

The Story Behind the Stamp: Balian 1818, May 27, 2006



Abd al-Rahman Ibn Mohammad is generally known as Ibn Khaldun after a remote ancestor. His parents, originally Yemeni Arabs, settled in Spain, but after the fall of Seville they migrated to Tunisia. He was born in 1332 in Tunisia, where he received his early education and where, still in his teens, he entered the service of the Egyptian ruler Sultan Barquq. His thirst for advanced knowledge and a better academic setting soon made him leave this service and migrate to Fez. This was followed by a long period of unrest marked by contemporary political rivalries affecting his career. This turbulent period also included a three year refuge in the small village of Qalat Ibn Salama in Algeria, which provided him with the opportunity to write *Muqaddimah*, the first volume of his world history that won him an immortal place among historians, sociologists and philosophers. The uncertainty of his career still continued, with Egypt becoming his final abode: here he spent his last 24 years. He lived a life of fame and

respect, marked by his appointment as the Chief Malakite Judge and lecturing at the Al-Azhar University, but envy caused his removal from his high judicial office as many as five times.

Ibn Khaldun's chief contribution lies in the philosophy of history and sociology. He sought to write a world history prefaced by a first volume aimed at an analysis of historical events. This volume, commonly known as *Muqaddimah* or "Prolegomena", was based on Ibn Khaldun's unique approach and original contribution and became a masterpiece in literature on the philosophy of history and sociology. The chief concern of this monumental work was to identify psychological, economic, environmental and social facts that contribute to the advancement of human civilisation and the currents of history. In this context, he analysed the dynamics of group relationships and showed how group-feelings, *al-'Asabiyya*, give rise to the ascent of a new civilisation and political power and how, later on, its diffusion into a more general civilisation invites the advent of a still new *'Asabiyya* in its pristine form. He identified an almost rhythmic repetition of rise and fall in human civilisation, and analysed factors contributing to it. His contribution to history is marked by the fact that, unlike most earlier writers interpreting history largely in a political context, he emphasised environmental, sociological, psychological and economic factors governing the apparent events. This revolutionised the science of history and also laid the foundation of *Umraniyat* (Sociology).

Apart from the *Muqaddimah* that became an important independent book even during the lifetime of the author, the other volumes of his world history *Kitab al-I'bar* deal with the history of Arabs, contemporary Muslim rulers, contemporary European rulers, ancient history of Arabs, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Persians, etc., Islamic History, Egyptian history and North African history, especially that of Berbers and tribes living in the adjoining areas. The last volume deals largely with the events of his own life and is known as *Al-Tasrif*. This was also written in a scientific manner and initiated a new analytical tradition in the art of writing autobiography. A book on mathematics written by him has not survived.

Not only was he the forerunner of European economists, such was his intellect that he is also considered the undisputed founder and father of the field of sociology. His *Muqaddimah*, the treatise on human civilisation in which he discusses at length the nature of the state and society, is essentially the first volume of a larger treatise dedicated to the history of the Arabs and those states and peoples that had played, in Ibn Khaldun's view, a historically significant role. The historian Arnold Toynbee said of the *Muqaddimah* that it is "undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place".

The twentieth-century economist and political scientist Joseph Schumpeter argues that Ibn Khaldun is without doubt the true father of economic science. In fact, it is worth comparing him with the man whom many economists might regard as the father of modern economic theory, Adam Smith. When one considers the sheer number of original ideas and contributions across so many areas of economic thought that Ibn Khaldun invented we can be left in absolutely no doubt that he is more worthy of the title.

Ibn Khaldun discovered a number of key economic notions several hundred years before their official births, such as the virtues and necessity of a division of labour (before Smith), the principle of labour value (before David Ricardo), a theory of population (before Thomas Malthus) and the role of the state in the economy (before John Maynard Keynes). He then used these concepts to build a coherent dynamic system of economic theory.