

## Thought Short Report

# Insights on the history of Anthropology: its emergence in the wider Middle East before it existed as a discipline

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**Abstract** - Before anthropology existed as a discipline, important grounding relating to different aspects of the study of humanity were present in many ancient writings of some Islamic Renaissance scholars in the wider Middle East such as *Abu Rayhan al-Biruni*, a Persian scholar (973-1048) and *Ibn Khaldoun*, a Tunisian scholar (1332-1406). In this paper I present briefly the scientific and cultural products of these scholars particularly those concerning anthropological subjects. I present also some important anthropological concepts and conclusions presented in their famous studies which represent the foundation of anthropology. Thus, this paper represents a contribution to the universal history of anthropology. The knowledge of this history and that of previous and current problems specific to anthropology would help to develop a real global anthropology.

**Key words:** History of anthropology, Wider Middle East, Founders of anthropology, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Ibn Khaldoun, Global anthropology.

Anthropological science groups multiple specialties with an ambition to study and understand the humankind in all its aspects. The term "anthropology" is from the Greek *anthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος), "man" (understood to mean mankind or humanity), and *-logia* (-λογία), "study". As discipline, anthropology was developed recently particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the West and known as originated in colonial encounter between Western people and colonized peoples. According to *Dieserud Juul* (1908) the term "anthropology" was first used in 1501 by German philosopher *Magnus Hundt*. But before this date important grounding relating to different aspects of the study of humanity were present in many ancient writings of some Islamic Renaissance scholars in the wider Middle East such as *Abu Rayhan al-Biruni*, a Persian scholar (973-1048) and *Ibn Khaldoun*, a Tunisian scholar (1332-1406). The aim of this paper is mainly to show the relatively high scientific level in which anthropology emerged in the wider Middle East before it existed as a discipline and, therefore, to remove the label of colonialism often coupled to its emergence.

### **Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973 - 1048)**

Abū al-Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, born 5 September 973 in Kath, Khwarezm (now in Uzbekistan, historically a part of Geater Iran), died 13 December 1048 in Ghazni (now in Afghanistan). He is considered as one of the greatest scientists not only of the 11<sup>th</sup> century but of all times. In fact he was a polymath with an interest in various practical and scholarly fields that relate to what nowadays is described as physics, anthropology, comparative sociology, astronomy, astrology, chemistry, history, geography, mathematics, medicine, psychology, philosophy, and theology. He founded the science of anthropology before anthropology existed as a discipline, and therefore he is considered as "the first anthropologist"

He was an impartial writer on custom and creeds of various nations and was the first Muslim scholar to study Indian populations and their traditions. In addition he wrote detailed comparative studies on the anthropology of religions and cultures in the Middle East, Mediterranean and especially South Asia. *Biruni's* anthropology of religion was only possible for a scholar deeply immersed in the lore of other nations (see: Akbar, 1984; Dyczkowski, 1988; Walbridge, 1998).

Most commonly known as a mathematician, astrologer, historian and scientist, *Al-Biruni* used his interdisciplinary interests from an anthropological perspective. This interest and knowledge contributed to *Al-Biruni's* cultural awareness, evident within his great book "Ta'rikh al-Hind" (Latinized as "Indica"). Living during the high period of Islamic cultural and scientific achievements, *Al-Biruni* placed a focus on modern anthropological interests including caste, the class system, rites and customs, cultural practice, and women's issues (Akbar, 2009).

Through this modern practice, *Al-Biruni* used the concepts of cross cultural comparison, inter-cultural dialogue and phenomenological observation which have become commonplace within anthropology today (Ataman K., 2005). Within "al-Hind", he did not criticize the Indian culture or the Hindu faith, but rather spoke through them.

*Al-Biruni* developed a sophisticated methodology for his anthropological studies. For example, he wrote the following in the opening passages of his "Indica": "*No one will deny that in questions of historic authenticity hearsay does not equal eyewitness; for in the latter the eye of the observer apprehends the substance of that which is observed, both in the time when and in the place where it exists, whilst hearsay has its peculiar drawbacks*". He was also aware that there are limitations to eye-witness accounts: "*The object of eye-witness can only be actual momentary existence, whilst hearsay comprehends alike the present, the past and the future*" (Morris, 2008).

*Biruni's* tradition of comparative cross-cultural study continued in the Muslim world through to *Ibn Khaldun's* work in the 14th century.

### **Ibn Khaldun (1332 - 1406)**

*Ibn Khaldun* is a great thinker who lived from 1332 to 1406. He was born in Tunis in a family which originated from Hadramout (in Yemen) and died in Cairo. His ideas have reflected their importance on the history of universal thought as much as within the Islamic realm. His thoughts are all self-created. He was probably influenced by some earlier scholars but he was not just a continuation of them. He created genuine and innovative ideas. Thus, although he lived during the 14th century his thoughts still manage to shed light among events of current times. Recognized as the founder of sociological sciences, he has been accepted and commented on by historians, jurists, theologians, politicians, economists, teachers, educators and environmentalists alike.

In his book entitled “*Muqaddimah*” which means “Introduction”, he presented a great work that has been translated into the world’s most common languages. The British historian Arnold J. Toynbee (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*), called the “*Muqaddimah*” a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.

Some of his books cover the history of mankind up to his time and others cover the history of Berber peoples, natives of North Africa, which remain invaluable to present-day historians, as they are based on *Ibn Khaldūn's* personal knowledge of the Berbers. In fact, he presented a deep anthropological study of Berbers before anthropology existed as a discipline: In addition to exhaustive descriptions and analyses of specificities and mode of life of Berber groups, he made a comparative study of different Arab and Berber genealogists existing well before him and draws his own analysis by concluding that the Berber ancestors came mainly from Syria, while only some tribes particularly Sanhadja and Ketama tribes, came rather from Yemen. This conclusion of *Ibn Khaldūn* agrees with recent genetic results which suggest an ancient common genetic background between current Berbers and Arabs (El Moncer et al. 2011, Bahri et al. 2012).

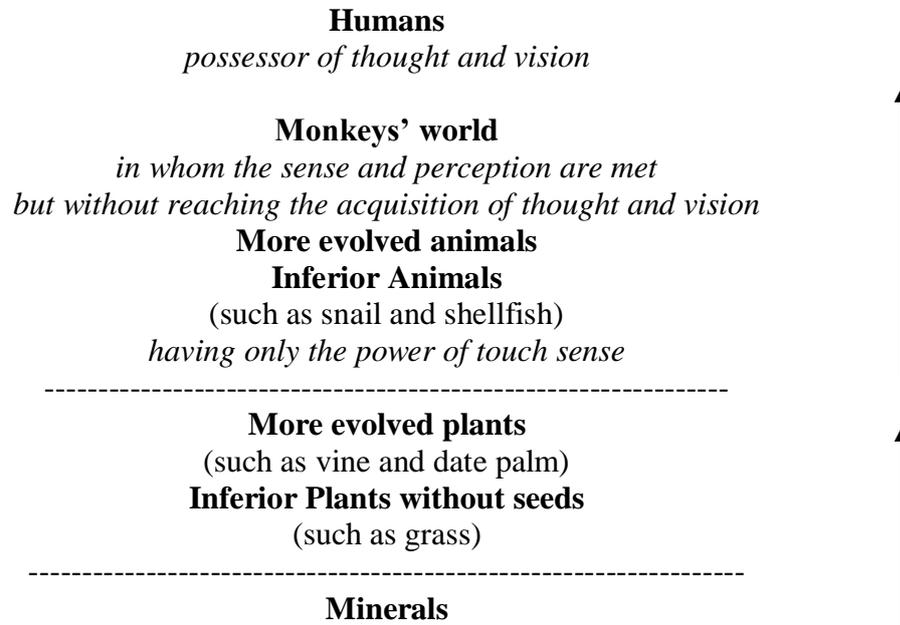
Concerning the discipline of sociology, he conceived a theory of social conflict. He developed the dichotomy of sedentary life versus nomadic life as well as the inevitable loss of power that occurs when desert warriors conquer a city. He conceived a central concept of “*asabiyyah*”, which has been translated as "social cohesion", "group solidarity", or "tribalism". This social cohesion arises spontaneously in tribes and other small kinship groups; it can be intensified and enlarged by a religious ideology. In addition *Ibn Khaldun* explained how this cohesion carries groups to power but contains within itself the seeds – psychological, sociological, economic, political – of the group's downfall, to be replaced by a new group, dynasty or empire bound by a stronger cohesion (see Hannoun 2003). He presented also the notion that when a society becomes a great civilization, its high point is followed by a period of decay.

Ibn Khaldun also contributed through his writings ideas which helped subsequent scholars to built up knowledge in what we designate currently biological anthropology particularly the subject of biological evolution and the origin of mankind. In fact the general idea of biological evolution was advanced more than 1,000 years before Darwin by the Iraqi thinker and writer *Amr ibn Bahr Al Jahis* (800-868) in his famous work presented in his book “Book of Animals”, in which he was the first to discuss food chains, and was an early adherent of environmental determinism, arguing that the environment can determine the physical characteristics of the inhabitants and that the origins of different human skin colours is the result of the environment.

He was also the first to describe the struggle for existence and an early theory of evolution by natural selection and considered the father of evolutionary theory. Later *Ibn al-Haytham* (1000-1038) wrote a book in which he argued for evolutionism and *Ibn Miskawayh* during the same period (1000-1030) discussed ideas on evolution. Then *Ibn Kaldoun* (1332 - 1406) presented this subject in abridged paragraphs but with more accuracy such as the following extracts that I have translated from the “*Muqaddimah*” as follows:

“ ..... See how the world set up started from minerals, then plants and then animals following a wonderful hierarchy. The last horizon of minerals is related to the first horizon of vegetation that has not seeds such as grass, while the last horizon of the other more evolved plants such as vine and date palm is related to the first horizon of simple animals such as snail and shellfish that have only the power of touch sense. The meaning of relatedness is that the last horizon of each beings stage is ready with curious tendency for becoming the first of the next stage. Thus, the animal world widened and its species increased and ended, in a gradual constitution, to the human possessor of thought and vision that are absent in the most evolved animals, the world of monkeys, in which the sense and perception are met but without reaching the acquisition of thought and vision .....”. Then he adds: *This world with all beings are in a situation of arrangement, disposition, connection between reasons and causes that give an intelligent relation between all universes and horizons and possibility of transformation of some beings to others.*

I can summarize this in the following diagram:



From this insight into the emergence of anthropology in the wider Middle East and its known recent development as a discipline in the West, I can draw the following conclusions:

- Anthropology emerged in a relatively high scientific level in the wider Middle East before it existed as a discipline and therefore, the label of colonialism often coupled to its emergence must be removed.
- Although the beginning of the development of Anthropology as a discipline in the West is originated in colonial encounter between Western people and colonized peoples and, therefore, coupled to its use in favor of extremist ideologies such as racism, this must not diminish the scientific value of anthropology as is the case of the use of physics and other sciences in the manufacture of different dangerous weapons which has not affected these disciplines negatively. However, only persons responsible for the use of these sciences in inhuman purposes must be criticized.

- Currently, although the use of anthropology in favor of extremist ideologies is almost disappeared, some influence of personal interest, linked or not to personal convictions which are beyond the scientific objectivity, persists and sometimes emerges thanks to the prestige and hegemony of some editors and publishers in some powerful countries. This intellectual hegemony could be one of the factors that could inhibit the development of a real global anthropology.

I am optimistic, in fact I believe that the majority of modern anthropologists will surmount the current problems specific to anthropology without ignoring the history of its foundation and without forgetting its previous problems for realizing the development of a real global anthropology.

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