Is Ibn Khaldūn "Obsessed" with the Supernatural?

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This article argues against the depiction of Ibn Khaldūn as someone whose preoccupation and credulity regarding mysticism or the occult diminish the rationalism and reformism of his thought, rendering it irrelevant to our concerns today. Instead, it argues that he consistently tries to steer his readers away from such pursuits by exposing them as fake when possible, or—in cases where their reality is attested to by unimpeachable religious sources—by highlighting the dangers they pose to both religion and state.

The celebrated historian and polymath Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) continues to provoke a wide variety of reactions and interpretations. Two recent books—Allen James Fromherz's *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times* (2010) and Robert Irwin's *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography* (2018)—add to a long tradition of scholarship that asserts, in the words of Aziz Al-Azmeh, "the total otherness of Ibn Khaldun with respect to the world of today in a manner consonant with the utter otherness of his time and culture in terms of this age and culture."[1] Like Al-Azmeh, moreover, both authors present their depictions of Ibn Khaldūn's "total otherness" as in some significant manner distinct from orientalist readings of the medieval thinker.[2]

Fromherz introduces his proposition of a "deeply non-modern aspect" to Ibn Khaldūn's thought by complaining of the scant scholarly attention paid to his "obsession with diviners and saints, with magical books [. . .] numerology, astrology, magic, and a whole cornucopia of seemingly strange and fantastic 'ologies' that fill his voluminous *Muqaddimah*."[3] Fromherz fails to pursue this line of inquiry himself, however, and his subsequent depiction reveals instead a "man of science" devoted to the "rules of logic" and steeped in the "tradition of Islamic philosophy and rationalism."[4] Rather, the nonmodern character of Ibn Khaldūn's thought is said to be evident "especially" in his "defense of [. . .] Islamic mysticism, or Sufism," and, secondly, in his preference—against the ancient Greek philosophers

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1. A. Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship: A Study in Orientalism* (London: Third World Centre for Research and Publishing, 1981), vi–vii. There are, of course, studies that offer more nuanced views of the universal relevance of various aspects of Ibn Khaldūn's thought. Examples include M. Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldûn's Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964); A. Cheddadi, *Ibn Khaldûn: L'homme et le théoricien de la civilisation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006); G. Martinez-Gros, *Ibn Khaldûn et les sept vies de l'Islam* (Arles, France: Sindbad, 2006); S. Say, *İbn Haldûn'un düşünce sistemi ve uluslararası ilişkiler kuramı* (Istanbul: İlk Harf Yayınevi, 2011); S. F. Alatas, *Ibn Khaldun* (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).

2. A. J. Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2010), 156–57, henceforth Fromherz; R. Irwin, *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018), xii, 150–51, 165–72, 193–94, 201–3, henceforth Irwin.

3. Fromherz, 5. For two relatively recent reviews of the subject, see M. Asatrian, "Ibn Khaldūn on Magic and the Occult," *Iran and the Caucasus* 7,1/2 (2003): 73–123; M. Melvin-Koushki, "In Defense of Geomancy: Šaraf al-Dīn Yazdī Rebuts Ibn Ḫaldūn's Critique of the Occult Sciences," *Arabica* 64,3–4 (2017): 346–403. Both present Ibn Khaldūn as generally hostile to occultism, a stance Melvin-Koushki, however, depicts as "reactionary" (p. 346).

4. Fromherz, 2, 116, 119.

as well as their Islamic successors such as Ibn Rushd—for tribalism over "civilization of the over-ripe urban variety."[5] His Sufism led Ibn Khaldūn to believe he could transcend the "dry, rational method" in favor of a mystical approach capable of finding "meaning behind the surface of events" and discovering "universal laws" of history and society "under the surface of mundane perception."[6] Tribalism prevented him from believing in "the progress of human history" and appreciating the "[c]ities, urbanism, monuments, structures, and written institutions" that "Western Europeans have assumed to be the prerequisite of true civilization."[7]

Irwin likewise asserts that "Ibn Khaldun was obsessed with the occult," ascribing the premodern "strangeness of his thinking" to his "preoccupation with occultism and futurology, as well as some of his bizarre scientific ideas."[8] To a greater extent than Fromherz, moreover, Irwin consistently emphasizes the mystical element in Ibn Khaldūn's education and training[9] and the irrationality of his scientific and historical analysis. Thus, while Fromherz affirms that some of Ibn Khaldūn's propositions—e.g., that the human spirit heats up when deprived of air or that sea monsters exist—appear "fabulous" in light of modern science, he also recognizes that given the state of knowledge in Ibn Khaldūn's time the "important point" is "not the validity" of this or that proposition, but the naturalistic and logical "method of reasoning" he applied.[10] Irwin, by contrast, makes no such allowances, accusing the medieval thinker of "weird science" because he believed that the rays of the sun become hotter the farther they travel from the sun or that plagues are caused by the corruption of air brought about by density of population.[11]

The single point relating to the supernatural on which Irwin adopts a more moderate stance than Fromherz is Ibn Khaldūn's relationship to Sufism. Whereas Fromherz casts doubt on the attribution to Ibn Khaldūn of a fatwa denouncing the Sufis and urging the destruction of their books by fire and water, Irwin ascribes it to a "hardening" of Ibn Khaldūn's attitude as a result of "encounters with heterodox mystics and charlatans in Egypt."[12] Irwin nevertheless ultimately agrees that Ibn Khaldūn was himself a Sufi and asserts that his entire "premodern and radically different" understanding of "societies and their histories" was "one in which causation is underpinned by God's will and the primary purpose of social organization is religious salvation."[13] Finally, Irwin also finds that Ibn Khaldūn's focus on tribes and "tribal loyalty" prejudiced him "unreasonably" against the comforts of urban life, blinding him to the realization that "living in luxury can be conducive to health and contentment."[14] As a result, Irwin ends up echoing Fromherz's conclusion that Ibn Khaldūn lacked a modern conception of progress: he "did not expect the world to get any better" and therefore "set out no program of reform."[15]

How valid are these assertions? To what extent is Ibn Khaldūn really so divorced from modern conceptions and concerns that he can make Robert Irwin feel that "I am encounter-

5. Fromherz, 5, 47, 128, 138–39.
6. Fromherz, 115, 124–25.
7. Fromherz, 122, 140.
8. Irwin, 119, 206.
9. Compare the characterizations of Ibn Khaldūn's most renowned teacher by Fromherz (p. 45) vs. Irwin (pp. 137, 197).
10. Fromherz, 118, and, more generally, 116–18.
11. Irwin, 16–17.
12. Fromherz, 126–27; Irwin, 115.
13. Irwin, xiii, 110.
14. Irwin, 207, 208.
15. Irwin, 9, 75.

ing a visitor from another planet"?[16] Most generally, of course, a fascination with the occult or supernatural does not suffice to banish Ibn Khaldūn from the circle of scientific inquiry any more than does Isaac Newton's preoccupation with alchemy and biblical interpretation or Wolfgang Pauli's preoccupation with parapsychology. But Fromherz and Irwin both argue that Ibn Khaldūn's alleged obsession with such subjects is salient because it underlies his social and political theories, the very core of his "science" of history.

In order to assess this argument, the objectionable elements among Ibn Khaldūn's observations need to be divided into two categories. The first is comprised of simple errors, such as his understanding of how diseases spread or of the physical characteristics of stars—errors that rest on a naturalistic, not supernatural, reasoning consistent with the level of knowledge at his time and can therefore not be said, *pace* Irwin, to impugn his scientific method. The second category involves the various occult subjects treated by Ibn Khaldūn. In order to get at his underlying orientation here, it is again useful to subdivide this category: into those phenomena that are identified as real in authoritative Islamic sources, such as the Quran and hadith, and those that are not. The latter group—variants of numerology and letter magic, such as *ḥisāb al-nīm* or the *zā'irja*, for example—he generally dismisses as mere tricks.[17] The religiously attested phenomena, by contrast, Ibn Khaldūn cannot but accept as real: "The existence of any branch of knowledge forbidden by religious law (*shar'*) cannot be denied. Thus, the reality of magic is confirmed with its proscription."[18] Irwin himself repeatedly stresses this imperative for Ibn Khaldūn, noting that he "accepted the reality of the monstrous races of Gog and Magog [. . .] [p]resumably [. . .] because their reality and apocalyptic menace was [*sic*] attested to in the Qur'an" and that "No believing Muslim could deny the immanence of magic in the world" since "the Qur'an attested to the reality of sorcery." A similar imperative applied to astrology: "Ibn Khaldun could not deny its validity out of hand, since it seemed to receive support from the Qur'an."[19]

With such phenomena, Ibn Khaldūn's consistent strategy is to focus instead on their deleterious consequences. Thus, sorcery and the use of talismans are described as so "harmful" that their practitioners "should be killed."[20] Astrology "does harm to human culture" because when it occasionally and accidentally does come true it erodes public faith in both "religion (*dīn*) and state (*duwal*)."[21] Alchemy is economically and politically harmful because it threatens to undermine the value of gold and silver currency, "the very backbone of everyone's wealth."[22] In no instance does Ibn Khaldūn promote such practices; the thrust of his entire discussion is to urge his readers to forsake them.

16. Irwin, xiii.

17. *Al-Muqaddima*, tr. F. Rosenthal, 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 1: 238, 245 (chap. 1, "Sixth Prefatory Discussion"); 3: 183, 227 (chap. 6, sec. 28). Henceforth I will cite Rosenthal's chapter, section, and page number (but not volume) as follows: *M* 6.28: 183, 227. I have occasionally amended Rosenthal's translations, based on the Arabic text in *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1981).

18. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifā' al-sā'il li-tahdhīb al-masā'il*, ed. Abū Ya'rub al-Marzūqī (Tunis: al-Dār al-'Arabiyya li-l-Kitāb, 1991), 220. All subsequent citations of the *Shifā'* refer to this edition. While I have generally relied on the English translation in Youmna A. Adal, "Sufism in Ibn Khaldūn: An Annotated Translation of the 'Shifā al-Sā'il li-Tahdhīb al-Masā'il'" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1990), I have frequently (including here) amended it. On the reality of magic, see also *M* 6.27: 159.

19. Irwin, 21, 119, 120, 135. On Ibn Khaldūn's "ambivalent" or "equivocal" views on astrology, see respectively Asatrian, "Ibn Khaldūn," 110–13 and Melvin-Koushki, "In Defense of Geomancy," 380–81. See also *M* 1.6: 206, 226; 6.31: 258–67.

20. *M* 6.27: 156, 159.

21. *M* 6.31: 262–63.

22. *M* 6.32: 270, 277.

Ibn Khaldūn pursues the exact same strategy when it comes to Sufism. First, he defines Sufism as the branch of religion concerned with the inner life, the well-being of the soul, and salvation in the hereafter—in contrast to jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which is concerned with external behavior, the implementation of devotional and legal strictures, and well-being in this world.[23] Then he identifies three levels of Sufism or spiritual struggle (*mujāhada*). The first two involve the effort to internalize the teachings of Islam and to cultivate personal righteousness, and neither has anything to do with the supernatural. This was the Sufism of the most virtuous early Muslims. Only later, after the passing of the founding generation, was a third level introduced: the gnostic struggle to go beyond sense perception in order to uncover (*kashf*) and apprehend the divine through various ascetic disciplines and ecstatic experiences.[24]

After isolating this mystical component of Sufi practice, Ibn Khaldūn acknowledges its religious validity and the reality of the supernatural perceptions it can afford. Likening the extreme retreat from worldly concerns it typically entails to "artificial death," he cites the Prophet Muḥammad's urging of "Die before you die" and points to unimpeachably pious Muslims who chose this path, "segregating themselves and severing all attachments from their hearts."[25] As a result, Ibn Khaldūn has to admit that it is possible for Sufis to "behold divine worlds that a person subject to the senses cannot perceive at all" and that they may even "perceive many events before they happen."[26]

In the end, however, Ibn Khaldūn emphasizes the harmful consequences of this path. As with magic, astrology, and alchemy, Ibn Khaldūn's real concern is with the threat it poses to the public, common good, which it does in two ways. Politically, the extent to which extreme asceticism represses worldly human drives deprives the polity of some of its most potent motivators for effective action. "They are natural dispositions and each one is created for a benefit: the suppression of desire (*shahwa*) cannot but lead to the destruction of humanity from hunger or sexual abstinence; the extirpation of anger (*ghaḍab*) cannot but lead to man's annihilation through inability to defend against an oppressor."[27] Intellectually, supernatural pursuits undermine the belief in natural causality necessary for logical inquiry and rational behavior: "The man who walks into fire on the basis of the fact that God made the fire cool and safe for Abraham and says [. . .] 'God will protect me from it' is a fool, like the one who drinks poison [. . .] just because Khālid Ibn al-Walīd did and was not harmed. The possible does not become impossible and the impossible possible just because the natural order may be violated by way of an [extraordinary] miracle or divine blessing."[28]

Ibn Khaldūn therefore goes as far as he can to discourage his readers from the pursuit of Sufi supernaturalism. In addition to the harm it causes to human civilization in general, he stresses the risks for its practitioners, devoting a significant portion of his main treatise on Sufism to the dangers involved in abandoning one's natural grounding in hopes of seeing God: "many Sufis [. . .] have been suddenly bewildered by the lights of His manifestation, when the veils were removed; they were drowned in an ocean of annihilation. Some died on the spot [. . .]. Some were struck with madness. [. . .] Other Sufis remained staring at the object of their vision, motionless, until they died."[29] The entire treatise is suffused with such words as "dangers," "perils," and "traps," and Ibn Khaldūn exhorts his readers to heed how

23. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 180, 181.
24. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 204; *M* 6.16: 77, 81.
25. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 199, 226, 229.
26. *M* 6.16: 81.
27. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 195.
28. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 241.
29. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 192; see also 199–200.

even renowned Sufi masters warned that "this state should be reached [. . .] only in due time, namely, in the hereafter."[30]

Ibn Khaldūn further argues that the supernatural insights gained by true Sufis are in fact unwelcome byproducts of their efforts to cultivate inner piety and righteousness: "Whatever supernatural knowledge or activity is achieved by the Sufis is accidental and was not originally intended."[31] In reality, "the early Sufis [. . .] had no desire to remove the veil and to have such (supernatural) perception. [. . .] Whenever they had a [supernatural] experience, they turned away and paid no attention to it. Indeed, they tried to avoid it. They were of the opinion that it was an obstacle and a tribulation."[32] At one point, Ibn Khaldūn goes so far as to say that whereas the first two levels of Sufi struggle are obligatory and permissible respectively, the third supernatural level, "which is that of unveiling, is, in our view, utterly reprehensible to the point of being prohibited, or even more."[33]

Finally, since he cannot in fact prohibit outright a practice with such religious legitimacy, Ibn Khaldūn devotes the bulk of his treatise on Sufism to mitigating its harmful effects. He does so by insisting that the Sufi who seeks to pursue this third path must—unlike the case with the first two, nonsupernatural levels of struggle—be guided at each step by a personal mentor, a qualified *shaykh*.[34] The role of the *shaykh* is to discipline and direct the Sufi's journey in order to prevent harmful personal or political consequences. Ibn Khaldūn accordingly compares his role to that "of a physician to the ailing or the just imam to the anarchic community."[35] Just like a skilled physician, the qualified *shaykh* is able to diagnose the particular needs of the individual follower and to prescribe the correct treatment, for each follower is unique and requires an instruction that would not be appropriate for another.[36] Just like a virtuous ruler, the qualified *shaykh* is able to discern what is most needful in a given situation and to "differentiate between the harmful and the beneficial" in each case.[37] The qualified *shaykh*, in short, tailors his guidance to maximum effect in order to keep each follower personally grounded and politically responsible. Without such a guide, the spiritual seeker must renounce the quest.[38]

Far from celebrating it, then, Ibn Khaldūn's treatment of Sufism—at least in its supernatural aspects—is to contain and minimize the harmful consequences of a "reprehensible" practice he cannot simply deny. And to what end? Ibn Khaldūn makes it very clear in his *Muqaddima*: "All laws are based on the effort to preserve culture," by which he means the development of the "sciences and arts resulting from that ability to reflect by which the human being is distinguished from animals."[39] Those sciences and arts, in turn, become "perfected" and "numerous" only in the context of advanced urban civilization (*ʿumrān ḥaḍarī*).[40] Thus, to conclude that Ibn Khaldūn prefers tribal to urban life because he worries about the loss of certain necessary qualities in the transition from primitive culture (*ʿumrān badawī*) to advanced civilization, and tries to find remedies for this loss, is to misunderstand his rationalist and worldly agenda at the most fundamental level.

30. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 193. According to Adal (333 n. 121), Ibn Khaldūn is citing Ibn al-ʿArabī here.
31. *M* 6.16: 222.
32. *M* 6.16: 102.
33. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 206.
34. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 223–24.
35. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 175.
36. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 233, 234.
37. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 227.
38. Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 243.
39. *M* Preliminary Remarks: 80; 1.Preface: 84.
40. *M* 5.16: 347; 6.8: 434.