

Recalling the Tunisian Polymath

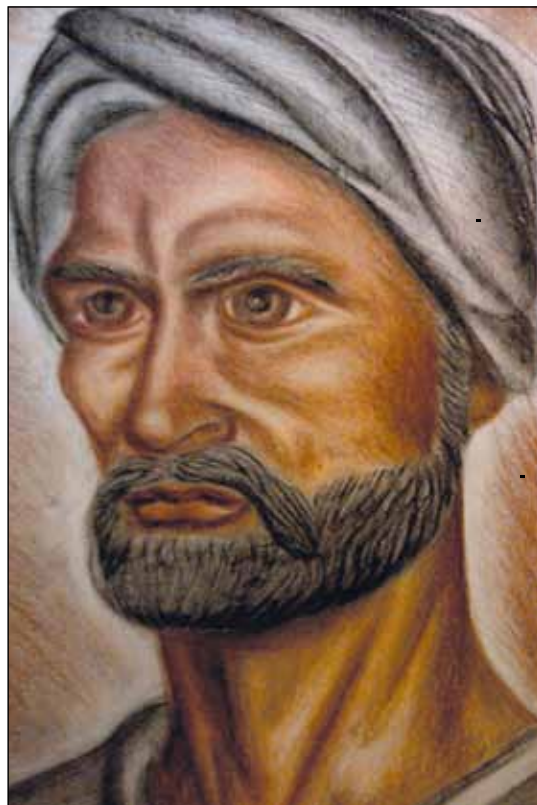
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As Tunisia enters a new era in its history, it must not forget the life and ideas of its greatest ever thinker. Ibn Khaldūn, the 14th century ‘son of Tunisia’, is often considered by many as one of the greatest polymaths of all time. Unlike most grand scholarly figures in history he was both a thinker and a doer. He led professional careers as a judge, political advisor, diplomat, professor and military strategist, but also lived the life of a scholar-adventurer, making intellectual contributions to a wide range of fields including politics, economics, sociology, cosmology, history, theology, geography, language, poetry and philosophy. An extensive traveller, he is widely considered to have been one of the founders of social science as a scholarly discipline as well as one of the world’s greatest ever historiographers. His philosophy greatly influenced some of the great thinkers of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. Yet in the West, he is little known.

Living in one of mankind’s most turbulent centuries, he observed at first hand – or even participated in – such decisive events as the birth of new states, the fearsome Mongol invasions, the Hundred Years’ War, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, the decline of Byzantium, the Black Death epidemic and the demise of the glorious Andalusian dynasty at the hands of the Christian reconquest. Born in 14th century Tunis to a family of Andalusian migrants, Ibn Khaldūn was trained as a theologian from a young age, much like most other Muslim scholars of the time, but soon joined the court of the ruler of Tunis as a calligrapher and administrator. The next 25 years for Ibn Khaldūn would be a political rollercoaster, filled with exile, escape, imprisonment, and betrayal, and with frequent emigration to and from various places around North Africa and the Middle East. His political skill became widely sought after, but his constant switching of alliances caused much scepticism and distrust from envious competitors and paranoid rulers. His career



Left: Ibn Khaldūn is considered a Tunisian national treasure



Right: Statue of Ibn Khaldūn in Tunis

as a judge was successful but tumultuous – he would be appointed and removed on six different occasions in different cities across the region.

One anecdote from his exploratory life is especially indicative of his genius. During the siege of Damascus by Mongol ruler Timur (Tamerlane), Ibn Khaldūn was appointed military strategist to defend the city against a notorious Mongolian rampage. As the fall of Damascus became inevitable, he had heard from rumours that Timur, while being a ruthless conqueror, had a liking for history and scholarship. During the siege, Ibn Khaldūn decided to take his chances to woo Timur and one night climbed down the city walls alone using a rope and entered Timur's tent. Impressed by his courage, social skills and knowledge, Timur negotiated with Ibn Khaldūn favourable terms of surrender for Damascus and even offered him a job as his court historian! Ibn Khaldūn – no doubt very politely – declined.

Ibn Khaldūn finally settled down to use his practical insights and acquired wisdom to develop one of the greatest volumes of comprehensive history ever written – the *Muqaddimah*. A polymathic tour de force, it skilfully synthesised elements of philosophy, theology, economics, political theory, sociology, natural science and geography, in order to explain the rise and fall of civilisations. This encyclopaedic masterpiece was famously hailed by British historian AJ Toynbee as “undoubtedly the greatest work of its

kind that has ever been created by any mind in any time or place”. It was certainly much ahead of its time.

What can modern day, post-revolution Tunisia take from the extraordinary life and mind of its foremost national treasure? Firstly, Tunisia must aspire to reclaim its old place as an intellectual and cultural hub for the region, based around the iconic institution from which Ibn Khaldūn himself graduated – the *Zaytuna Mosque*. Moreover, its system should encourage its youth to explore different fields to allow them to contextualise their environment and make sense of who they are as a people. One of Ibn Khaldūn's main sociological concepts was the *Asabiyyah*; a unique form of social solidarity or ‘group consciousness’ that he claims has kept societies and civilisations together throughout human history. He argues that no society can achieve anything – survive or conquer – unless there is a collective and deep-rooted internal consensus about its aims. He also emphasises the necessity of a strong, just and legitimate leadership. This must all be noted by the authors of the constitution as well as policy-makers in post Revolution Tunisia. The sense of common purpose and solidarity that defined and then brought about the Revolution must continue. The *Asabiyyah* of the Tunisian people must prove to be sustainable if the country is to reinvent itself in a way that will be recorded with distinction in tomorrow's history books. E

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Ibn Khaldūn was a graduate of the Zaytuna mosque in Tunis