2. Ibn Khaldûn and the practice of method

Quantitative relationships in the Muqaddima[1]

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> In the homes of the wealthy, where tables are decked in abundance, crumbs and grains scatter across the floors, attracting swarms of ants and other insects. In the cellars, rats and cats scurry about. Above the rooftops, the sky teems with birds, who eat and drink their fill before flying off. But around the homes of the poor, where food is scarce, you will find no insects crawling, no birds in the air, and not a rat or cat in the cellar.[2]

With this witty observation, Ibn Khaldûn demonstrates a proportional link between human prosperity and the number of animals that benefit from it. This brings us right to the first topic of this article, *proportional relationships*, or: how Ibn Khaldûn connects the quantities in which phenomena from different domains appear. Connections like the one in this example can be found throughout the *Muqaddima*, spanning a wide range of fields: from demography and politics to economics and culture.

The second topic I would like to discuss – '*small and large*' – also revolves around quantities: specifically, how Ibn Khaldûn compares or connects phenomena that exist on different scales. To give an example: when a relatively small empire begins to decline, the process of disintegration follows the same pattern as it would in a vast empire.

Why focus on these subjects, and why spotlight the quantitative dimensions of Ibn Khaldûn's work? To clarify that, we need to take a closer look at the theoretical and methodological foundations of the *Muqaddima* and examine how later scholars have responded to it.

Up to now, Ibn Khaldûn's work has mainly been explored in two ways: by social scientists and philosophers interested in its theoretical aspects, and by historians who treated the *Muqaddima* as a rich source of information about North African history.[3] Both his theories and his empirical observations have rightfully earned admiration. Of course, this attention has also brought criticism and, inevitably, sparked debates among commentators and interpreters. But to truly understand how a researcher worked, we need to follow him to the point where theory and observation intersect – where theory becomes practice, and practice shapes theory.

When trying to grasp the methodological side of Ibn Khaldûn's work, it is tempting to lean on the reflections he sets out before his major historical writings.[4] Those have often been relied on, and for good reason. They are insightful and clarify many valuable methodological guidelines. Yet what he outlines there only partially covers the theory-driven research practice found in the *Muqaddima*.[5] To really uncover how Ibn Khaldûn approached his research, we need to look deeper.

The core of the *Muqaddima* is built around concepts and theories. To recognize similarities in phenomena across vast regions and long periods, Ibn Khaldûn developed a range of concepts. Examples include *'umrân badâwa* (nomadic-agrarian society), *'umrân hadâra* (sedentary-urban society), *jâh* (prestige), and *'asabiyya* (group solidarity).[6] Alongside these, the

Muqaddima puts forward theories that explain social processes. One especially influential theory is his two-phase model: power first emerges among nomads, is then consolidated in cities, and ultimately declines there as well. Ibn Khaldûn uses his concepts and theories to organize and explain what he observes: the raw facts – the complex reality of society. In turn, he tests these ideas against empirical evidence gathered from observation.

As I read through the *Muqaddima*, I gradually noticed that Ibn Khaldûn repeatedly relies on certain signature methods in applying his theoretical tools. Again and again, I found him pointing out proportional relationships in his collected data or drawing parallels between phenomena that appear on different scales. I decided to trace this pattern. Both of these approaches, as already mentioned, have a quantitative aspect – and that turns out to be a hallmark of Ibn Khaldûn's approach to scholarship.[7]

Recognizing proportional relationships and connecting phenomena that take place on different scales serve as a sort of methodological 'middle ground' – bridging the gap between his concepts and theories on the one hand and purely empirical research on the other. This opens up a way to grasp the complex interplay between his broad, overarching theories and his empirical findings. By following him in this line of investigation, I try to get a sense of how he observed and reasoned, how he made elusive subjects open to inquiry, and what his methodology – explicit or implicit – might have involved. In short, I am seeking to glimpse the reflective side of his research practice. In doing so, I hope to clarify what I find so inspiring, methodologically, about Ibn Khaldûn's way of working.

Proportional Relationships

The term 'proportional relationships' here refers to connections between the quantities of two or more types of phenomena. Ibn Khaldûn makes statements along the lines of, 'when phenomenon A occurs to a greater (or lesser) degree, the same holds true for another phenomenon, B.' This represents the simplest kind of proportional relation.[8] Moreover, the *Muqaddima* features more complex connections involving more than two variable factors.

Here is a relatively simple relationship: there is a proportional link between the size of a population and the number of soldiers it can provide.[9] Ibn Khaldûn uses this idea to challenge older historical accounts that mention extraordinarily high numbers of soldiers in certain campaigns. He argues that, based on the limited populations those armies would have been drawn from, those figures are simply not possible.

Ibn Khaldûn also describes a proportional connection between population density in a region or city and the degree of labour division and specialization. In places where a nomadic-agrarian lifestyle prevails, population density is low, while cities are densely populated. The level of labour division and specialization in crafts follows suit: little among nomads and farmers, much more in cities.[10] Building on this, Ibn Khaldûn notes that larger cities see a greater variety of trades practiced than smaller ones.[11]

Ibn Khaldûn also observes a proportionality between the power of rulers and the level of cultural flourishing in their realms. Everything that contributes to the culture of a city or region, he claims, is linked to the extent of the ruler's authority over that place.[12] Large cities and impressive monuments are the achievements of strong dynasties.[13] The splendour that accompanies a dynasty's wedding celebrations mat-

ches its wealth and power.[14] The same goes for the gifts distributed at such events. For instance, the Umayyads usually gave camels to their guests, while the more lavish Abbasids handed out large sums of money, luxurious garments, and richly adorned horses. Ibn Khaldûn notes that such differences between dynasties that were still close to a nomadic way of life and those that had become urbanized, recur frequently throughout Islamic history.[15]

At the level of dynasties, as well as among the social classes beneath them, there is a clear pattern: the more prestige someone commands, the more income they can receive – often without having to work for it themselves. The reason is simple: people are more willing to put in effort for someone who holds high prestige, often without expecting payment, hoping to benefit from the protection and influence such a prominent figure can offer. Prestige (*jâh*), a central concept in Ibn Khaldûn's thinking,[16] is unevenly distributed across every society, forming a scale from the highest to the lowest, from abundance to none. Monarchs hold the greatest share; members of their courts enjoy it too, though to a lesser degree. Certain merchants possess some prestige, while others do not. Those at the bottom of the prestige ladder have none at all and miss out on its benefits, relying entirely on the fruits of their own labour to make a living.[17]

When it comes to economics, Ibn Khaldûn also observes proportional relationships. The busier a city is, the more income it generates, which, he notes – much to the delight of any free-market enthusiasts – leads to greater prosperity for everyone living there. Once again, he points to a sliding scale: in a wealthy city, every social group fares better: judges, merchants, craftsmen, small shopkeepers, emirs, and soldiers alike. For example, he says a *qâdî* in Fez is more affluent

than a *qâdî* in other North African cities like Bougie, Tlemcen, or Ceuta. Even beggars in Fez are better off. They ask for money to buy sacrificial animals for festivals, as well as luxuries like meat, butter, ready-made meals, or spices. In Tlemcen or Oran, such requests would be met with sharp rebuke. Prosperous cities attract more migrants than poorer ones. Similarly, as Ibn Khaldûn notes in the opening quote, wealthy households attract more insects, rats, cats, and birds than poor ones.[18]

Another intriguing connection: when a civilization has long vanished from the earth and only underground remains bear witness to its former glory and culture, the amount of treasure found there is proportionate to the size of that civilization. So, this amount varies from country to country.[19]

Let us pause here to consider what kind of method might underlie the examples discussed so far. Ibn Khaldûn seems to proceed like this: first, he organizes phenomena within a particular field (for example, underground relics); then he does the same for another field (lost civilizations); and finally, he draws a connection between the two sets of data.[20]

Now, let us look at a more complex example: a relationship between the quantity of one phenomenon and two other fluctuating factors. According to Ibn Khaldûn, the number of people supporting a rising dynasty directly shapes both the size and the longevity of the empire that dynasty creates.

When a dynasty conquers a territory, it must have enough followers to occupy the entire region, including its borderlands, and enforce its authority everywhere. Pushing expansion beyond this point leaves the borders exposed and vulnerable. As Koesen and Poppinga translate:

> Dynasties hold greater strength at their core than at the edges. Once a dynasty reaches its furthest boundary, it weakens and can no longer expand. It is similar to rays of light [...] or the ripples that spread across water after a stone is tossed in.[21]

He points to the massive expansion of the Arabs in the early days of Islam as an example; this was possible because of their large numbers.[22] Given the military resources they had at the time, they could not conquer any more territory. So they decided to abandon that idea. Later dynasties would also run up against this same limitation.[23]

The second connection, specifically the link between the size of the initial support base that brings a dynasty to power and the longevity of the resulting state, is discussed by Ibn Khaldûn in the following paragraph.[24] A state that rises with the backing of a large population is destined for a long existence. The reasoning goes like this: having a large following leads, as mentioned, to a vast empire. Such an empire has many borderlands, and over time, the erosion of central authority tends to begin at the edges. But because the periphery is so wide, it takes a very long time before the process of disintegration reaches the core of the empire. Throughout this period, the dynasty endures.

Beyond these proportional relationships, Ibn Khaldûn describes two or three even more complex patterns. He weaves the proportional links he observes in social life into broader arguments where different phenomena interact in a sequence. In this way, he analyses the rise and fall of dynasties as cumulative processes, with various factors reinforcing each other and causes becoming intertwined. You might call these spirals. They come in two versions: upward spirals, where different factors strengthen one another (like

the consolidation of power and everything that comes with it), and downward spirals, where reinforcing factors trigger decline and breakdown. A prime example of the latter is Ibn Khaldûn's masterful analysis of the decay that, he argues, inevitably brings all dynastic states to ruin.[25] The argument unfolds along three lines.

1. The power and prestige of the military elite begin to fade after the establishment of a dynastic state. Such a state is founded by a group whose members are willing to give everything for victory – even their lives. But once power has been seized, one among them monopolizes authority and all the benefits that come with it. The former comrades-in-arms are now only motivated to support the state out of self-interest.

2. Those who belong to the ruling elite gradually become accustomed to a life of luxury, which requires them to spend more and more money. Their expenses soon exceed their income, and many end up in financial trouble. When the ruler asks them to help fund military campaigns or, if they cannot pay, seizes their property, their fortunes collapse even further. As the ruler's supporters grow weaker, the ruler is forced to step in and provide financial aid. This money has to come from taxes, but raising taxes is not easy. Even when the ruler does introduce new taxes, it only brings in a little more revenue, while the demand for subsidies keeps growing with the rising luxury. So the ruler has to cut spending on the army. If this cycle repeats itself, the dynasty's state becomes weaker and weaker. Combined with the declining moral fiber of the elite, the state becomes ripe for collapse. Neighbouring countries and previously subjugated groups seize the opportunity to attack and bring down the state.

3. The mindset of the ruling elite shifts as they seek the peace and stability that comes with established

rule. Those who get used to this lose the traits of desert dwellers – like courage, boldness, and a sense of direction – and become defenseless city folk. In these circumstances, the only way the dynasty can hope to survive is by relying on an army of foreign mercenaries. Sometimes, a dynasty manages to hold onto power with troops recruited from nomadic regions. Ibn Khaldûn gives a few examples of this: the Turkish regime in Egypt and Syria, and the Almohads in the final phase of their rule.

This chapter is built on three main arguments: how the elite respond mentally to the establishment of a dynasty, the financial, military, and psychological effects of increased luxury, and finally, how the pursuit of peace impacts the military elite and their efforts to compensate for the resulting weakness. Altogether, these trends create a downward spiral.

What stands out in this analysis is the wealth of concise insights, the smooth shifting of viewpoints, and the clear, analytical focus that always keeps the bigger picture in mind.[26] Each of the three arguments explores a range of mechanisms. Some fall under what is called a 'proportional relationship' – for example: greater luxury among the ruling elite brings higher costs for that group. Others are part of the two-phase model, such as the decline of the 'nomadic' group identity and its impact on the mentality of the elite. There is also a mechanism at play in the dynamics between states: when one state grows weaker, it upsets the balance of power, paving the way for the downfall of the weakest.

The sequence of mechanisms described here – as well as the previously mentioned simple proportional relationships – suggests that Ibn Khaldûn aimed for more than just pointing out these connections; he was searching for causes and effects. The opening sentence

of Chapter II reads: 'Differences between groups of people arise from the way they make their living.' Later, he states: 'Anyone involved in farming or herding is compelled to live in the countryside because the pastures, fields, and grazing lands there offer more space than in or around the cities. They have no other option. [...] When living conditions improve [...], they are able to rest more, allowing them to focus together on things that are not strictly necessary.' Ibn Khaldûn concludes: 'This demonstrates that both the lives of farmers and nomads, as well as that of city dwellers, are natural and necessary.'[27] Even when he does not say it outright, it is clear that he is implying causal connections. He argues that there are inevitable sequences at play. For instance, a region's population can only provide a certain number of soldiers. To control a territory of a certain size, you need a specific number of troops. Division of labor requires a certain population density. The production of luxury goods is only possible if there is sufficient demand. These kinds of proportional relationships appear to be recurring patterns.[28]

When he discusses more complex relationships, it is clear he assumes a web of intertwined causes.[29] He weaves ecological, economic, cultural, psychological, moral, and supernatural factors into his analysis—sometimes all together, sometimes just a few. For him, causality is a tangled, layered affair.

Another question arises concerning the quantities involved in the quantitative relationships Ibn Khaldûn highlights. He often works with gradations. Differences in wealth between cities, the unequal power of rulers, material prosperity unevenly spread among city dwellers, social prestige within a society – all these are sliding scales. Yet, the types of gifts given by the Umayyads (camels) and those by the Abbasids (urban

luxury goods) fall, according to Ibn Khaldûn, into two unmistakably separate categories – an example found more than once in the *Muqaddima*. Two distinct organizing principles are at work. The sliding scales are organized by the idea of 'more or less,' while the divisions are based on 'yes or no.'[30]

So, sometimes Ibn Khaldûn describes quantitative differences as a continuum, sometimes as a clear split. What led him to one choice or the other? I suspect he always picked the structure that offered the clearest overview and the best way to ask deeper questions, especially when facing a lot of information. This shifting between dualities and sliding scales is typical of his approach. He uses the same method on a grand scale when comparing his broad concepts of 'rural society' and 'urban society.' At the start of chapter 11, where he introduces these ideas, he sometimes refers to two distinctly different types of society, pointing out major differences in mindset between nomadic-agricultural groups and urban populations.[31] But in other cases, he uses a sliding scale, seeming to see these as two ends of a single spectrum. Nomadic, agricultural, and urban ways of living form a continuum, stretching from caves and tents, past huts and simple houses of wood, clay, or stone, all the way to grand, tall homes and palaces.[32]

What stands out in a description like this is the blend of something very concrete – all those different forms of housing – and an abstraction that captures this variety: a sliding scale. It reminds me of the appeal of early Mondrian, who, on his way to abstraction, painted trees that had become bold forms but were still unmistakably trees. In Cézanne's still-lifes and landscapes, too, you can see both the tangible world and the geometric abstractions distilled from it.

'Small' and 'Large'

Ibn Khaldûn often connects phenomena of limited scope to those that are broader or part of larger developments. He explores these relationships in various ways. These kinds of connections, which I will discuss next, are just as typical of his focus on quantitative aspects as the proportional relationships described earlier.[33] For clarity, I distinguish between different types of connections here, though in practice, they are not strictly separated categories.

Supporting examples. The sections where specific situations or processes are described in detail serve as supporting examples within the overall structure of the Muqaddima. They help Ibn Khaldûn to. reinforce and clarify his arguments.

In the previously mentioned chapter about the decline of dynastic states, he explains that a dynasty which has lost its internal manpower reserves can sometimes stay in power longer by hiring mercenary troops from outside. He then illustrates this principle on a smaller scale with a few examples. For instance, he shows how Turkish rulers in Egypt and Syria relied on the Mamluks: 'At one point, the Turkish rulers recruited their infantry and cavalry from Mamluks whom they had brought into the country specifically, as these newcomers were braver and better able to endure hardship than the descendants of earlier Mamluks, who had grown up in comfort and under the ruler's protection.'[34]

Following the same approach – first establishing a general principle, then illustrating it with concrete examples – Ibn Khaldûn explains that the earliest Arab-founded cities failed because the sites were chosen based on criteria suitable for nomadic encampments, not for lasting urban settlement. He then lists some of these unsuccessful cities: Kairouan, Kufa, Basra, and

Sijilmasa[35]

In both instances, the specific details are meant to back up the broader argument presented before. At the same time, Ibn Khaldûn pursues a deeper methodological aim. In the first example, he contrasts the resilience of nomads with the lack thereof among sedentary people. In the second, he highlights the major differences between nomadic and urban lifestyles. This is how he further supports his theory about the two types of societies.

Sign of a Stage. Sometimes, Ibn Khaldûn interprets a phenomenon as an indicator of the stage a larger entity is currently experiencing. In other words, what might seem like a minor detail can actually signal that something bigger is at play.[36] In a chapter discussing how rulers' accessibility to their subjects changes over time, he describes the following development. At first, during the nomadic phase, the leader is approachable by everyone. But as the rule becomes more hierarchical, one must first go through an intermediary blocks questions. At a later stage, the ruler is almost completely cut off from the outside world. Eventually, there may come a point where the sovereign is ruler in name only, while someone else holds the real power. At that point, the figurehead is kept away from everyone. A chamberlain shields them entirely from the outside world. And, as Ibn Khaldûn notes, this is a sign that a dynasty is nearing its end.[37]

There can also be positive signs pointing toward future progress. When a clan and its leader are truly ready – morally and politically – to take power in a region, it's shown by their moral superiority. It's not particularly impressive to be courteous to rivals and equals, since, according to Ibn Khaldûn, that usually comes from political pragmatism and self-interest. But

when members of a clan treat people who pose no threat to their power – like devout individuals, scholars, merchants, and outsiders – with genuine respect, that's a real mark of virtue. It shows that faith and the common good are at the heart of their actions, which is a strong indicator that they are fit to govern others. God decrees that such a clan will come to rule 'because it already displays all the signs of it.'[38] On the other hand, if God intends to strip a clan of power, this virtue is the first thing to disappear. According to Ibn Khaldûn, when you notice this happening, you can be certain that the clan will soon vanish from the political stage.[39]

The way Ibn Khaldûn uses signs to identify a particular stage in historical developments is much like how palaeontologists use guide fossils to date a layer of earth.

'Zooming in'. A statement or claim about a larger geographic area is further detailed on a smaller scale. Ibn Khaldûn draws his conclusions from data from the entire Arab-Islamic world (and sometimes beyond). But when it comes to the Maghreb – a region he knows best – he repeatedly adds more specific details.

In his analysis of the link between prosperity, urban civilization, and the formation of states, Ibn Khaldûn zooms in on Ifrîqiyya and the Maghreb. Ifrîqiyya – which covers present-day Tunis and the bordering part of Algeria – thrived under the rule of the Fatimids in the tenth century, while the Maghreb (now Morocco and western Algeria) enjoyed moderate wealth during the era of the Almohads in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Yet, as he observes, much of the Berber civilization has now faded away. Today, aside from the coastal regions and the nearby hills, the landscape is mostly desert and emptiness.[40]

Another vivid account centres on the industries of the Maghreb. Ibn Khaldûn notes that they mainly produced woollen textiles and processed leather, thanks to the local abundance of raw materials.[41] This was, of course, due to the region's rich livestock farming. What's interesting about this detail is how it fits with the recurring theme in the *Muqaddima* – the division between the mostly nomadic-agricultural Maghreb and the urbanized Near East, reflecting Ibn Khaldûn's two societal models. At the same time, he subtly refines this broad classification by highlighting how the urban economy closely interacts with the nomadic-agricultural one, softening the contrast between the two types of society.

Partial process – total process. Ibn Khaldûn often elaborates on general social theories by exploring specific components within them. A key aspect of his approach is connecting these individual processes to the larger development of society as a whole. By examining the total process and its parts, he clarifies his broader perspective.

One example among many is his discussion of how writing spread, set against the background of the divide between nomadic farmers and city dwellers. In rural areas, writing was rare or absent – just as it had been among the Arabs when they were still nomads. By contrast, in cities, written communication became increasingly common as urban culture took deeper root. This pattern held true for Arabs who settled in cities, as they adopted writing more and more.[42]

Numerous other instances of this approach – where partial processes are linked to the larger picture – can be found in the third chapter of the *Muqaddima*. Institutions and offices unique to dynastic rule, like the chancery, mint, and customs, first emerged during the

transition from a nomadic to a settled society, and then continued to evolve. Much of the discussion in Chapters V and VI about crafts, the arts, and sciences – which Ibn Khaldûn considers almost entirely urban achievements – consists of case studies that highlight particular facets of urban culture.[43]

Generally, he maintains a certain chronological and geographic method. His periodization often goes as follows: the pre-Islamic Arabs, Muhammad and the first four caliphs, the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the dynasties of smaller states, and the Turkish rulers. Geographically, he moves from east to west – covering the Islamic east first, then the Islamic west, frequently breaking down both regions further: Iraq, Egypt, Maghreb, Andalusia, and so on.

Analogy between the small and the large, where similar patterns emerge at different scales. One example is Ibn Khaldûn's insightful analysis of how both large and small realms break apart into several, smaller states.[44]

In every dynastic state, the ruler is determined to maintain power, even if it means eliminating potential rivals within his own family. As a result, those rivals often flee to hard-to-reach border regions. Once an empire enters the stage of decline, it begins to crumble as members of the royal family branch out from the edges and establish rival domains. It's also quite common for other noble families to found their own states in this way. This cycle repeats itself time and again. That's how the Abbasid Empire fragmented: first, Andalusia was torn away by the Umayyads; then Idris – a refugee from the East who claimed descent from the Prophet – set up his own rule in the Maghreb. After that, the governors of Tunis broke away from Baghdad, and later the Fatimids conquered Tunis and expanded

onward into Egypt and the Middle East. The Abbasid realm continued to lose more territory to competing dynasties in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and even farther east. Ibn Khaldun then revisits this same pattern – this time on a smaller scale – to describe the fate of various North African kingdoms. He repeatedly identifies a similar process: as a ruling dynasty's power fades, internal disputes or competition from other families lead to the splitting of the empire.

He draws a similar comparison when discussing how dynastic states and autonomous cities evolve. When a state falls apart, cities are left to fend for themselves. Typically, the city's elite seize control. This sparks rivalries between different clans and factions within the city. If one patrician manages to defeat his rivals, he establishes sole rule and tries to make it hereditary. Ibn Khaldun points out that even these small-scale dynasties follow the same pattern as those ruling vast empires: on a smaller scale, they display the same signs of youth and old age as the great states.[45]

Here is one final example. Ibn Khaldun applies this same approach – spotting recurring patterns at different levels – in his famous generational model. This time, he describes a cycle that applies to rulers as well as prominent families in both tribal societies and cities. Every dynasty, he says, goes through cycles of rise, peak, and decline. The founder – the first generation – is the conqueror, full of the qualities of a desert nomad: courage, vigour, and alertness. His direct successor has not experienced the struggle to gain power firsthand, but still remembers it and tries to emulate it. The third generation is further removed and can only imitate the founder second-hand. Finally, the fourth in line assumes power is his by birthright and will last forever. That's where decline sets in.[46] Then comes the telling

comparison: 'This is the fate of kings, and likewise of the "houses" [distinguished families] among the tribes, the emirs, and all those with a strong sense of group solidarity [meaning those who can count on the backing of a powerful clan]. The same applies to the "houses" within the cities.'[47]

Much has already been said about whether and to what extent the connections described here should be considered as evidence in Ibn Khaldûn's reasoning. Let me summarize. Supporting examples are used to back up and clarify broader claims. Ibn Khaldûn relies on telling details as indicators to determine the stage a larger entity is in. What I have called 'zooming in' is his way of applying an idea or argument about a bigger area to a smaller, more specific region. Through his exploration of partial processes, he sheds light on his understanding of society's overall development, while also explaining the smaller parts through his larger perspective. When comparing big and small, he identifies similar patterns that appear in processes of different scales. It seems Ibn Khaldûn employed all these methods, believing that insight into a part can support understanding of the whole, and vice versa. This depth of insight increases with frequent shifts in viewpoint, moving from 'small' to 'large' and back again. Whether consciously or intuitively, he may have made use of this, just as he did when alternating between 'division' and 'gradual scale' in his earlier analysis.

One thing that stands out in all these approaches is Ibn Khaldûn's keen sense of proportion and his attention to differences in scale when phenomena take place. Thinking in terms of scale and scale differences is a key part of Arab Neoplatonic philosophy. At its core is the idea of a cosmic order in the

macrocosm, which repeats itself at various scales, even in the world below the heavens. The concept borrowed from the Greeks, that a relatively small entity – a microcosm – reflects a larger one – a macrocosm – was very common in Arab intellectual circles. Ibn Khaldûn, familiar with these ideas, may have been influenced by them when developing his thoughts about 'big' and 'small' within society.[48]

Old questions, asked anew

You can turn to Ibn Khaldûn's work to gather detailed information about the medieval Islamic world, as many historians have done. Alternatively, you might focus on the more abstract aspects – what we might call the "system" – as philosophers and social theorists often do. My own approach lands somewhere between these perspectives, honing in on the interplay between them. One key trait of Ibn Khaldûn's methodology is his tendency to draw proportional connections between different phenomena. I have also shown how he sometimes organizes his observations into clear-cut divisions, and other times arranges them along a sliding scale. He frequently interprets these connections in terms of cause and effect, and it is evident that he is open to the idea of multiple causes. When working on a small scale, he lets big-picture questions guide his exploration, and he tests his broader conclusions by checking them against what he observes in the details. Throughout his analyses, one thing consistently stands out the skillful way he weaves together empirical observation and abstract thinking.

Finally, I would like to share a few thoughts on two ongoing debates that Ibn Khaldûn's work repeatedly sparks.

The first centres on how much his perspective on

society and its history was shaped by his faith, and how much was focused on worldly matters – meaning, with people and their relationships at the heart. The sources I rely on are the texts I gathered for my research. This is a selective approach: I chose these texts for their historical and sociological value, not for their theological content; none are taken from the chapters of the *Muqaddima* that deal with religious sciences. However, these texts from my collection have hardly, if ever, been included in the discussion so far, though I believe they can shed new light on the subject.

In this section, I noted that Ibn Khaldûn often – sometimes openly, sometimes more subtly – treats proportional relationships as direct causes. Many of the causes he identifies are grounded in the realities of this world. In his framework, God only appears as the 'prime mover': having determined the patterns that guide social processes once and for all, God does not intervene further. Based on this, some have gone so far as to call Ibn Khaldûn a sociological deist. It's also frequently argued – most recently by Cheddadi – that Ibn Khaldûn distanced himself from a strictly religious (Islamic) view of society, adopting instead a largely secular perspective.[49] Most of the passages from the *Muqaddima* that I have cited support this interpretation.

However, there are other passages that have rightly been highlighted to show that Ibn Khaldûn did, in fact, judge many matters through the lens of his faith—for example, his views on the caliphate and various branches of knowledge.[50] And in one of the texts quoted above, Ibn Khaldûn attributes to God the power to raise certain clans to prominence or remove them from power.[51] As Meuleman correctly points out, Ibn Khaldûn recognized not just natural and social forces, but also the influence of supernatural powers.[52]

The second debate I would like to address concerns the extent to which Ibn Khaldûn was indebted to philosophical systems versus his role as an empirically minded social scientist. Once again, I draw on the texts I have assembled, acknowledging that my selection is one-sided, but also noting that these passages have rarely been included in this discussion. The various excerpts I cite in my article make it abundantly clear that Ibn Khaldûn was an eager and gifted observer with a scientific, empirical mindset. When he uses abstractions, they do not come across as mere deductions or ideas derived from other ideas; instead, they seem to arise through an ongoing dialogue with his observations.

Scholars have often pointed out the striking parallels between Ibn Khaldûn's concepts and research methods and those of Western thinkers like Vico, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. His blend of empirical and conceptual approaches supports the idea that these similarities go beyond the surface, hinting at a deeper affinity in scholarly practice. Still, there are also passages in the *Muqaddima* that have been rightly noted by those – Mahdi in particular – who see traces of a philosophical legacy in his work.[53]

How can all of this be reconciled? There is little point in ignoring these contradictions. You cannot simply counter the 'faith-based' passages with the 'secular' ones, or vice versa. The same goes for the 'philosophical' versus 'empirical-theoretical' sections.

But that is not necessary if you approach the *Muqaddima* as a fundamentally diverse work. Ibn Khaldûn devoted decades to its creation, which alone could have shifted his aims over time.[54] It would also be worthwhile to take a closer look at how his evolving ideas interacted with his ongoing historical research in the *Kitâb al-'ibar* throughout the different stages of his

life. In the end, one might ask whether his objectives in the *Muqaddima* remained constant from start to finish.[55] After all, this work explores a wide range of fields, each shaped by its own traditions – some more rigid than others – traditions that even an original thinker like Ibn Khaldûn could not, or did not wish to, fully escape. That is why the *Muqaddima* offers such striking blends of tradition and innovation, constantly surprising and captivating its readers.

LITERATURE

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NOTES

[1] Heleen Koesen and Djûke Poppinga repeatedly and generously shared their vast knowledge of the Muqaddima with me. Maaike van Berkel introduced me to a wide range of facets of Islamic-Arabic culture and history. Farouk Achour kept my curiosity alive with fresh insights about the Maghreb over coffee at the neighbourhood espresso bar. Remke Kruk and Abdesselam Cheddadi offered invaluable advice. Bert Demyttenaere contributed some intriguing ideas. Anne-Ruth Wertheim reviewed earlier drafts and helped refine my arguments and phrasing.

[2] Muq.IV, II; Dut. p. 230; Eng. II, pp. 275; Arab. II, pp. 238-239.

[3] Theoretical: for instance, Sorokin, *Social and cultural dynamics*, Toynbee, *A study of history*, and Gellner, Muslim society (On him: Driessen, 'Ibn Khaldun onder antropologen', in this volume). For historical data: for example, Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale*, and Brett, in various articles in his in his *Ibn Khladûn and the medieval Maghreb*. The literature I have encountered on Arabic historiography and on Ibn Khaldûn as a historian has yielded little directly relevant to the subject of this article. As far as I know, only Khalidi and Cheddadi have engaged with it to some extent. See notes 8, 33 and 36 for that. Rosenthal, *A history of Muslim historiography*, and idem, 'Translator's introduction', and Robinson, *Islamic historiography*, do not address this topic. But the body of literature on Ibn Khaldûn is vast and much of it is written in languages I do not read.

[4] This refers to the foreword of the entire historical work, the *Kitâb al-'ibar*, its introduction, and the introduction to the *Muqaddima* (which itself is an extended introduction to the *Kitáb al-'ibar*). Dut. pp. 35-42, 43-64, 65-77; Eng. I, pp. 6-14, 15-68 and 71-85; Arab. I, pp. 2-8, 8-55, 56-68.

[5] In this regard, my research into the work of the prominent contemporary medievalist Jacques Le Goff may have made me a bit wiser. I found that, while his programmatic articles

offer many interesting ideas, they only faintly reflect the richness of his actual research, especially in theoretical terms. See Künzel, 'Op weg naar de mentaliteits-geschiedenis.'

[6] See Cheddadi, *Ibn Khaldûn*, pp. 469-470.

[7] His focus on quantity is also evident in his observations about time and space, as well as the durability and scale of the phenomena he studied. I hope to explore this further in future research.

[8] Khalidi notes that, according to Ibn Khaldûn, causes in terms of size and complexity are proportionate to the size of the events they cause (*Arabic historical thought*, p. 227; *Classical Arab Islam*, p. 120), which connects to what is further explored here.

[9] Muq. Introduction I; Dut. pp. 44-47; Eng. I, pp. 16-21; Arab. I, pp.9-13.

[10] Muq. II, 1, 28; Dut. pp. 96–97; Eng. I, pp. 249–250, 308–310; Arab. I, pp. 221–222, 276–277.

[11] Muq. IV, 20; Dut. pp. 246–247; Eng. II, pp. 301–302; Arab. II, pp. 265–266.

[12] Muq. III, 13; Dut. pp. 149–150; Eng. I, p. 351; Arab. I, p. 313.

[13] Muq. III, 16; Dut pp. 153–154; Eng. I, p. 356; Arab. I, pp. 317–318; Muq. IV, 3; Eng. II, pp. 238–239; Arab., II, pp. 205–206. See also Van Leeuwen, 'Ibn Khaldûn en de islamitische stad,' in this volume.

[14] Muq. III, 16; Eng. I, pp. 359–360; Arab. I, p. 320.

[15] Muq. III, 13; Eng. I, pp. 350–351; Arab. I, pp. 312–313.

[16] Cheddadi, *Ibn Khaldûn*, pp. 386–389.

[17] Muq. V, 5,6; Dut. pp. 259–260; Eng. II, pp. 326–328, 328, 330; Arab. II, pp. 287–288, 289, 290–291.

[18] Muq. IV, 11; Dut. p. 230; Eng. II, p. 275; Arab. II, pp. 238–239.

[19] Muq. V, 4; Eng. II, p. 325; Arab. II, pp. 285-286.

[20]

[21] Muq. III, 7; Dut. p. 135; Eng. I, p. 328; Arab. I, pp. 291-292.

[22] He uses this argument – the greater the initial support, the greater the empire – during a conversation with the

Mongol ruler Timur Lenk, certainly to flatter the man who held his fate at that moment, but possibly also because he genuinely believed in the future of Timur's empire (Ibn Khaldûn, 'Autobiographie', p. 237).

[23] Muq. III, 7; Dut. pp. 134-135; Eng. I, pp. 327-330; Arab. I pp. 291-293.

[24] Muq. III, 8; Dut. pp. 136-137; Eng. I, pp. 330-332; Arab. I, pp. 293-295.

[25] Muq. III, 11; Dut. pp. 139-141; Eng. I, pp. 339-343; Arab.I, pp. 302-305.

[26] Othewr examples of such spirals: Muq III, 41, 45; Dut. Pp 206-211; Eng. II, pp. 103-111, 118-124; Arab. II, pp. 93-100, 108-113 and Muq. IV. 11, 18, 19; Dut. Pp. 227-230, 237-242, 242-245; Eng. II, pp. 271-276, 291-297, 297-301; Arab. II, pp. 234-239, 255-261, 261-265.

[27] Muq. II, 1; Dut. pp. 96-97; Eng. I, p. 249; Arab. I, pp. 220-221; italics are mine (R.K.)

[28] There is a direct connection between Ibn Khaldûn's ideas on causality and his innovative historical approach: he argues that to distinguish what could or could not have happened, it is essential to understand both the causes behind social processes and how those causes operate. For further reading, see Van Berkel, 'Onder historici,' in this volume.

[29] Meuleman, 'La causalité dans la *Muqaddimah*', p. 116; this was also discussed in his 1978 thesis, *De causaliteit in de Muqaddimah*, p. 15.

[30] This last point was noted by Bert Demyttenaere.

[31] For instance, see Muq. II, 4-6; Dut. pp. 100-103; Eng. I, pp. 253-261; Arab. I, pp. 225-232.

[32] Muq. II, 1-2; Dut. pp. 96-99; Eng. I, pp. 249-252; Arab. I, 220-223.

[33] Cheddadi, *Ibn Khaldûn*, pp. 470-471, argues that Ibn Khaldûn substantiates his broader conclusions by examining specific topics, often presented in 'monographs.' From my perspective, he seems to group under 'monographs' just about everything I address as several different approaches to linking the 'small' and the 'large.'

[34] Muq. III, 11; Dut. p. 144; Eng. I, p. 342; Arab. I, p. 305.
[35] Muq. IV, 5; Dut. p. 224; Eng. II, pp. 247-248; Arab. II, pp. 213.
[36] Khalidi, *Historical Thought*, p. 229, discusses this category of phenomena as 'indicators (*dalâ'il*), which one might refer to as symptoms,' with two examples from the *Kitab al-'ibar* given in footnote 86.
[37] Muq. III, 42; Dut. pp. 199-201; Eng. II, pp. 111-113; Arab. II, pp. 100-103; italics by me, R.K.
[38] Muq. II, 19; Eng. I, p. 294; Arab. l, p. 262; italics mine, R.K.
[39] Muq. II, 19; Eng. I, pp. 291-295; Arab. I, pp. 259-262.
[40] Muq. IV, 14; Eng. II, pp. 282-283; Arab. II, pp. 246-247. See also Muq. IV, 17; Eng. II, pp. 350-351; Arab. II, pp. 310-311, a masterful overview of the region's history. Further examples include Muq. V, 16, 17; Dut. pp. 266-267; Eng. II, pp. 348-349, 350-351; Arab. II, pp. 308-309, 310-311 and Muq. VI, 7; Eng. II, pp. 426-433; Arab. II, pp. 376-383.
[41] Muq. V, 20; Dut. 268-269; Eng. II, pp. 353-354; Arab. II, pp. 313-314.
[42] Muq. V, 29; Eng. II, pp. 377-387; Arab. II, pp. 338-346.
[43] For example, treatises about the navy (in Muq. III, 32; Eng. II, pp. 37-46; Arab. II, pp. 32-40), banners, coins (both in Muq. III, 34; Eng. II, pp. 50-52 and 54-60; Arab. II, pp. 44-46, 47-53), architecture (Muq. V, 24; Eng. II, pp. 357-363; Arab. II, pp. 317-324), calligraphy (Muq. V, 29; Eng. II, pp. 377-391; Arab. II, pp. 338-349), education (Muq. VI, 7; Eng. II, pp. 426-433; Arab. II, pp. 376-383 and Muq. VI, 38; Eng. III, pp. 300-305; Arab. III, pp. 260- 264), poetry (Muq. VI, 59; Eng. III, pp. 412-480; Arab. III, pp. 359-433).
[44] Muq. III, 43; Dut. pp. 201-204; Eng. II, pp. 114-117; Arab. II, pp. 103-106.
[45] Muq. IV, 21; Dut. pp. 247-249; Eng. II, pp. 302-305; Arab. II, pp. 267-269; for the translation, I rely on Rosenthal.
[46] Muq. II, 14; Eng. I, pp. 278-282; Arab. I, pp. 247-250.
[47] Muq. II, 14; Eng. I, p. 280; Arab. l, p. 249.
[48]Remke Kruk brought this to my attention. It would be worthwhile to explore this line of thought further and compare Ibn Khaldûn's ideas with how Neoplatonic

concepts play out in other fields. On the use of Neoplatonic ideas in magic, see Kruk's article, 'Ibn Khaldûn en de occulte wetenschappen,' in this volume. For a parallel in natural philosophy, consider Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, p. 91, as well as Kruk's introduction to that work, p. 24.

[49] Cheddadi, *Ibn Khaldûn*, p. 472.

[50] For more on this, see Muq. III, 23-26; Dut. pp. 169-181; Eng. I, pp. 385-428; Arab. I, pp. 342-376, and Weststeijn, 'De status van de droomuitleg,' in this volume.

[51] Muq. II, 19; Eng. I, pp. 291-295; Arab. I , pp. 259-262.

[52] Meuleman, 'La causalité dans la *Muqaddimah*', pp. 124-126.

[53] Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldûn's philosophy of history*. The contrast between the 'philosophical' and the 'empirical-theoretical' aspects of Ibn Khaldûn's work might not be as stark as suggested here, if, in fact, he was influenced by the previously mentioned Neoplatonic ideas. In that case, philosophical thought could have enriched both the conceptual framework and empirical analysis.

[54] For the developmental stages of the *Muqaddima*, see Cheddadi, 'Notice.'

[55] Van Berkel, 'Onder historici,' in this volume, and idem, 'Ibn Khaldûn, a critical historian at work,' pp. 257-261, argues that in some passages, Ibn Khaldûn, true to his new historical method, subjected the role of officials to historical-sociological analysis, while in other sections – guided by different traditions – he idealized them. One might also wonder whether the 'encyclopedic' sections in chapters III, V, and VI, the expositions on various offices, crafts, and sciences, were sometimes developed much further than was strictly necessary for supporting his method.