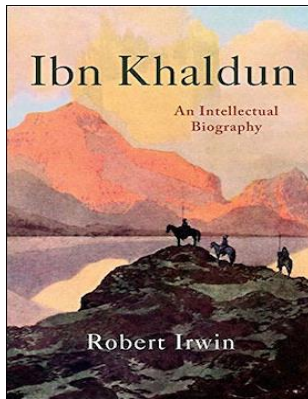




Ibn Khaldun

Robert Irwin's Compelling Intellectual Biography



British medievalist Irwin, a well-known critic of Edward Said, takes us to fourteenth-century North Africa where the Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun wrote his *Kitab al-Ibar*, *Book of Lessons*, whose first volume, *al-Muqaddima* stands as a unique example of a universal history. Irwin examines Ibn Khaldun's life, times, writings, and ideas.

The author describes Ibn Khaldun as guided by events, the Qur'an, Shari'a, and teachers such as al-Abili and al-Mas'udi, "the imam of the historians." He watched the plague of 1348 take his parents and recorded the death of his wife and five daughters.

Born in Tunis, Ibn Khaldun survived as a drifter among Arabs and Berbers from Granada to Cairo. He was a politician as well as a teacher and writer, but the book explores the many reverses in his career and his missed chances to win a position where he might sway rulers. Irwin agrees with scholars who have suggested that Ibn Khaldun penned his universal history to explore why he was a political failure. He also believes that Ibn Khaldun was a Muslim jurist and theologian of the strict Maliki school, which may explain his disdain for occultism as it might carry veiled Shiite messages for disruptive politics.

Ibn Khaldun was, in modern terms, a historical sociologist; he used the term *asabiyya*, عصبية, meaning to be bound by same interest or opinion over five hundred times in *al-Muqaddima*, evoking the lives of Bedouins, bound by loyalty, bonds of solidarity, and reinforced by religion. His famous cyclical theory of history, based on his reading of early Islamic Arab conquests and Roman and Greek empires, claimed that it took four generations from Genesis until doom. He reasoned that given this brief span, every dynasty might fear an early fall. This anticipated similar but much later theories by Giambattista Vico and Arnold Toynbee.

Irwin believes that what made Ibn Khaldun unique was his unmatched ability to reason abstractly and to generalize about social and historical phenomena. He appropriately sums up Ibn Khaldun's writing with a saying of the Prophet Muhammad: "Be in this world as if you were a stranger and a passing traveler."

Irwin's book is an exciting exploration of Ibn Khaldun's writings. Elegantly told, it offers new insights on his ideas about "man, the being who has the ability to think and reflect."

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

Robert Irwin: *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 272 pp.

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