

Reflections on Ibn khaldun's *Asabiyah*: Historical sociology revisited

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Abstract

Ibn Kahldun's *The Muqadimmah* has received increasing attention in recent decades. In particular, the concept of *asabiyah* has been interpreted in a number ways, causing obscurity in its meaning and usage. This paper explores the concept of *asabiyah* from a historical sociology perspective with the objective to initiate a discussion centered on human agency and social structure.

Keywords

asabiyah, human agency, social structure, production mode, close contact

Introduction

Ibn Khaldun was born to a prominent and learned family in Tunis on May 27, 1332 AD (Ramadan 1, 732 AH). His interest in scientific rather than political subjects are evidenced from his education, his attempts to follow his master al-Abili to Fez, his professional career in Tunis, Fez and Granada, and his research and teaching in Biskra and Egypt. Modern scholars have found Ibn Khaldun's *The Muqaddimah* (Introduction to History) remarkable in terms of organization, topics of discussion, explication of social events, and, more importantly, innovative theories. Among the many theories and concepts he expounded in *The Muqaddimah*, *asabiyah* is of particular importance. The term has been translated and interpreted in different ways: "partisanship", "feeling of unity", "famille", "parti", "tribal consciousness", "blood relationship", "social solidarity", etc. (Baali 1988:43). The term has therefore become even more ambiguous. This paper approaches the concept from an

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historical sociology standpoint, focusing on human agency and structure as well as the interaction between them (see Abrams 1982:x) in order to clarify the meaning and the role of *asabiyah*. The next section offers a critical review of the literature explicating *asabiyah*. Later sections explore the theoretical basis of the concept, its typology, and its role in social change.

Interpretations of *Asabiyah*

Ibn Khaldun's commentators have interpreted *asabiyah* in various ways, some in clear contradiction with the concept developed in *The Muqaddimah*. Lacoste (1984), for example, has sought the root of *asabiyah* in social structure rather than human agency, seeing productive activity in a tribal structure as a pre-condition for its existence. Further, he has restricted *asabiyah* to North Africa. His examination of *The Muqaddimah* has certain theoretical flaws. The main difficulty is the commentator's Marxist approach. His explanation of *The Development of the State* is an example. He places great emphasis on the existential relationship of *asabiyah* with productive activity and the tribal structure in North Africa. According to Lacoste, there is close connection between the degree of *asabiyah* and the level of productive activity. He finds *asabiyah* less common among camel-driving nomads than those who live in less arid areas. Lacoste claims, "the absence of *asabiyah* and of any constructive policies amongst the Bedouin thus results from the extremely rudimentary nature of their productive activity (Lacoste 1984:112)". He adopts the view of Montagne who believed that the authority of the chieftain increased in less arid areas. In fact, Lacoste denies the blood ties from which *asabiyah* originates but contends that it corresponds to a certain social structure and level of economic development (Lacoste 1984:112).

The same notion, although in different words, is implied in the term "tribal structure", to which Lacoste had recourse in his explanation of the root of *asabiyah*. Lacoste presents tribal structure as a precondition for the existence of *asabiyah*. To him, *asabiyah* is in fact inseparable from the tribal life (Lacoste 1984:101) found within the context of *umran badawi*. The third point on which Lacoste insists is the geographical confinement of *asabiyah* to North Africa (Lacoste 1984:102, 103, 105).

The first objection which may be raised is that although *asabiyah* is found in North Africa, there is documentary evidence within *The Muqaddimah* which shows that Ibn Khaldun was in fact referring to *asabiyah* outside North Africa. Lacoste's only explanation is that Ibn Khaldun referred to past events of a particular land or that the notion of *asabiyah* is rarely applicable to the history of other lands. He explains (Lacoste 1984):

When he (Ibn Khaldun) invokes *asabiyah* to explain events in other countries, he makes it quite clear that he is referring to past events (usually the great Arab conquests of the seventh century) or to a political conjuncture of the past (p. 104).

The precise application of his concepts is restricted to the Maghreb; they are only tangentially applicable to the history of some other lands. We must therefore examine the meaning of *asabiya* in the specific context of the history of the medieval Maghreb (p. 105).

The difficulties begin when Lacoste reduces the status of *The Muqaddimah* to a book of history which Ibn Khaldun wrote on North Africa. *The Muqaddimah*, however, is not history in itself. Rather, Ibn Khaldun used historical material to make history intelligible. Moreover, the historical material Ibn Khaldun refers to is not restricted to North Africa, and covers the history of both pre-Islamic and Islamic civilizations. In the following pages, I will show to what extent this sort of interpretation results from the theoretical weakness of the commentator and the weakness of his knowledge of *The Muqaddimah*. The second question for which Lacoste has no answer is the title of Section 21, from Chapter 4 of *Muqaddamah* which speaks of “the existence of group feeling in cities and the superiority of some of the inhabitants over others (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 2:302)”. Lacoste claims that *asabiyah* can only exist within the context of *umran badawi* (Lacoste 1984:100).

Adopting a similar approach, but using different language, G.S. Firzly begins his discussion of *asabiyah* with the claim that all attempts at a satisfactory translation have been futile. Yet, it is interesting that “mode of production” is central to Firzly’s argument concerning the evolutionary process of *umran*. According to this commentator, the foundation of the evolutionary process is based upon two modes—production of necessities and production of conveniences and luxuries (Firzly 1973:306)—and is revealed on two structural and super-structural levels.

On the structural level, this process takes the form of “the socio-economic evolution of *umran* from its *badawi* to its *hadari* stage (Firzly 1973:306)”. Parallel to this first level is the super-structural level where “evolution takes on the form of a socio-political process centered around *asabiyah* and culminating in the dynastic State (Firzly 1973:306)”. Consequently, small-scale *asabiyah* belongs to *badawi umran* (rural society) and evolves into large-scale *asabiyah* in the *hadari umran* (urban society) stage. Using this theory, Firzly came to the mistaken conclusion that Ibn Khaldun relies on *essentialism* to explain his theory of social evolution (Firzly 1973:306).

Seemingly, the author was not familiar with the meaning and the application of this term in the Classical World. Briefly, essentialism—in which a genetic

model is used to explain social evolution—forms no part of Ibn Khaldun's social theory. Moreover, if a theorist believes in social evolutionary essentialism, there is no room in his theory for the evolutionary process based on modes of production. That is the dilemma that Firzly has not solved. Which of these provides an acceptable analysis of Ibn Khaldun's social theory?

Firzly's next point is that *asabiyah* is a tribal phenomenon or a dynamic socio-political phenomenon (Firzly 1973:280), again, a characteristic feature of North Africa at the time (Firzly 1973:276).

The second set of explanations trace the origin of *asabiyah* to human agency and view structure in interaction with human agency or as an external necessity in shaping *asabiyah*. For example, natural desire forms the core of Mahdi's thought concerning *asabiyah*. He believes that "*asabiyah* (social solidarity) originates in the natural desire to be compassionate toward, and to help and defend one's immediate relations (Mahdi 1957:196)".

Mahdi speaks of the impact of external necessity (Mahdi 1957:196) where natural desire is lodged. Difficult conditions in the desert demand co-operation and confederation. These conditions persuade men to form groups to protect themselves from hostile forces. Moreover, common ancestry is influenced by factors such as common interests and experiences and ultimately, in reality, it becomes a mere figment (Mahdi 1957:197). Although in general I agree with Mahdi in his claim that *asabiyah* originates from human agency, I believe that his interpretation of *asabiyah* does not correspond with Ibn Khaldun's concept, which in the succeeding pages I will show that it is far more comprehensive. Mahdi's idea is based on one type of *asabiyah* and he overlooks the theoretical basis of the concept.

In speaking of *asabiyah*, M.M Rabi uses the same language as Mahdi, but the picture he portrays is much more comprehensive. Rabi believes that there is an alliance between *asabiyah* and structure. From this vantage point, *asabiyah* is a phenomenon both in nature and in society (Rabi 1967:49). Primitive cultures, according to him, influence the characteristics and the role of *asabiyah*. The hard life of primitive people makes them rely both on their own power and the power of the group to which they belong in facing adverse circumstances. Consequently, in primitive cultures alertness, dynamism and violence are characteristics of *asabiyah*.

According to Rabi, (1967:52) the ultimate goal of *asabiyah* is royal power and a better life. When new conditions come to the fore, reciprocal interactions between *asabiyah* and the new conditions give rise to a change in the role of *asabiyah* (Rabi 1967:52).

Apart from the two approaches examined above, there are others emanating from different disciplines such as D.M. Hart's anthropological approach. Hart's main concern is *asabiyah* based on common ancestry among North Africans

(Hart 1993:39-56). Having acquainted the reader with a different interpretation of *asabiyah*, I wish to draw his attention to a point worth considering.

Nearly all Ibn Khaldun commentators have found an identity between the theoretical basis of *asabiyah* and its application, and focusing on the latter they have tried to explain the former. My intention in the following pages is to distinguish between two senses of *asabiyah* and their social implication.

Theoretical Basis of *Asabiyah*

In any debate concerning *asabiyah*, Ibn Khaldun's theory of Man must be considered. According to him, while God instills good and evil in human nature the great mass of people do not have the means to improve their lot (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:261-262). Thus, injustice and aggression, considered evil qualities per se, are closest to human beings (Ibn Khaldun, 1986, Vol. 1:262). In reality, these qualities are responsible for discord and dispute amongst humans. As such, Ibn Khaldun finds it necessary for governments to protect the urban population and for tribal militia to protect the Bedouins (Ibn Khaldun, 1986, Vol. 1:262-263, Al-Saghir 1969:45).

Among Bedouin tribes the family is undoubtedly the smallest social unit which protects its members in the face of calamity (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol.1:263-264). This is the conclusion that Ibn Khaldun draws:

If it is true that the place where one lives is in constant need of defense and active protection, it is equally true with regard to every other social unit, such as prophecy, the establishment of royal authority, or propaganda. Nothing can be achieved in these matters without struggle, since man has the natural urge to offer resistance. And in this struggle one can not do without group feeling, as we mentioned at the beginning (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:263).

As Ibn Khaldun notes, human life is a constant struggle and this struggle is possible only in a social context. The relationship between an individual and his/her social group is central to Ibn Khaldun's notion of *asabiyah*, "It is clear that it is in the nature of human beings to enter into close *contact* and to *associate* with each other, even though they may not have a common descent (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 2:302, my italics)".

We see that Ibn Khaldun's notion of *asabiyah* is tied to "contact" and "association", which may be based on blood ties or other types of relationships between individual and his/her social group. The above quotation highlights a form of co-operation theory, one that Ibn Khaldun develops alongside his theory of conflict. From this standpoint, the more direct the relationship the closer its contact and unity (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:264), which result in mutual support

and aid (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:265) to those who are related to each other, through kinship or through rights and obligations binding those without common descent (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:267).

In Ibn Khaldun's eyes, the "only meaning of belonging to one group or another is that one is subject to its laws and conditions, as if one had come into close contact with it (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:267)". Ibn Khaldun applies his notion of *asabiyah* to societies under consideration to uncover their inner workings.

Types of *Asabiyah* (Social Solidarity)

In his notion of *asabiyah*, and in his own historical studies, Ibn Khaldun distinguishes various kinds of *asabiyah*. The first and foremost is the solidarity between an individual and a social group, which is based upon blood relations. This type occupies a highly significant place in Ibn Khaldun's social theory, as set forth in *The Muqaddimah*, "respect for blood ties is something natural among men, with the rarest exceptions (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:264)".

Humans are sensitive to blood ties. These feelings do not come to Man if the relationship is somewhat distant, but it is the result of direct relationship and close contact between persons who help one another (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:264). To further explain this kind of *asabiyah*, he makes use of such new terms as "pedigree" (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:264), "lineage", "purity of lineage" (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:265), "nobility", "House" (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:276) and "prestige" (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:278). Despite the great stress he puts on blood ties and pedigrees, he returns to his first notion about *asabiyah* and says that pedigrees are in themselves something imaginary and they are useful "only in so far as they imply close contact" (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:265).

The second kind of *asabiyah* results from the close contact of clients with people of another descent. According to Ibn Khaldun, this kind of *asabiyah* brings about the same result as the blood ties. He says:

Clients and allies belong in the same category. The affection everybody has for his clients and allies results from the feeling of shame that comes to a person when one of his neighbors, relatives, or a blood relation is, by any degree, humiliated. The reason for this is that a client relationship leads to close contact in exactly, or approximately, the same way, as does common descent (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:264).

The third kind of *asabiyah* is that of the asylum seeker who "had to flee from his own people by reason of some crime he committed (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:267)". When such a person comes to a new social group, they count him as a new member and behave towards him as to those who have common descent. As

a corollary, the person comes to have the same rights as other members (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:267).

The fourth and last type of *asabiyah* Ibn Khaldun talks about is based upon religious belief. Religious dogma is the unifying element of the members of a society. Religion minimizes mutual jealousy and turns people's attention to the truth and the oneness of their objectives. Consequently, this type of social solidarity, like others, gives rise to mutual co-operation and support. Ibn Khaldun explains:

This is because royal authority results from superiority. Superiority results from group feeling. Only by God's help in establishing His religion do individual desires come together in agreement to press their claims and their hearts become united. God said: "If you had expended all the treasures on earth, you would have achieved no unity among them". The secret of this is that when hearts succumb to false desires and are inclined to the world, mutual jealousy and widespread differences arise. When they are turned toward the truth and reject the world and whatever is false, and advance toward God, they become one in their outlook. Jealousy disappears. Mutual co-operation and support flourish. As a result, State power increases and the dynasty grows (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:319).

Among the four types of *asabiyah*, the last one, solidarity based on blood ties, has a privileged place in Ibn Khaldun's social theory. In numerous places he attempts to show the significant function blood ties serve among tribes in selecting their leadership, in unifying their actions, and in circulating power, all of which he himself witnessed or deduced. How *asabiyah* works in society is the focus of my attention in the next section.

***Asabiyah* as a means of social change**

In the transition from rural society (*umran badawi*) to urban society (*umran hadari*), Ibn Khaldun isolates two main causes. The first emanates from human agency that seeks superiority over others (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:285). The second, although it has roots in the individual, is effective when it develops in a certain social context (*umran badawi*) and remains in the same condition. This is *asabiyah* based upon blood ties. It acts as an agent to change power in favor of those who have direct relationships with their pedigrees ((Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:264 265, 269, 276). In addition, it may cause a tribe to make preparations to attack other tribes and ultimately to attack the Central State itself in the pursuit of power. The tribe shares in the State to "the degree of its power and usefulness to the ruling dynasty (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:286)". Consequently, "It gains

control over a corresponding amount of wealth and comes to share prosperity and abundance with those who have been in possession of these things (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:286)".

The new condition affects the social setting of the tribe, which brings about deep changes both in its social structure, *asabiyah*, and the conditions of desert life. If a tribe brings the State under its control, the blood *asabiyah* which caused the tribe to come to power will follow a different path.

The first question to be answered is, "does Ibn Khaldun believe in the existence of *asabiyah* in the city or does he abandon his consideration of *asabiyah* when a tribe comes to power?" As stated in the previous pages, some commentators believe that *asabiyah* belongs to rural society (*umran badawi*), particularly in the social context of North Africa. This reading of Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiyah* results from the failure of these commentators to grasp the origin of *asabiyah*.

The theoretical foundations of *asabiyah* are based on Ibn Khaldun's theory of Man. *Asabiyah* exists as long as Man exists.

One feels shame when one's relatives are treated unjustly or attacked, and one wishes to intervene when peril or destruction threatens them. *This has been a natural urge in Man, for as long as there have been human beings* (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:264). (Emphasis added)

If we admit that there is *asabiyah* between citizens in a city, how can we then reconcile this with Ibn Khaldun's statement, "when a dynasty is firmly established, it can dispense with group feeling? (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:314)". But, the type of *asabiyah* that Ibn Khaldun is considering here is based on blood ties and not on other types of *asabiyah*.

If we consider the content of Ibn Khaldun's discussion in sub-section two of Chapter Three of *The Muqaddimah* we see that he speaks of the emergence of a new group feeling in Muslim States. He puts forward the emergence of a second type of *asabiyah* or the "client *asabiyah*".

[The rulers] maintain their hold over the government and their own dynasty with the help either of clients and followers who grew up in the shadow and power of group feeling, or of tribal groups of a different descent who have become their clients (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:314).

In short, Ibn Khaldun does not dispense with *asabiyah* altogether but calls for another form of *asabiyah*. Client *asabiyah* then replaces blood *asabiyah*. He highlights the weakness of client *asabiyah* compared to blood *asabiyah* (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 2).

The inner circle of clients and followers enjoy the favors and benefactions of the ruler. A [new] group feeling is derived from them. However, [this new group feeling] does not have anything like the powerful impact [of blood ties], because it lacks direct and close blood relationships (pp. 119-120).

Although dynasties of wide power and great royal authority have their origin in religion—based either on prophethood or truthful propaganda (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:319)—according to Ibn Khaldun, blood *asabiyah* rank higher in order of importance, “religious propaganda cannot materialize without group feeling (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:322)”.

However *asabiyah* is still a driving force which changes the situation in the favor of those who preserve the social context in which blood *asabiyah* is shaped. Ibn Khaldun is interested in blood *asabiyah* for a number of reasons. The first concerns the circulation of power among tribes. Secondly, in the political expansion of the State, blood *asabiyah* takes a leading role. In such a context, a new element is added to the definition of *asabiyah*, namely the population factor.

Thus, the expansion and power of a dynasty correspond to the numerical strength of those who obtain superiority at the beginning of the rule. The length of its duration also depends upon it. The life of anything that comes into being depends upon the strength of its temper. The temper of dynasties is based upon group feeling. If the group feeling is strong, the [dynasty’s] temper likewise is strong, and its life of long duration (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:331).

Finally Ibn Khaldun reflects upon the formation of groups based on blood *asabiyah* as opposed to the Central State—a phenomenon witnessed by the writer himself. According to Ibn Khaldun, *intermarriage* is the unifying element for inhabitants of cities. This process leads to a sort of classification individuals that forms friendships or hostilities and is the first step in the formation of parties and groups.

Many city inhabitants come into close contact through intermarriage. This draws them together and eventually they constitute individual related groups. The same friendship or hostility that is found among tribes and families is found among them, and they split into parties and groups (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 2:303).

When the Central State becomes weak, the inhabitants demand devolution so that they may take control of their affairs. If they obtain the control of the city, they will follow the same path of evolution that those before them followed, emphasizing their superiority over other social groups and keeping them at a distance (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 2:303).

***Asabiyah* and other Social Factors**

From its seed-bed in rural society (*umran badawi*) and during its succeeding transformation in the urban, *Asabiyah* in general and blood *asabiyah* in particular is influenced by factors such as family, the mode of production, or mere geography. The writer of the paper emphasizes the social factors.

The closed family, which itself is the product of geographical and economic factors, is the main resource, which through reproduction successively reinforces *asabiyah*. Consequently, every factor which leads to the change of this system of family life will, willy nilly, weaken social solidarity. In the history of Islam, these factors may either be geographical (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:266-267) or social. The Arabs intermingled in cities with non-Arabs and the closed family changed into the open family and thus the purity of the Arabs lineage sullied.

Later, sedentary Arabs mixed with Persians and other non-Arabs. Purity of lineage was completely lost, and its fruit, the group feeling, was lost and eliminated. The tribes then disappeared or were eliminated, and with them, group feeling was eliminated. But [the earlier situation] remained unchanged among the Bedouins (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:267).

In Ibn Khaldun's view, meekness and docility towards the outsider leads to a lessening of the vigor of group feeling (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:287). The best concrete example of this is the payment of taxes and imposts to the Central State. The imposition of taxes on a tribe ruins group feeling among its members. Such a tribe is too weak to defend and protect itself, and as such is unable to gain control of the state (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:289).

Luxury and *asabiyah* is the last factor considered by Ibn Khaldun. Luxury is detrimental to *asabiyah* because a life of ease dims group feeling, according to Ibn Khaldun (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:287); military forces are weakened in terms of numbers (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 1:340) and their strength and bravery are abated. Luxury converts the soldier's toughness into cowardice and laziness (Ibn Khaldun 1986, Vol. 2:125). The whole process recoils upon the ruler and the State and results in their downfall (p. 341). Ibn Khaldun exemplifies his theory by references to the history of the Muslim State from the time of Umayyid to the end of the Abbasid Caliphate, which was supplanted by Hulagu (p. 127).

Conclusion

A technical term in Ibn Khaldun's social theory, *Asabiyah* has been interpreted in different ways. To better understand the concept of *asabiyah*, this paper approached it from an historical sociology standpoint. It first examined the

critical literature on *asabiyah*, either as human agency or social structure. It showed that commentators who have traced *asabiyah* to social structure as well as those who have confined it to the North Africa have been misled. It then argued that *asabiyah* springs from human agency rather than social structure—hence, the different forms of *asabiyah* enumerated by Ibn Khaldun. Finally, it attempted to elucidate *asabiyah's* place in social theory—social change.

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