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Revisiting Ibn Khaldun's Discourse on Knowledge Transmission in Islam: A Critical Analysis of Arab and Non-Arab Contributions

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Abstract:

Ibn Khaldun stated in his discourse in Chapter Forty-Three of Book Six in the Muqaddimah that the bearers of knowledge in Islam were mostly non-Arabs[1], despite the civilization and refinement achieved by the Arabs. In this sociological inquiry, our objective is to rigorously assess the validity of this assertion by subjecting it to systematic critical discourse analysis. The aim is to determine whether the claim can be substantiated or must instead be challenged and refuted, thereby clarifying the extent of its potential inaccuracy. This assessment will be grounded in a detailed examination of the selected corpus, which serves as the analytical dataset identified in the aforementioned reference.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Sociological Inquiry, Ibn Khaldun's Assertion, Knowledge Bearers in Islam, Arab Civilization.

Introduction:

The Khaldunian discourse occupies a central place in the study of the social and cultural structures that shaped the trajectories of knowledge formation in Islamic civilization. Among the most debated issues is his statement that "the bearers of knowledge in Islam were mostly non-Arabs," a claim that goes beyond mere historical description to constitute, at a deeper level, a sociological representation of the division of intellectual labor within the medieval Islamic society, and of the symbolic relations between Arab and non-Arab groups. This perspective cannot be approached as a purely individual opinion; rather, it should be understood as a discourse that reflects the conditions of knowledge production in its historical context and redraws the boundaries between center and periphery within the cultural sphere of that period.

Building on this premise, the present study seeks to interrogate the discursive structure of this claim by employing the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis to uncover the mechanisms of meaning-making and the manifestations of symbolic power in Ibn Khaldun's construction of the position of

[1] Ibn Khaldun, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. The Muqaddimah. Edited and studied by Ahmad Al-Zuʿbi. Dār Al-Arqam Printing and Publishing, Beirut, 2009, p. 619.

"non-Arabs" within the scientific field. This approach requires reading the Khaldunian text as a corpus that reveals patterns of social representation and illustrates how ethnic and cultural distinctions operate in redistributing scholarly value within a broad and multi-origin intellectual community.

The study does not limit itself to assessing the validity of the claim in light of historical facts; rather, it extends to examining the social conditions that rendered such a discourse possible, as well as the collective imaginaries it may have helped produce or reinforce. In doing so, the approach aims to offer a multilayered sociological reading that contributes to unpacking the relationship between knowledge and identity, while rethinking the dynamics of interaction between Arabs and non-Arabs within the broader process of knowledge production in the Islamic context.

1- Research Problem:

- Ibn Khaldun asserted in his Muqaddimah that the bearers of knowledge in Islam were mostly non-Arabs, and that the Arabs had only a limited share in this domain for reasons he considered objective. This impression has prevailed almost up to the present time.
- However, a re-examination of Ibn Khaldun's discourse on this matter, and a reinterpretation of it through the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis, grounded in an attempt to understand the nationalist interpretation of history, will inevitably lead us to one of two possible conclusions:

1- Either confirming Ibn Khaldun's claim that the majority of the bearers of knowledge in Islam were non-Arabs.

2- Or refuting Ibn Khaldun's assertions through scientific evidence and demonstrating that the Arabs had a substantial share in bearing knowledge within the Islamic community.

This methodology, on which Critical Discourse Analysis is based, represents one of the most significant—though relatively recent—fields within modern linguistic analysis. It employs the concepts of textual analysis to link the structure of discourse with power relations within society, addressing the ways in which these relations are produced, reinforced, or contested through discursive interaction[1].

2- Key Concepts of the Study:

2-1: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA Approach):

Despite the relative novelty of the Critical Discourse Analysis approach—it emerged in the late twentieth century and took on an institutional form in 1991, when an academic exchange and collaborative program was initiated among researchers and theorists from various countries with the support of the University of Amsterdam—research and studies rapidly multiplied, and the field soon became firmly established, acquiring an institutional character across different parts of the world[2].

[1] Fairclough, Norman. Discourse Analysis: Textual Analysis in Social Research. Translated by Talal Wahba. Arab Organization for Translation, Beirut, 2009, p. 7.
[2] Ali Hamed. The Critical Analysis of the Discourse of the Equilibrium Paradigm in the Sociology of Education: A Study of Émile Durkheim's "Moral Education" as a Model. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Martyr Hamma Lakhdar University, Algeria, 2023, p. 171.

The roots of the term in Critical Discourse Analysis can be traced back to the influence of Marxism and Critical Theory, where “critique” refers to a mechanism aimed at interpreting social phenomena and transforming them[1].

Henry Widdowson maintains that Critical Discourse Analysis involves uncovering the implicit ideologies embedded in texts and revealing their ideological biases, thereby exposing the ways in which power is exercised through discourse[2].

In Critical Discourse Analysis, it is argued that discursive practices contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups—for example, relations between social classes, between men and women, and between ethnic minorities and the majority. These effects are understood as ideological in nature[3].

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is defined as an interdisciplinary approach that views language as a form of social practice. It focuses on examining how social and political dominance is reproduced through texts and speech. Therefore, CDA is used in sociology to study ideologies and power relations embedded within discourse. It also provides valuable insights into how discourse expresses forms of social and political inequality, abuse of power, and domination, linking all of this to the broader social and political context[4].

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) represents the most recent approach to linguistically oriented discourse analysis. It is concerned with studying the dialectical relationships between language, discourse, and society, as well as the power reinforced by these relationships within the realm of social practice and the social changes they bring about[5].

Discourse studies and critical discourse studies benefit from numerous and diverse methodologies for observation, analysis, and other strategies for data collection, examination, or evaluation. These methods are employed to test hypotheses, develop theory, and gain knowledge in understanding and analyzing critical discourse[6].

We have identified more than five different interpretations, definitions, or explanations of the concept of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which may, to some extent, hinder arriving at a comprehensive and unified definition of the term. This variation is largely due to the explicit divergence in how the concept is addressed across various disciplines in the social, human, and literary sciences, as well as due to the relative novelty of the field and the breadth of discussions and fundamental disagreements surrounding it.

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[1] Mounia Obeidi. Critical Discourse Analysis: Models from Media Discourse. Kunooz Al-Ma‘rifah Publishing and Distribution, Amman, 2016, p. 10.
[2] Mounia Obeidi. Ibid., p. 11.
[3] Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips. Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method. Translated by Shawqi Bouannane. Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities, Manama, 2019, p. 128.
[4] Amal Mohamed Adel Ibrahim Abdel-Rahbah. "Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis and Its Applications in Sociological Research." In The Critical School in Egyptian Sociology: Studies Dedicated to Dr. Samir Naim Ahmed, Cairo: Insaniyat Publishing and Distribution, 2012, p. 116.
[5] Mohamed Yatawi. Critical Discourse Analysis: Concepts, Fields, and Applications. Arab Democratic Center, Berlin, 2019, p. 10.
[6] Teun A. van Dijk. Discourse and Power. Translated by Ghidaa Al-Ali, National Center for Translation, Cairo, 2014, p. 34.

A thorough and reflective reading of the various definitions mentioned above—despite their differing essences and analytical angles—guides the reader and consumer of the intended Khaldunian text toward understanding and uncovering many issues, including the profound contradictions that, at their core, represent a form of struggle over the primacy of knowledge production. This is, in fact, the core and objective of the current study, which will be revealed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. However, a full understanding of this approach requires it to be supported and accompanied by other essential concepts that must be clarified, as they form the foundational basis for a deeper analysis of Khaldunian discourse. Moreover, invoking these accompanying concepts ensures that Critical Discourse Analysis is firmly situated within the sociological field, distancing it from traditional linguistic or rhetorical discourse analysis.

2-2 The Concept of Ideology in Discourse:

Ideology is a core concept in Critical Discourse Analysis, as it is often considered an outcome generated by texts (discourse). In this regard, Norman Fairclough asserts that "ideological effects are one type of outcome produced by texts, which are of particular concern to Critical Discourse Analysis: the influence of texts in establishing, sustaining, or transforming ideologies.[1]"

In the same context, Norman Fairclough defines ideology in discourse as follows: "Ideologies are representations of aspects of the world, and their contribution can be identified in establishing, maintaining, or transforming social relations associated with power, dominance, and exploitation.[2]"

Based on the above definition of ideology, which is fundamentally linked to discourse and rooted in a critical perspective that significantly diverges from the traditional concept of ideology, it is understood not merely as a form of power, but as encompassing a range of descriptive viewpoints. These are regarded as positions, stances, beliefs, or perspectives, among others.

Karl Mannheim defines ideology in the following terms: "We implicitly refer to the specific meaning of the concept of ideology when the term points to the doubts and suspicions that fill our hearts, and the hesitations in our minds regarding the views, ideas, and conceptions put forth by our opponents. These opinions and conceptions are seen as conscious emotional masks that obscure the true nature of the social condition, because true knowledge of that condition does not align with the interests of the opposition. These distortions, falsifications, and misrepresentations span a wide range—from fully conscious lies to semi-conscious fabrications and unconscious masks, including well-crafted attempts to deceive, manipulate, defraud others, and entrap them in the pit of self-deception.[3]"

John Storey defines ideology as follows: "Another definition suggests something of distortion, misrepresentation, or concealment. Here, ideology is used to refer to how certain texts and practices present distorted images of reality—what is sometimes referred to as false consciousness.[4]"

[1] Norman Fairclough. Previously Cited Work, p. 35
[2] Ibid., p. 35.
[3] Karl Mannheim. Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge. Translated by Abdel Jalil Al-Taher, Academic Research Center, Beirut, 2017, pp. 167–168.
[4] John Storey. Cultural Theory and Popular Culture. Translated by Farouk Mansour, Abu Dhabi Authority for Tourism and Culture, 2014, p. 17.

2-3 The Concept of Power in Discourse:

The concept of power is one of the fundamental notions in the social sciences. It is a complex and ambiguous concept, and it is no surprise that a substantial number of studies have been devoted to analyzing it across various fields and disciplines. However, what specifically focuses on the dimensions of power most directly related to the study of language, discourse, and communication is what is known as Critical Discourse Studies. Teun A. van Dijk defines it as: "Critical Discourse Studies is that scholarly movement specifically concerned with theorizing and critically analyzing discourse that reproduces the abuse of power and social inequality. The central task of Critical Discourse Studies lies in its detailed examination of the concept of power.[1]"

2-4 The Concept of Hegemony in Discourse:

The term was coined by Antonio Gramsci to describe the influence and dominance of the ideological apparatus of the bourgeois superstructure over the proletariat and civil society. According to Gramsci, the ideology of the superstructure is deeply rooted in society—within the family, religious institutions, traditional thought, schools, and labor unions. The dominance of this ideology compels civil society to conform to the existing political order. Gramsci therefore urged the Communist Party to develop a socialist culture capable of confronting the hegemony of bourgeois ideology[2].

3- Research Hypothesis and Its Corpus:

"In this study, I argue that Ibn Khaldun's discourse on the predominance of non-Arabs among the bearers of knowledge in Islam—contrasted with the comparatively limited share of Arabs—performs three distinct functions. The first is the construction of a purported assertion by Ibn Khaldun that the Arab race is inherently inclined toward leadership, governance, and sovereignty, whereas non-Arabs are more disposed to engage in crafts and professions, including the pursuit of knowledge. These acquired characteristics are subsequently reified into symbols that shape emerging national or ethnic identities."

The second function, then, is to demonstrate through discourse that the Arabs constitute a nomadic nation, while non-Arabs (ʿajam) represent a sedentary one. Finally, the third function lies in Ibn Khaldun's tendency toward a nationalist interpretation of history aimed at reinforcing class-based signification. This serves to obscure the implicit ideological dimension embedded within the discourse. To support this claim, I will analyze a passage from the Muqaddimah using the approach of critical discourse analysis[3].

The selection of this text as the subject of study stems from the intertextuality and structural progression employed by Ibn Khaldun in composing the passage entitled "On the Majority of Scholars in Islam Being Non-Arabs[4]", found in Chapter 43 of the sixth book[5] of the Muqaddimah, titled "On the Sciences, Their Various Categories, Methods of Instruction, and Related Matters, Including an

[1] Ali Hamed. Previously Cited Work, p. 182.
[2] Abdelmajid Labsir. Encyclopedia of Sociology and Concepts in Politics, Economics, and General Culture. Dar Al-Huda, Algeria, 2010, p. 466.
[3] Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah, op. cit.
[4] Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah, op. cit., pp. 619–620.
[5] Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah, op. cit., p 468.

Introduction and Supplements". A clear intertextual link can be observed between the selected passage and Chapter 2, titled[1] "On the Acquisition of Knowledge as One of the Professions". The issue does not lie in the classification of knowledge acquisition as a profession per se, but rather in Ibn Khaldun's association of this pursuit with the inherent nature of nations—attributing it exclusively to sedentary civilizations. This is problematic, as the acquisition of knowledge is a human legacy that emerges wherever the necessary conditions for its development are met.

Ibn Khaldun then follows the analyzed passage with another text, found in Chapter 44, titled "On How a Non-Arabic Tongue, When Acquired Early, Limits Its Speaker's Ability to Master the Sciences Compared to Native Arabic Speakers."

The analyzed text, along with the aforementioned intertextual passages, collectively revolve around the ongoing debate that Ibn Khaldun constructs concerning the acquisition of knowledge and science between the Arab and non-Arab peoples. Through this discourse, he seeks to highlight distinct identities that, beneath their rhetorical surface, carry ideological implications and symbolic representations of conflicting identities.

4- Research Methodology:

In this study, I apply procedures derived from a framework I have proposed for discourse analysis, drawing on tools from critical discourse analysis (CDA). This framework consists of two stages:

1- Establishing a historical understanding of the discursive event.

2- Analyzing the formation, performance, distribution, and circulation of the discourse.

This study explores the impact of the social and political context on the construction of the discourse under examination, with the aim of developing a clear understanding of the relationship between the formation of Ibn Khaldun's discourse and the political and social conditions surrounding its production and circulation. The focus will be specifically placed on how the nationalist interpretation of history, as presented in the selected text, functions as a tool for establishing historical objectivity through interpretation and analysis. This approach either affirms Ibn Khaldun's theory that the majority of scholars in Islam were non-Arabs, or conversely, refutes it—ultimately transforming the discourse into a vehicle for fueling conflict.

"It is a curious fact that the majority of those who have carried the torch of knowledge in the Islamic community have been non-Arabs. Among the Arabs, there are scarcely any scholars—whether in the religious sciences or the rational sciences—except for a very rare few."

Ibn Khaldun begins the passage with an expression of astonishment at the reality that the majority of those who carried the mantle of knowledge within the Islamic ummah were non-Arabs. He articulates a sweeping negation regarding the presence of Arab scholars, extending his claim to both domains of knowledge: the religious (revealed) sciences and the rational (intellectual) sciences. This exclusion is only softened by a marginal acknowledgment of a few rare exceptions.

[1] Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah, op. cit., p 469.

This value judgment appears to be inaccurate from several perspectives, as knowledge is a shared human legacy that cannot be confined to a single nation or religious group to the exclusion of others. A direct response to Ibn Khaldun's view can be found in Dr. Taha Hussein's analysis and critique of Ibn Khaldun's social philosophy, where he states: " "This is not all there is to the matter. Ibn Khaldun maintains that the Arabs exaggerate in their disdain for the sciences and arts. He makes this bold claim in the sixth part of the Muqaddimah, where he discusses the highest forms of civilization. He also asserts that most scholars belonged to the Persian nation. Yet, as Professor Casanova has noted, it is very difficult to determine the actual ethnic origin of Muslim scholars and philosophers due to the mixing of races caused by the system of clientage (mawālī) as previously mentioned, as well as through intermarriage[1]".

"And even if one of them were Arab by lineage, he would be non-Arab (ʿajamī) in his language, upbringing, and education—despite the fact that the religion is Arabic, and the founder of its law is Arab."

Ibn Khaldun's reductive views, crude explanations, and the way they have been exploited by Orientalists and their sympathizers to malign and diminish the Arabs in the modern Arab world, have caused considerable dismay. In response to this, Dr. Naji Maʿrūf turned to the depths of historical sources to uncover what lay buried within them. He consulted genealogical records of Arab tribes, tracing their migrations and branches, and examining how changes in geographic location affected names and titles. He also returned to classical scientific heritage texts, compiling and classifying them based on the verified lineage of their authors. The results astonished him, revealing the extent of the illusion into which Ibn Khaldun—and those who echoed his claims—had fallen[2].

He demonstrated that the major Sunni scholars who compiled the six canonical hadith collections (al-ṣiḥāḥ al-sittah) traced their lineage to non-Arab regions. Among them, three were found to be of clear Arab descent, and one—al-Nasāʾī—is likely to have been Arab. Two others were Arabs by walāʾ (clientage): Imām al-Bukhārī al-Juʿfī and Ibn Mājah al-Qazwīnī al-Rubaʿī. As for the three imams of confirmed Arab origin, they are[3]:

- Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī was an Arab from the tribe of Qushayr.
- Abū ʿĪsā al-Tirmidhī was an Arab from the tribe of Sulaym.
- Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī was an Arab from the tribe of al-Azd.

Naji Maʿrūf ʿAwwād took it upon himself to refute a long-standing assumption that had prevailed among scholars and the general public since it was first introduced by Ibn Khaldun in his Muqaddimah. Through a meticulous investigative study drawing on foundational sources—such as biographical dictionaries (ṭabaqāt), geographical and historical works, chronicles, and classical encyclopedias—he demonstrated that this assumption was unfounded. He argued that many prominent figures in the core Islamic sciences, though associated with non-Arab regions, were in fact of Arab lineage. Their residence—and that of their families or tribal branches—in places like

[1] Taha Hussein. Ibn Khaldun's Social Philosophy: Analysis and Critique. Translated by Muhammad Abdullah 'Inan, Academic Center for Research, Beirut, 2016, p. 120.
[2] Muslim Scholars Who Were Arabs. (2021, June 8). Center for Research and Knowledge Communication. https://www.kapl.org.sa/magazine/ahwal-al-marefah/article
[3] Muslim Scholars Who Were Arabs, op. cit.

Khurasan, Marw, Herat, and other parts of the eastern Islamic world, does not negate their confirmed Arab ancestry. This lineage is well documented in historical and biographical sources, even if those same sources identify them with the cities and regions in which they lived[1].

The reason for this is that, in the early stages of the Islamic community, there existed neither formal knowledge nor technical disciplines, due to the prevailing conditions of simplicity and tribal life. The rulings of the Sharīʿa—God's commands and prohibitions—were preserved in the hearts of men, who had learned their sources from the Qurʾān and the Sunnah, as transmitted by the Prophet and his companions. At that time, the people were Arabs unfamiliar with the practices of formal instruction, authorship, or documentation; nor were they inclined toward such pursuits or prompted by any need for them.

By "the early stage of the Islamic community," Ibn Khaldun refers to the pre-Islamic era—al-Jāhiliyyah—that preceded the rise of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and its surrounding regions. He asserts that this phase in Arab history was devoid of knowledge and craftsmanship, attributing the absence of intellectual and technical pursuits to the prevailing conditions of simplicity and nomadism. However, historical evidence suggests a very different reality. Dr. ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, in his book Education Through the Ages, argues: "The Arabs possessed sciences related to their language, the rules of their speech, the composition of poetry, and the crafting of oratory. They were a people knowledgeable in narratives, and had deep familiarity with the conditions of tribes and regions. They also had knowledge of the rising and setting of stars, the weather patterns associated with celestial constellations, and their rainfall predictions." Moreover, the well-established sources available to us—chief among them the Qurʾān, pre-Islamic poetry, and the literary and historical works produced by Arab scholars, particularly during the Abbasid era—attest to the familiarity of many sedentary Arabs with various scientific fields, including irrigation engineering, urban planning, mathematics, mechanical sciences, medicine, veterinary science, agriculture, and the literary arts"[2].

What also reinforces the argument that the Arabs, including the Bedouins who lived in deserts and barren lands, had a share in knowledge and learning—contrary to what Ibn Khaldun claimed when he described their intellectual life as simplistic and primitive—is what ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Dāʾim affirms in his assessment. He writes: "These sources also indicate that the Bedouins were largely illiterate, but necessity guided them toward a range of skills which they acquired through experience and transmitted orally and aurally. These included poetry, oratory, astronomy, genealogy, historical narration, geographical description, medicine, meteorology, wind patterns, divination, augury, physiognomy, and translation, among others…" This observation highlights the experiential and oral foundations of Bedouin knowledge, revealing a cultural sophistication often overlooked by those who reduce their legacy to mere primitiveness[3].

Ibn Khaldun then shifts to describing the condition of the Arabs after the advent of Islam, categorically denying that they possessed any real knowledge or familiarity with the sciences. This,

[1] Abdel Nabi, A. (2023, December 14). The Arab Identity of Muslim Scholars. Mindhar. https://mindhar.com/articles
[2] ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, ʿAbd Allāh. (1984). Education Through the Ages: From Ancient Times to the Early Twentieth Century (5th ed.). Dār al-ʿIlm lil-Malāyīn (Original work published in Arabic)
Beirut, Lebanon, p. 133. .
[3] Ibid., p. 133

despite the fact that they had access to foundational sources such as the rulings of the Sharīʿa—God's commands and prohibitions. He claims that they transmitted these rulings orally, committing them to memory rather than engaging with them through formal learning. However, this too is a misleading assertion, refuted by the lived historical realities of Arab intellectual life during the earliest period of Islam.

Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī, quoting al-Māwardī in Adab al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn, who in turn cites Ibn Qutaybah, reports that the Arabs held the art of writing in high regard—contrary to what Ibn Khaldun claimed in the Muqaddimah, where he considered writing and script to be among the human crafts (ṣanāʿiʿ) and asserted that the Arabs were distant from them due to their Bedouin nature. In fact, the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) had over forty scribes, most of whom were young men from Medina. There is no doubt that they had learned writing, reading, and related skills in the elementary schools (kuttāb) of Mecca and Medina prior to the advent of Islam[1].

As previously stated, crafts and technical professions are primarily associated with settled (urban) populations, and the Arabs were among the furthest of peoples from them. Consequently, the sciences also came to be rooted in urban life, and the Arabs remained distant from them and from their development. At that time, the urban populations were largely non-Arabs (ʿajam) or those akin to them—mawālī and inhabitants of cities—who, in turn, followed the Persians in adopting the forms and habits of civilization, including crafts and professions, due to the deeply rooted urban culture inherited from the Persian state. Thus, the founders of the science of grammar were Sībawayh, followed by al-Fārisī, then al-Zajjāj—each of whom was of non-Arab lineage. They were, however, raised in the Arabic language and acquired it through upbringing and close association with Arabs, and they later codified it into principles and an established discipline for those who came after them.

Ibn Khaldun begins from an intertextual reference that precedes the passage under examination, in Book Six of the Muqaddimah, Chapter Two, titled: "On the Teaching of Knowledge as One of the Crafts[2]." Ibn Khaldun traces the origin of crafts to the nature of ʿumrān and civilization within a single nation. He offers examples drawn from the contrast between the East and the West in his time. There is no significant issue in this; logically, the more developed a civilization, the more abundant knowledge will be within it, as the conditions necessary for its emergence will be present. However, this does not negate the possibility that knowledge may also exist as a form of craft among Bedouin societies, and that it is not exclusive to settled urban populations. Indeed, he acknowledges—within the same chapter mentioned above—a clear contradiction in this regard.

"Do you not see the people of urban society in comparison with the Bedouins—how the townsman appears adorned with intelligence and filled with cleverness, to the extent that the Bedouin imagines he has surpassed him in the very essence of humanity and intellect? Yet this is not the case. This impression arises only because the townsman has mastered various habits and disciplines associated with crafts and urban life—things unknown to the Bedouin. When the urbanite becomes saturated with these crafts, their dispositions, and the refined instruction associated with them, it leads others—those who lack such dispositions—to believe that he possesses a superior intellect, and that the souls of the Bedouins are inherently deficient in their nature and innate disposition. But that, too,

[1] Atlas, Muḥammad Asʿad. (1957). Education and Instruction in Islam. Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm lil-Malāyīn, p. 18.
[2] Muqaddimah: ibid, p 469

is false. For we indeed find among the Bedouins individuals who are of the highest degree in understanding and excellence in their intellect and natural disposition.[1]".

In addition to what has been mentioned, we acknowledge Ibn Khaldun's assertion that knowledge is one of the crafts (ṣanāʿiʿ), and that it grows and flourishes in the presence of civilization. However, we differ with him on the claim that knowledge is exclusive to urban populations. Moreover, Ibn Khaldun's binary division between urban and Bedouin societies within the Arab context—whether in the Maghreb or the Mashriq—cannot serve as definitive proof that the production of knowledge was limited to non-Arabs. This, in fact, constitutes a clear contradiction.

Likewise, the majority of those who transmitted and preserved ḥadīth among the people of Islam were non-Arabs or those who had become Arabized in language and upbringing, due to the flourishing of this discipline in Iraq.

It is also well known that all the scholars of the principles of jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh) were non-Arabs. The same applies to the scholars of speculative theology (ʿilm al-kalām) and the majority of Qurʾānic exegetes. It was only the non-Arabs who undertook the preservation and documentation of knowledge.

Ibn Khaldun attributes the transmission of ḥadīth, as well as the scholarly traditions of uṣūl al-fiqh, ʿilm al-kalām, and Qurʾānic exegesis, entirely to non-Arabs, while completely excluding the Arabs from these fields. This is a striking claim, particularly given that he provides no names or genealogical evidence to support it, relying instead on generalized reports. Such an approach to knowledge and scholarly inquiry—one that lacks documentation and verification—renders the argument intellectually sterile and of little value. It is especially ironic that Ibn Khaldun, who was among the first to harshly criticize earlier historians and revolt against their uncritical methods of investigation, falls into the very same methodological pitfalls by offering conclusions without clear evidence. Can it truly be believed that a civilization as vast and intellectually rich as the Islamic one produced scholars in these foundational disciplines exclusively from non-Arab origins, without a single Arab among them? Such a conclusion seems either naïve or ideologically driven, with the implicit aim of undermining and diminishing the status of the Arab people.

Dr. Naji Maʿrūf ʿAwwād, in the first volume of his book The Arab Identity of Scholars Attributed to Non-Arab Regions in the Islamic East, writes: "It is necessary to investigate the lineage of the mawālī—those who converted to Islam or were taken as captives and later embraced the faith—since some of them may have been of Arab or Semitic origin. For example, Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān ibn Thābit al-Kūfī is, according to a narration by Imām Abū Muṭīʿ al-Balkhī, of pure Arab descent from the Anṣār. Another view holds that he was a Taymī, from the tribe of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq. Yet another narration claims that he was of Iraqi origin, from the city of Babylon—meaning he was a Semitic Arab, one of the remaining descendants of the ancient Babylonian ʿAmāliq. Some historians even trace his lineage back to Abraham (Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl). All of this refutes the claim of his Persian or Afghan ancestry and reaffirms his place within the Arab lineage.[2]"

[1] Muqaddimah: ibid, p 472

[2] Maʿrūf, N. (1984). The Arab Identity of Scholars Attributed to Non-Arab Regions in the Islamic East (Vol. 1). Baghdad: Ministry of Information Publications, Heritage Books Series No. 35, Dār al-Shaʿb Press, p. 45.

What seems evident is that Ibn Khaldun expressed these views because he did not have access to many of the sources and works that would have demonstrated the contrary to his theory. This can be inferred from the concluding remarks in the chapter he devoted to the transmitters of knowledge[1].

What Ibn Khaldun proposed—and what was later echoed by a number of scholars—reveals a certain ignorance regarding the genealogical origins of Arab scholars. The belief held by some that scholars associated with non-Arab regions were necessarily non-Arabs, along with their disregard for these scholars' immersion in Arab culture, their intellectual production in the Arabic language, their allegiance to Arab identity and to Islam, and other factors that effectively remove them from any presumed "foreignness," even if their ethnic roots were non-Arab, has led to a fundamental misconception. How much more mistaken, then, is this assumption when many of these scholars were in fact of pure Arab origin—not only culturally, but by bloodline as well?

Naji Maʿrūf further affirms: "In order to refute Ibn Khaldun's theory—and those who followed in his footsteps—and to deconstruct and disprove the claim that the majority of knowledge-bearers in the Islamic community were non-Arabs rather than Arabs, it is essential to investigate and scrutinize the genealogies of Muslim scholars, especially those affiliated with particular regions, notably non-Arab lands in which they often lived. This is necessary to determine whether their origins were Arab or non-Arab. One of the most important findings reached through persistent research and examination was the discovery of a large number of scholars who, despite being associated with non-Arab cities, towns, and villages—now located outside the Arab world—could be traced back through their lineage to Arab ancestry.[2]"

As for the Arabs who had come into contact with civilization and entered its domain after emerging from a Bedouin lifestyle, they were preoccupied with leadership during the Abbasid era and with the responsibilities of governance, which diverted them from pursuing knowledge and intellectual inquiry. They were, after all, the people of power, protectors of the state, and leaders of its political affairs. Moreover, they were affected by a sense of pride and dignity that made them disdain the pursuit of knowledge at that time, since it had come to be regarded as one of the crafts (ṣanāʿiʿ). Leaders, as a rule, tend to look down upon crafts and professions and whatever leads to them. Thus, they delegated the pursuit of knowledge to others—namely, non-Arabs and those of mixed origin (mawālīd).

Ibn Khaldun attributes the Arabs' lack of engagement with knowledge and intellectual pursuits following the rise of Islam to their preoccupation with leadership, governance, and the management of state affairs. He presents a rather curious claim—one that demands critical scrutiny—namely, that the Arabs were too proud to adopt knowledge as a vocation, unlike others. This view stands in contrast to what has been demonstrated elsewhere: that the Arabs have long valued and honored virtue, including the pursuit of knowledge and learning. Moreover, a review of their intellectual and cultural legacy prior to Islam reveals that they possessed considerable familiarity with certain fields of knowledge and various forms of understanding.

[1] Maʿrūf, op. cit., p. 64.
[2] Maʿrūf, op. cit., p. 52.

"This passage clearly refutes and contradicts Ibn Khaldun's claim that the Arabs turned away from the pursuit of knowledge because it had become a craft, while they were preoccupied with political leadership and governance. As further evidence, it became clear to me that many scholars who are associated with various professions, crafts, sects, schools of thought, groups, spiritual paths, disciplines, Arab regions, or even certain individuals—fathers and mothers—in all parts of the Islamic world, were in fact of pure Arab origin. From this investigation, I was able to identify more than one thousand (1,000) male and female scholars from the Islamic East alone. I published a selection of these scholars in a treatise that I printed in 1965, in which I highlighted more than one hundred names of Arab scholars and families who were attributed to non-Arab cities, professions, or crafts, leading to the mistaken assumption that they were of non-Arab origin. My aim in publishing that work at the time was to draw attention to the fact that being associated with a non-Arab city does not necessarily imply non-Arab descent, as many researchers—often speculatively—tend to assume. In reality, the majority of those individuals can be traced back to purely Arab origins and belonged to well-known or lesser-known tribes from the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, they authored their works, dictated their teachings, and conducted their scholarly gatherings entirely in the Arabic language[1]."

Islamic history itself refutes and undermines Ibn Khaldun's assertion that the Arabs were inclined toward leadership and political power at the expense of scholarly pursuits. "One clear example is Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr, the second and arguably strongest caliph of the Abbasid dynasty. He was raised among the eminent members of Banū Hāshim, who resided in al-Ḥumaymah. He grew up eloquent, well-versed in historical narratives and traditions, and deeply familiar with poetry and prose"[2].

As for the rational sciences, they did not emerge within the Islamic community until after the scholars and authors of knowledge had become clearly distinguished, and knowledge itself had become an established craft. At that point, these sciences came to be associated primarily with non-Arabs, while the Arabs abandoned them and ceased to pursue them. They were carried forward only by Arabized non-Arabs (al-muʿarabbūn min al-ʿajam), as is the case with all crafts, as we have previously stated. This remained the norm in the Islamic cities so long as civilization remained in the hands of the non-Arabs and in their regions, such as Iraq and Khurasan.

After discussing the transmitted and religious sciences, Ibn Khaldun entirely excluded the Arabs from engaging in them, attributing their development and transmission exclusively to non-Arabs. However, the justifications he provided remain modest and fail to constitute strong or conclusive evidence to support his claims. As demonstrated in the preceding sections—based on careful investigation, verification, and reference to reliable scholarly sources—we have critically challenged and effectively refuted his theory on this matter.

In the following passage of the text under examination, Ibn Khaldun turns to the rational sciences, and, using the same method and reasoning, he once again categorically excludes the Arabs

[1] Maʿrūf, op. cit., p. 53.
[2] Abdel Hakim, M. (2011). Hārūn al-Rashīd: The Slandered Caliph. Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī for Publishing and Distribution, p. 24.

from engaging with, contributing to, or developing these disciplines. He attributes this absence to the very same causes he previously outlined in relation to the transmitted and religious sciences.

It appears that Ibn Khaldun formulated these views, as presented in the text under analysis, without access to a wide range of sources and works—particularly those concerned with the history of the Eastern Islamic world and the state of Arab intellectual advancement there. Although his knowledge of geography was no less impressive than his command of history—evident in the detailed geographical introduction and regional divisions at the beginning of the Muqaddimah—he nonetheless made striking and surprising errors. Despite his scholarly stature and breadth of knowledge, Ibn Khaldun not only erred in this particular judgment, but also considered Iraq to be a non-Arab land (ʿajam), even though classical and modern consensus regards Iraq as an integral part of the Arab world. Furthermore, he classified the renowned grammarian al-Fārisī as Persian, when in fact he was of Arab descent from the tribe of al-Manādhirah[1].

What is most important to emphasize in this context is that Arab-Islamic civilization was not—as many researchers have mistakenly imagined—merely a literary or philosophical culture, detached from scientific and empirical inquiry. Rather, it was a civilization that succeeded in achieving a harmonious balance between broad humanistic and intellectual values and a distinctly scientific, experimental spirit. This scientific character became especially prominent during the reigns of al-Rashīd and al-Maʾmūn.

Randall, in his book The Making of the Modern Mind, points to this empirical character as a defining feature that distinguished Arab-Islamic civilization from Greek civilization, the latter being more focused on mathematics and abstract philosophical inquiry. The historian Sedillot also highlights this experimental orientation within Arab civilization when he speaks of the Bayt al-Ḥikmah (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad, founded by Caliph al-Maʾmūn in 830 CE. He states:" What distinguishes the Baghdad school is the scientific spirit that pervades its work: proceeding from the known to the unknown; observing phenomena with precision in order to ascend from results to causes; and rejecting anything not proven through experience—these are the principles that the Arab masters taught us. The Arabs of the ninth century possessed that fertile method which, in the hands of the moderns, would later become the key to their most beautiful and significant discoveries[2]"

Among the most compelling examples of this empirical scientific orientation, we may cite contributions in the field of astronomy, beginning with the astronomical school in Baghdad during the reign of Caliph al-Manṣūr. At its forefront was al-Battānī—known as the "Ptolemy of the Arabs" and author of works on trigonometric calculations—as well as Abū al-Wafāʾ, who preceded the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe in identifying certain lunar phenomena. We may also mention ʿAlī ibn Yūsuf, credited with the discovery of the pendulum; Ḥasan ibn al-Haytham, the renowned physicist and astronomer, founder of the science of optics (ʿilm al-manāẓir); and al-Bīrūnī, whose remarkable achievements extended into the sciences of mechanics and hydrostatics. In the realm of medicine, we recall Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and his influential work al-Ḥāwī (The Comprehensive Book), in which he introduced the use of gentle laxatives, provided early clinical descriptions of diseases

[1] Maʿrūf, op. cit., p. 53.
[2] ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, op. cit., p. 219.

such as measles and smallpox, and was the first to write on pediatric medicine. He also pioneered the use of cupping (ḥijāmah) in the treatment of cerebral hemorrhage[1].

Through the documented passages presented above, which demonstrate the brilliance of Arab scholars across various rational sciences and the extent to which they contributed to their development, it becomes clearly evident that Ibn Khaldun erred in claiming that the Arabs did not engage in the rational sciences, and that such fields were the exclusive domain of non-Arabs. Furthermore, Arab women also participated in the pursuit of knowledge alongside men, although Ibn Khaldun made no mention of them whatsoever in his Muqaddimah. ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Dāʾim highlights this point, stating: "In the field of medicine, Arab women during times of war played a role similar to that of today's Red Cross organizations. In addition, some women excelled in medicine and became highly renowned among physicians. Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿah included biographies of several of them in his work Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbāʾ (Classes of Physicians), and al-Qifṭī also mentioned them in Akhbār al-Ḥukamāʾ (Reports of the Sages). Among the most famous were Zaynab, the physician of Banū Uwd, who specialized in eye treatments and wound care; Umm al-Ḥasan, daughter of the judge Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭanjānī, who was broadly knowledgeable in many fields but especially distinguished in medicine; as well as the sister and daughter of Ibn Zuhr's grandson, both of whom were exclusively permitted to treat the women of al-Manṣūr's court."[2]

It becomes clear from the aforementioned passages that the Arabs had a significant share in the development and pursuit of the rational sciences, just as they did with the transmitted sciences. Thus, Ibn Khaldun's assertion—that the sciences, being among the crafts (ṣanāʿiʿ), were exclusive to the non-Arabs and that the Arabs remained distant from them—proves to be inaccurate. To further support this conclusion, the following key observations may be outlined:

1- A significant number of scholars attributed to non-Arab regions can in fact be traced back to authentic Arab origins and lineages. In the first volume of this work, which this introduction precedes, we have listed over three hundred such scholars. This substantial number—many of whom are being identified for the first time—strongly indicates that the majority of those who carried the mantle of knowledge in the Islamic community were Arabs, not non-Arabs. We will present a similar number, or even more, in each of the upcoming second and third volumes, in addition to the scholars to be featured in the dedicated volume on Sicily and al-Andalus.[3]

2- One of the key points that refutes Ibn Khaldun's claim is that the Arabs did not, in fact, maintain political leadership within the Abbasid state except during the early Abbasid period and parts of the middle period. Nevertheless, many of the Abbasid caliphs themselves were scholars and men of letters. As for the broader Arab population, they turned to scholarship, trade, and various crafts. The same can be said of the Arabs in al-Andalus and across the Islamic world as a whole.[4]

3- There is no doubt that attribution to non-Arab cities has obscured the Arab identity of many scholars. As a result, people have come to assume that Arab scholars associated with non-Arab regions were themselves non-Arabs. Thus, scholars such as Fakhr al-Rāzī, al-Marghīnānī, and al-

[1] ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, op. cit., p 221.
[2] ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, op. cit., p 226.
[3] Maʿrūf, op. cit., p. 63.
[4] Maʿrūf, op. cit., p. 67

Fayrūzābādī, who were affiliated with cities like Rayy, Marghīnān, and Fayrūzābād, have been widely regarded as Persians, even though they were, in fact, pure Arabs descended from Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq. Similarly, figures such as al-Waṭwāṭ (Ibn Mardawayh al-Balḥī), Abū al-Fatḥ al-Marzawī al-Naysābūrī, Abū Bakr al-Harawī, and al-Riḍā al-Ṣāghānī have been counted among the non-Arabs, when they are actually Arabs from the lineage of ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. Others, like ʿUthmān al-Maḥmī al-Naysābūrī, al-Dībāj al-Ḥarrānī, Abū Bakr al-Marāghī, and Shaykh Khālid al-Naqshbandī, have also been considered non-Arabs, when in truth they descend from ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān. The same can be said of thousands of prominent Arab figures who were associated with non-Arab cities but were, in fact, Arabs from various tribes.[1]

When those cities were ruined and civilization—God's secret in the emergence of knowledge and the crafts—vanished from them, knowledge likewise disappeared entirely from the non-Arabs, as they had fallen into a state of nomadism. Knowledge then became confined to cities where civilization remained abundant. And today, no place enjoys a more flourishing civilization than Egypt: it is the mother of the world, the pavilion of Islam, and the fountainhead of knowledge and the crafts.

Ibn Khaldun follows the logic of his cyclical theory of civilization and history, attributing the decline of knowledge and the crafts among non-Arabs to the collapse of civilization in the cities where they had once thrived. As these regions fell into a state of nomadism, the pursuit of knowledge and technical disciplines among the non-Arabs likewise diminished. From the evident intertextual structure of his writing, it is clear that he views the presence of civilization as directly proportional to the presence of knowledge—a notion that is reasonable and widely accepted. However, the inconsistency lies in his tendency to tie this relationship to a specific ethnic group. What is particularly striking in his interpretation of this civilizational cycle is that, unlike his earlier detailed account of the different ethnic groups—Arabs and non-Arabs alike—who carried the banner of knowledge throughout the various phases of Islamic civilization (from the pre-Islamic period to the emergence of Islam, and up through the end of the Abbasid era), he does not offer any similar elaboration regarding the peoples who sustained the sciences and crafts in Egypt, which he praises as the center of civilization in his concluding remarks.

It is evident that Ibn Khaldun did not follow the same consistent methodological approach when addressing the final stage of his civilizational cycle as it pertains to Egypt. He leaves a clear question mark at this point, offering no indication as to which group—Arabs or non-Arabs—had the greater share in carrying the torch of knowledge. This ambiguity stands in contrast to the rest of his discourse, which explicitly ties the rise and decline of scientific activity to specific ethnic groups. Yet, historical evidence shows that during Ibn Khaldun's own time, Arab presence in Egypt was both strong and deeply rooted, playing a central role in shaping the civilization across its various dimensions—scientific, intellectual, political, and cultural.

Conclusion:

[1] Maʿrūf, op. cit., p. 68

Upon examining Ibn Khaldun's discourse in the Muqaddimah—particularly the chapter in which he addresses the question of who carried the mantle of knowledge in Islamic civilization—it becomes clear that his view is shaped by a theoretical framework that links the flourishing of science to the level of urbanization. This perspective aligns with his broader theory of ʿaṣabiyyah and the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations. However, his tendency to generalize this link along ethnic lines, effectively marginalizing the Arab role in both transmitted and rational sciences in favor of the non-Arabs, reveals a methodological shortcoming and hints at underlying ideological bias.

Through a critical discourse analysis, supported by historical sources, biographical dictionaries, and contemporary research, it becomes evident that many scholars associated with non-Arab cities were, in fact, of genuine Arab lineage. Moreover, Arabs played an active and foundational role in the development of Islamic sciences—across the East and West, during the Abbasid era, in al-Andalus, Egypt, and beyond. Notably, Arab women also contributed to the medical and intellectual fields, making their exclusion from Ibn Khaldun's account a further sign of the limitations of his perspective.

In light of this evidence, Ibn Khaldun's thesis—that the non-Arabs were the primary bearers of scientific knowledge in Islam while the Arabs had little share—fails to withstand historical scrutiny and objective analysis. Science, at its core, is a shared human legacy that transcends ethnic and linguistic boundaries and flourishes wherever the social and civilizational conditions allow it to do so.

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