

Nomadic Virtues, Luxury, and Group Dynamics: Unveiling Complexities in Ibn Khaldun's Theory Around Nomadic Population

Yongne Zhu^{1,a,*}

¹*Princeton International School of Mathematics and Science (PRISMS), Princeton, New Jersey, United States*

a. pike_zhu@163.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Ibn Khaldun's insights in Chapter II of *Muqaddimah*, explore how nomadic societies' pursuit of comfort and luxury challenges traditional perceptions. While Khaldun's observations shed light on the contrasting traits of sedentary and Bedouin groups, emerging archeological evidence reveals active trade engagement and incorporation of luxury among nomads. Sites like Pazyryk exemplify this, showcasing how luxury items were woven into nomadic cultures. Khaldun's concept of "group feeling" and the interplay between environment and social organization further enrich our understanding of nomadic unity and adaptation. Despite challenges in empirical verification, Khaldun's insights remain a relevant lens to examine societies, shedding light on the complex relationship between survival and luxury.

Keywords: Nomadism, Societal evolution, Luxury and survival, Group identity, Archaeological evidence

1. Introduction

Chapter II of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* delves into the categorization of two distinctive groups: the sedentary and the Bedouin, referred to by him as "natural groups." [1] Khaldun contends that the sedentary populace emerged due to improved conditions for the Bedouins, triggering a yearning for comfort and luxury. This distinction extends beyond mere sedentary and Bedouin labels, encompassing other instances that Khaldun refers to like the nomadic Berbers and Zanâh in the West, and the Kurds, Turkomans, and Turks in the East. [2] This broader application illustrates the concept's relevance to a diverse array of nomadic civilizations, as his understanding and comparison of the two different lifestyles can project onto a larger scale than just the Arab world. Ibn Khaldun's categorization of sedentary and Bedouin groups serves as a framework for understanding the evolution of societies. [1] Although his observations came from within the specific situation, the transition from harsh nomadic life to sedentary settlements is driven by an inherent human desire for comfort and luxury and exists regardless of the specific instance. [3] This distinction extends to other nomadic cultures, revealing that this phenomenon is not confined to a specific region. This creates the basis for the exploration of how societal shifts occur due to the changing conditions that influence groups to prioritize comfort over survival under Khaldun's descriptions.

2. Virtue within the Nomadic Discourse

Remark 4 accentuates Khaldun's assertion that the nomads possess virtues closer to goodness in comparison to sedentary groups. Likely referencing the virtues to follow within Islamic traditions, it is difficult to define what he exactly means. Khaldun defines "virtue" as "bravery, or nobility, or fame, however this may have come about," which the nomads acquire under the harsh conditions they live in.[2] However, in traditional Islamic texts such as the *Quran*, the word "virtue" is mentioned in many different conditions but seldom specifically defined as a clear concept or direction to follow.[4] It is often mentioned alongside the word "evil", like in this case, "advocate virtue, forbid evil, perform the prayers, practice charity, and obey God and His Messenger," which also lacks a specific definition. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact intentions of Khaldun, but based on how Khaldun referred to the role that law plays in destroying the fortitude of the sedentary population, both the "virtue" and the "evil" can be understood as nature.[2] "Virtue" refers to the traits needed to survive in the wild where the law of the jungle reigns supreme, where the nomadic people follow their natural instincts for survival; "evil" refers to the traits of human nature, the desire for unlimited luxury and ease once survival is no longer an issue, where the sedentary people follow their natural instincts for greed.

Criticizing the sedentary population's inclination towards idleness and extravagance, which he believes contradicts Islamic principles of moderation, Khaldun's arguments are structured while being underpinned by religious context. Although divine intervention is referenced in his discourse, his arguments predominantly follow a logical sequence, often intertwining logical theories with religious references.[5] Khaldun's argument centers on the observation that sedentary living fosters comfort-seeking behavior, deviating from innate survival instincts. Throughout the chapter, he underscores the significance of prioritizing basic necessities over luxury, forming a recurring theme.[2] An intriguing paradox emerges when considering that while Islamic tradition reveres the nomadic way of life, the accumulation of power and wealth frequently leads to sedentary settlements. In support of traditional views, Khaldun asserts, "It should be known that God put good and evil into the nature of man." This emphasis on inherent human tendencies to have both "virtue" and "evil" highlights his adept fusion of divine influence and societal impact within his argumentation.

3. Archeological evidence

Like many other intellectuals at the time, Khaldun saw the nomadic population as simpler, therefore having more "virtue", compared to the sedentary population, but much archeological evidence presents the opposite. It is important to consider that the nomadic lifestyle was not devoid of its own complexities, including engagement with luxury and socio-economic intricacies. Recent research reveals that nomadic societies actively engaged in trade and incorporated luxury goods into their way of life. This challenges the notion of nomads as solely adhering to a survival-driven existence. Excavation in Pazyryk and other monumental tombs is a good example as it presents clear evidence of the representation of status and socio-economic complexity with the findings of horse bones, gold, and other luxuries like silk, indicating that nomadic groups exhibited a capacity for strategic engagement with luxury.[6] The deliberate inclusion of luxury items in these burial sites not only points to the socio-economic status of the individuals but also challenges the prevailing notion of nomads shunning luxury in favor of a minimalistic existence.[7] This shift in perspective highlights the dynamic nature of nomadic cultures. The representation of status and socio-economic complexity through luxurious items suggests that the nomadic lifestyle was a rich tapestry woven with both practicality and indulgence. It underscores their ability to navigate economic networks, engage in trade, and adapt to varying circumstances. Therefore, while Khaldun's observation of the nomadic virtues offers valuable insight, the evolving archaeological narrative compels us to recognize that the relationship between nomads and luxury is far from dichotomous.

4. Formation of Group Feeling

In the seventh remark, Khaldun introduces the concept of “group feeling” as a countermeasure against human vices like injustice and aggression.[8] This notion serves as a representation of collective identity, with family relations representing its initial form.[2] Khaldun posits that the nomadic lifestyle nurtures group cohesion due to factors such as lineage purity. Nomadic societies, driven by resource competition and natural inclinations, foster a sense of unity and shared purpose. Understanding “group feeling” as a precursor to political identity is crucial. This sentiment evolves from shared experiences and collaborative survival efforts, bolstering group resilience. Khaldun’s framework of the nomadic system, which highlights tightly-knit familial networks and resource competition, emerges as an optimal catalyst for cultivating this group cohesion. Moreover, Khaldun’s exploration extends to the dynamic interplay between a society’s environment and its social organization.[8] He highlights the profound influence of the environment, particularly in the harsh desert regions. Combining this with the preconditions Khaldun stated, we can finally build the ideal condition of his theory. The arduous conditions breed a deep commitment to filial bonds, emphasizing the importance of maintaining purity within lineages.[9] This commitment, rooted in the struggle for survival in a challenging landscape, nurtures a culture of trust that is tightly bound to familial connections. On the other hand, in more fertile lands, cooperation and dominance within more powerful groups come to the fore.[2] With this, we find Khaldun’s pessimistic views of humans, the “virtue”, or the commitment in this case, can not be shown unless it is within the close intricate relationships. The human nature of greed can only be suppressed under those circumstances. It is difficult to use text evidence to verify Khaldun’s ideas, as the nomads have no written text evidence and the archeological evidence can not show the detailed interactions required for the existence of “group feeling”, but his insights remain pertinent, offering a lens to examine societies across time and contexts.

5. Conclusion

When considering Khaldun’s first half of chapter 2, it is difficult to find the archeological evidence that exists for the other historical texts such as the *Hanshu*, which does not go into detail about the societal relationships existing within a nomadic context. But hopefully in the future, as archaeological discoveries continue to evolve our perspective, Khaldun’s legacy will endure as a gateway to explore the intricate interplay between survival, luxury, and collective identity in the tapestry of human history. His knowledge source at the time was also variable as he was a part of a sedentary society himself. The *Muqaddimah* was shaped greatly by the time period that Khaldun lived in, which was during the decline of the impact of Islamic state power.[10] There are still many sections within the text available for deeper studies as most modern scholars focus on Chapter 3 with the theories around the rise and fall of civilizations.

References

- [1] M. Akif Kayapınar, *Ibn Khaldūn’s Notion of ‘Umrān: An Alternative Unit of Analysis for Contemporary Politics?* (University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 701-706.
- [2] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah* (1377), 163-184.
- [3] Bryan K. Miller and Ursula Brosseder, *Beasts of the North: Global and Local Dynamics as Seen in Horse Ornaments of the Steppe Elite* (Published by Science Press, 2012), 95-96.
- [4] *Qu’ran*, 9:71.
- [5] Briton Cooper Busch, *Divine Intervention in the ‘Muqaddimah’ of Ibn Khaldūn* (*History of Religions* 7, 1968), 317–329.
- [6] Jean Bourgeois et al., *Saving the Frozen Scythian Tombs of the Altai Mountains (Central Asia)* (*World Archaeology* 39, 2007), 458–474.

- [7] Parzinger, Hermann, Viacheslav I. Molodin, and Damdinsüren Tseveendorzh, *New Discoveries in Mongolian Altai: The Warrior Grave of the Pazyryk Culture at Olon-Güüriin-Gol* (Bonn University Press, 2009), 203-220.
- [8] Dhaouadi, Mahmoud, *The Ibar: Lessons of Ibn Khaldun's Umran Mind* (*Contemporary Sociology* 34, 2005), 585–591.
- [9] Lenn E. Goodman, *Ibn Khaldūn and the Immanence of Judgment* (University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 738-741.
- [10] Cengiz Tomar, *Between Myth and Reality: Approaches to Ibn Khaldun in the Arab World* (*Asian Journal of Social Science* 36, 2008), 591-595.