites the influence of Ibn Khaldun in regard to Hamilton Gibb, Marshall Hodgson, Albert Hourani, Ernest Gellner and other distinguished students of Islam and Arabic and Berber history and society. If, however, Ibn Khaldun were in some ways a precursor to these 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals, then, it would seem obvious that he would have had flashes of modernity that would place him more or less ahead of his time even if, as Irwin states, he was a traditionalist in most respects.

There are limits. Irwin debunks the idea that because Ibn Khaldun placed monkeys just below humans in his Great Chain of Being, he has “preempted” Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*.

As a background to his presentation and discussion of ideas, Irwin offers his reader an aperçu of the turbulence of North African history during the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the threats to the stability of Mamluk-ruled Egypt. He describes Ibn Khaldun’s meetings with Tamerlane, at some risk to himself, outside the walls of besieged Damascus in 1401 and the subterfuge by which he persuaded Tamerlane to permit him to return to Cairo before he sacked Damascus. It was this turbulence and the insecurity that it engendered that probably provoked much of Ibn Khaldun’s pessimism in regard to the course of history. Arab dynasties were being supplanted in the West by Berbers, and in the East, by Turks. North Africa had apparently been more prosperous in previous times, particularly during the Roman period, than it was in his period. But also a source of Ibn Khaldun’s pessimism was his not too successful attempts to hold high office at Fez, Granada, Béjaïa, Tunis, and Cairo and the few periods of imprisonment to which he was subjected because he made the wrong political choices. Possibly the *Muqaddima*, the final version of which Ibn Khaldun completed a year before he died, was partly an attempt to explain to himself the reasons for his own political failures. This was also a purpose of his *Tar‘if*.

Although Ibn Khaldun criticizes nomads and nomadic society, he believes that they, being purer and better disciplined than sedentary people owing to the hardships of nomadic life, become the founders of new societies. Some of these societies become empires, like the Almohad Caliphate in North Africa which displaced the Almoravids, but then they decline and are eventually replaced because the sedentary life that they have adopted has led to decadence. Such was a major inspiration for Ibn Khaldun’s understanding of the cyclical nature of historical and societal development and of his pessimism. Although Irwin describes the methodology of the *Muqaddima*, he indicates that Ibn Khaldun could not prove that the principles of the rise and fall of societies set out therein actually corresponded to what he wrote in the *Ibar* about Berber and Arab Societies of North Africa (which were more transhuman than purely nomadic).

Ibn Khaldun’s key to what holds societies together is ‘*asabiyya*, sometimes translated as solidarity, which he views as an essential characteristic of a successful society. He has defined it in varying ways according to the specific characteristics of the human groupings that he is discussing. ‘*Asabiyya* may designate group solidarity, *esprit de corps*, patriotism, tribalism, and clannism depending on what is being discussed and the translation from Arabic to the target language. Ibn Khaldun admired the ‘*asabiyya* of the Mamluks, originally slave soldiers, who became a kind of military aristocracy and created a dynasty in Egypt (1250-1517). But many centuries later, *The Arab Human Development Report 2004* blamed ‘*asabiyya* for holding back the development of Arab society (p. 207).

True to his stated objective, Robert Irwin has resituated Ibn Khaldun within his era, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Islamic Maghreb and Egypt. He has displayed great erudition and a mastery of Arabic as well as the context of Ibn Khaldun's oeuvre, and its influence. Irwin's book, however, is difficult to follow, no doubt because his style is more that of a novelist than that of the writer of a historical monograph — what this “Intellectual Biography” really is.