

## ABDEL RAHMAN IBN-KHALDUN

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



There is a tendency to think of sociology as exclusively a comparatively modern, Western phenomenon. In fact, however, scholars were developing sociological ideas and theories long ago and in other parts of the world. One example is Abdel Rahman Ibn-Khaldun.

Ibn-Khaldun was born in Tunis, North Africa, on May 27, 1332 (Alatas, 2011, 2014; Faghirzadeh, 1982). Born to an educated family, Ibn-Khaldun was schooled in the Koran (the Muslim holy book), mathematics, and history. In his lifetime, he served a variety of sultans in Tunis, Morocco, Spain, and Algeria as ambassador, chamberlain, and member of the scholars' council. He also

spent two years in prison in Morocco for his belief that state rulers were not divine leaders. After approximately two decades of political activity, Ibn-Khaldun returned to North Africa, where he undertook an intensive five-year period of study and writing. Works produced during this period increased his fame and led to a lectureship at the center of Islamic study, Al-Azhar Mosque University in Cairo. In his well-attended lectures on society and sociology, Ibn-Khaldun stressed the importance of linking sociological thought and historical observation.

By the time he died in 1406, Ibn-Khaldun had produced a corpus of work that had many ideas in common with contemporary sociology. As described in his *Muqaddimah*, Ibn-Khaldun was committed to the scientific study of society, empirical research, and the search for causes of social phenomena. He devoted considerable attention to various social institutions (for example, politics, economy) and their interrelationships. He was interested in comparing primitive and modern societies.

One particular topic that Ibn-Khaldun studied was state formation. He argued that "the rise and decline of North African states lay in the essential differences in social organization between pastoral nomadic and sedentary societies" (Alatas, 2011:15). Relying on the concept of *'asabiyyah*, Ibn-Khaldun developed a cyclical theory of state formation. *'Asabiyyah* refers to a group's feeling of solidarity or social cohesion. It comes from a shared knowledge of common descent. Nomadic groups had a high level of *'asabiyyah* and, therefore, "could defeat sedentary people in urban areas and establish their own dynasties" (15). However, once nomadic groups settled, they would lose *'asabiyyah* and become vulnerable to "attack by another group of nomads with superior *'asabiyyah*" (15). There are interesting similarities and differences between Ibn-Khaldun's ideas and later sociological theories. On the one hand, Ibn-Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* anticipates the concept of social cohesion in the work of theorists like Emile Durkheim, 400 years later. On the other hand, Ibn-Khaldun's description of historical cycles strongly contrasts with the focus on linear and progressive social development assumed by many of the classical theorists.

Ibn-Khaldun did not have a dramatic impact on classical sociology, but as scholars in general, and Islamic scholars in particular, rediscover his work, he may come to be seen as being of greater historical significance.