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# Ibn Khaldun's Views on Race: Influences by Early Life/Childhood, Climate, Geography, and Geographic Segmentation

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## Abstract

Ibn Khaldun was a prominent Arab historian during the 14<sup>th</sup> century and is often credited as being the founder of what became the disciplines of history, philosophy, sociology, and more. Ibn Khaldun was remarkably present in the ability to discern fact from fiction, sensibility from absurdity, and logic from illogic. One such example comes from Ibn Khaldun's writing of *The Muqaddimah* wherein which he states, "Genealogists who had no knowledge of the true nature of things imagined that Negroes were the children of Ham... To attribute the blackness of the Negroes to Ham, reveals disregard of the true nature of heat and cold and the influence they exercise upon the climate and upon the creature that come into being in it."<sup>1</sup> Ibn Khaldun often dispelled of ludicrous notions about race, giving logical explanations to the topic that still holds true today, however, at times Ibn Khaldun, himself, added to the nonsensical concepts of his time. Ibn Khaldun's writing of *The Muqaddimah* is an essential source that was used to produce an understanding of what his views on race were during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Ibn Khaldun's views on race are heavily impacted by his early life and childhood, as well as his ideas of geography and climate, which he claims influences not only the color of one's skin but an individuals' character, intelligence, needs, and religious beliefs. Such ideas are controversial and contentious; however, this research aims to report the findings for the purpose of understanding his views on race and why Ibn Khaldun viewed race in the ways that he did.

**Keywords:** Ibn Khaldun, race, The Muqaddimah, 14th century, geography, Muslim, geographic segmentation.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Khaldun, and Franz Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah: The Introduction to History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 59.

Ibn Khaldun, through his writing, introduced the idea of geographic segmentation, which is best understood by viewing the visual aid below, known here as figure 1, created by Tamer Baran in his article “Market Segmentation Strategies from Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun.”<sup>2</sup>

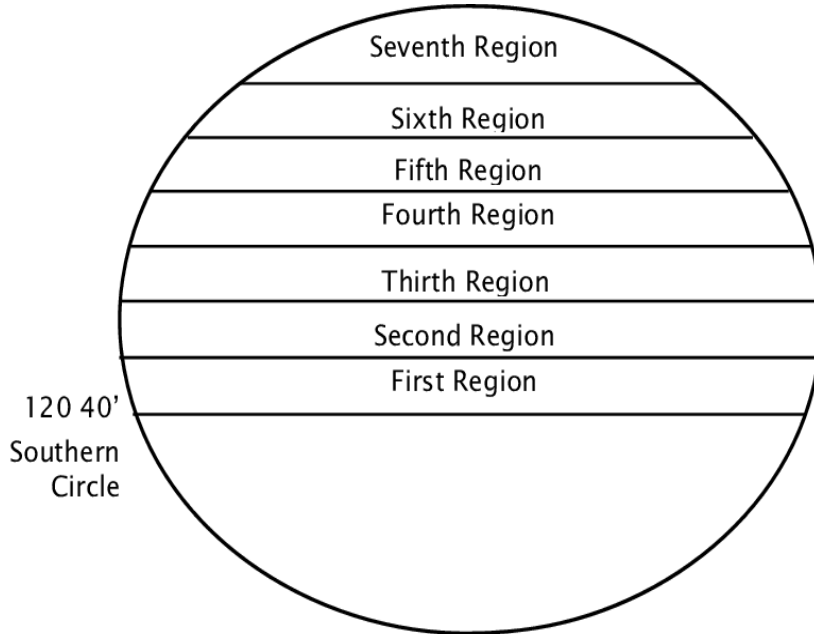


Figure 1

Geographic segmentation consists of dividing the earth first into two sections that we are all familiar with, modernly known as the Northern Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere. The southern section of the earth, which he refers to as the “Southern Circle”, Ibn Khaldun described as being “all emptiness.”<sup>3</sup> He went on to state further, on pages 54-55 of *The Muqaddimah*, that “[the equator] is believed to coincide with the beginning of the first of the seven regions. All civilization is to the north of it.”<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Ibn Khaldun does not mean that there is no human life outside of these regions, but rather that he believed the areas below the equator housed some of the most intemperate zones of the earth, and in such areas, communities of people could not advance themselves to meet the necessary standards that he believed are required for civilization to occur: Human social organization.

The Northern Hemisphere, where Ibn Khaldun believed to be the only place that civilization can dwell, was then divided further into seven regions. Each region has differed climates, and he believed such conditions had a vital effect on an individual's skin color, character, needs, intelligence, and even their religious beliefs. Ibn Khaldun describes the first, second, sixth and seventh regions as being “furthest from normal weather” or the “less temperate zones”, while the third, fourth and fifth regions consist of “normal weather” and are

<sup>2</sup> Baran, Tamer. “Market Segmentation Strategies from Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun.” *Journal of Ibn Khaldun Studies* 2, no. 1 (Nov. 2018): 62.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 54-55.

thus the “more temperate zones”.<sup>5</sup> According to Ibn Khaldun, the three middle zones house the countries within the Maghrib, as well as the countries Iraq, Syria, Western India, Spain, and China. Contrarily, he references the first, second, sixth and seventh regions with housing the “Slavs” and “Negroes”. The contrasting ways in which he describes the inhabitants of the differing zones exemplifies the profound connection between geography/climate and racial views.

On page 59 of *The Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun referenced a popular claim about race, made by genealogists of his time. Genealogists claimed that the black skin of individuals located in the first and second zones of the world was a result of their descendancy from Ham, the cursed son of Noah, whose black color was conducive with the slavery that God inflicted upon his descendants.<sup>6</sup> However, Ibn Khaldun’s geographic focus aided him in successfully correlating certain causes of skin color and race with their general locations and relative climates. Ibn Khaldun stated in his most well-known book, *The Muqaddimah*, that “The black skin common to the inhabitants of the first and second zones is the result of the composition of the air in which they live, and which comes about under the influence of the greatly increased heat in the south.”<sup>7</sup> On page 60 of *The Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun goes on to debunk the genealogists’ claim further, by emphasizing the role that climate has on one’s skin color. He states that “Negroes from the south who settle in the temperate fourth zone or in the seventh zone that tends toward whiteness, are found to produce descendants whose color gradually turns white in the course of time. Vice versa, inhabitants from the north or from the fourth zone who settle in the south produce descendants whose color turns black. This shows that color is conditioned by the composition of the air.”<sup>8</sup> Ibn Khaldun’s statement is exemplified by the figure below, which was created by Saioa Lopez to depict the distribution of human skin color.<sup>9</sup>

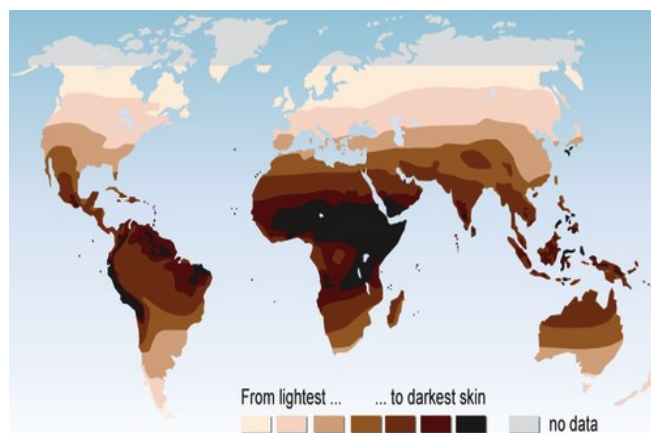


Figure 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Lopez, Saioa. “Skin Color: an example of adaptation to the environment.” *Society of Spanish Researcher in the United Kingdom*, (Jan. 12, 2017): Figure 1.

The figure above illustrates Ibn Khaldun’s statement that the farther south an individual travels, the darker their complexion becomes overtime by the increased heat of the sun, whereas the farther north an individual travels, the lighter their complexion becomes overtime due to the decreased heat of the sun.

On page 61 of *The Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun continues to explain that genealogists in the 14<sup>th</sup> century utilized the concept of geographic segmentation and, as Ibn Khaldun states, “declared all the inhabitants of the south to be descendants of Ham... all or most of the inhabitants of the north to be the descendants of Japheth... And finally, declared [those] who inhabit the central regions, to be the descendants of Shem”.<sup>10</sup> Figure 3 below is an edited version of figure 1 that I created to depict the geographic locations that are claimed by genealogists to be relative to the three biblical figures named above: Ham, Japheth and Shem.

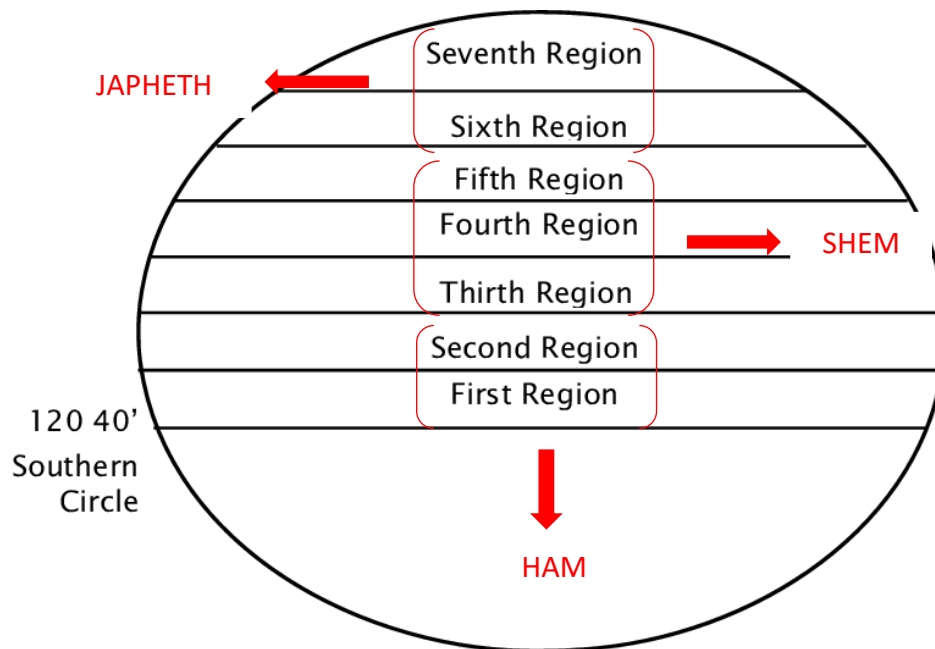


Figure 3

According to the writings of Ibn Khaldun in *The Muqaddimah*, the regions declared by genealogists to be inhabited by the descendants of Shem, otherwise known as the third, fourth and fifth regions, are credited as housing the most temperate nations. The descriptions of the inhabitants of the central regions go as far as to state that, “The human inhabitants of the [three middle] zones are more temperate in their bodies, color, character qualities, and general conditions.”<sup>11</sup> This is the first instance in which the climate of the three central regions is correlated with the abilities and qualities of its inhabitants. He specifies further that the inhabitants of the three middle zones are more temperate than the inhabitants of the remaining zones, in all aspects, due to their weather conditions being normal, thus making the people normal, as well.<sup>12</sup> Ibn Khaldun credits those of the third, fourth and fifth regions as having an advanced craftsmanship, tools and currency, while also stating that, “These

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 58.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 58.

communities tend to stay far away from wrong in all attitudes and events. [They] know Prophecy, property, state, religious laws, and sciences.”<sup>13</sup>

Although, Ibn Khaldun did well in discrediting genealogists' assumption of dark skin color being a result of the descendancy from a biblical figure, he too, presented concepts on race that were heavily influenced by his concept of geographic segmentation. When describing the first, second, sixth, and seventh regions, Ibn Khaldun states that “People of these regions are far from being normal just like their weather when compared to the people from the other three regions. They are... adequate in all things possible. Their buildings are from clay and reeds. Their clothes are from leaves or animal skin. Their qualities of character are close to those of dumb animals.”<sup>14</sup> He goes on to state further, “It has even been reported that most of the black inhabitants of the first zone live in savage isolation, do not congregate and eat one another.”<sup>15</sup> The reasoning for this, he claims, is that “their remoteness from being [in] temperate [regions] produces in them a disposition and character similar to those of dumb animals, and they become correspondingly remote from humanity. The same also applies to their religious conditions. They are ignorant of prophecy and do not have a religious law.”<sup>16</sup>

Ibn Khaldun's concept of geographic segmentation, at times, resulted in his statements being ill-informed. One such example can be found on page 63 of *The Muqaddimah*, wherein which Ibn Khaldun states, “We have seen that Negroes are in general characterized by levity, excitability, and great emotionalism. They are found eager to dance... they are everywhere described as stupid.”<sup>17</sup> Ibn Khaldun attempted to give an explanation to his statement by stating that “Negroes live in the hot zone. Heat dominates their temperament and formation... As a result, they are more quickly moved to joy and gladness, and they are merrier. Excitability is the direct consequence.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, Ibn Khaldun believed that due to the geographic location, being in what he refers to as the first and second zones, the increased heat of the air resulted in the feeling of inexpressible joy and gladness, excitability, great emotionalism, an eagerness to dance, and stupidity. Ibn Khaldun's interpretation of the black inhabitants' joy and gladness being due to the climate around them is yet another example of the role that geography and climate played in his views on race. The previous examples paired with the present of how one's location influences their skin color, intelligence, and characteristics shows how integral of a role Ibn Khaldun's ideas on geography played in what his beliefs on race were.

Much of Ibn Khaldun's ideas and views on race were heavily influenced by his understanding of geography, climate, and their relative impact on human beings' skin color, character, needs, intelligence, and even their religious beliefs. However, Ibn Khaldun's views on race are substantially more complex than what I have introduced thus far, with factors that include politics and Ibn Khaldun's early life. Ibn Khaldun's life and upbringing is an essential resource in discovering his views of the world. As such, Ibn Khaldun's views on race derive, in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 59.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Khaldun and Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 63.

part, from his social experiences, upbringing, education, and learned behaviors. Born in Tunis, Tunisia in the year 1332, Ibn Khaldun was brought up in a prominent upper-class Andalusian family known for its participation in education and politics. Tunis, Tunisia, at the time of Ibn Khaldun's life and adolescence, was enduring political instability following the decline of the Arab Muslim Empire. During Ibn Khaldun's childhood, political rivalries, plots, and upheavals on the rise would have had a considerable influence on the ways in which he viewed the world. More so, Ibn Khaldun's observations of how individuals (as well as society) handled such instability greatly affected his views of the world and the differing individuals within it.

Ibn Khaldun states in, "The Autobiography of Ibn Khaldun" that he was able to trace his descent to an Arab tribe from Yemen, specifically known as the Hadhrami or (People of Hadhramaut).<sup>19</sup> Hadhramaut is a region in South Arabia, whose population in the 13<sup>th</sup> century was of majority Berber descent. Robert Irwin, the author of "Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography" took note of this information and stated that, "The biographer Mohammad Enan questions [Ibn Khaldun's] claim, suggesting that his family may have been Muladis [Muslims of mixed Arab, Berber, and Iberian origin who lived in Al-Andalus during the Middle Ages] who pretended to be of Arab origin in order to gain social status."<sup>20</sup> When Ibn Khaldun's ancestors left Andalusia and moved to Tunisia, they did not change their claim to Arab history even though the Berbers, at the time, were ruling Al-Andalus. Had they chosen to reclaim their Berber heritage, the esteem of the family would surely have diminished. To reclaim Berber heritage would be to confess deceit, and to confess deceit would be to welcome criticism. Enduring such an ordeal in the early life stages has the potential to teach an adolescent that prestige is equivalent to power and that prestige can manifest in many forms; one of which is an individual's ancestry/heritage (i.e., race). Assuming Ibn Khaldun's family did, indeed, falsify their origins to dignify themselves, assuredly such an experience paired with an affinity for politics in a time of instability would have fueled Ibn Khaldun's focus on civilization, politics, and power. Additionally, his views, understanding, and ideas of race would be affected by his experiences.

Many of Ibn Khaldun's statements on race stem from an already established geographic concept; and his ideas of geography often correlate with topics within politics, religion and sociology. However, it can also be deduced that Ibn Khaldun's early adolescent life and social circumstances played an integral role in shaping his views of not only race, but society. Ibn Khaldun's efforts to discover, record, and explain the world around us aided in the development of many disciplines that we use today, even dispelling some of the nonsensical claims of his time. However, Ibn Khaldun made several contentious statements on the topic of race, and such narratives warrant critical analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of Ibn Khaldun's work, life and opinions. Further research into Ibn Khaldun's views on race and the factors in which these views were bred is necessary and can help us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what his views on race were.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibn Khaldun. "The Autobiography of Ibn Khaldun." *JiaHu Books*, (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Moss, Lawrence S. "Ibn Khaldun Drifted Away from Al-Farabi's Political Idealism." *Routledge*, (1996): 87.

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