

The Journal of Social Encounters

Volume 9
Issue 1 *The Continuing Saga of Darfur and Sudan*

Article 13

2025

Review Essay: Ibn Khaldun on Sufism

Eslam ElBahlawan
eslamalaa@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters



Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [African Studies Commons](#), [Anthropology Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Islamic Studies Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

ElBahlawan, Eslam (2025) "Review Essay: Ibn Khaldun on Sufism," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, 43-50.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69755/2995-2212.1327>

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol9/iss1/13



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](#).

Review Essay: Ibn Khaldun on Sufism

Eslam Alaa ElBahlawan

eslamalaa@hotmail.com

An Analysis of the Requirements of the Sufi Path: A Defense of the Mystical Tradition by Ibn Khaldūn. Edited and translated by Carolyn Baugh. 2022, New York: New York University Press, ISBN 9781479806331.

Introduction

Ibn Khaldūn's *The Requirements of the Sufi Path*, expertly translated by Carolyn Baugh, is not just a scholarly exploration of Sufism; it is a bridge between the mystical and the legal, a rare fusion of juristic precision and spiritual insight. In this work, Khaldūn steps into the role of a jurist to defend the Sufi tradition, weaving together the wisdom of Sufi masters like Imam al-Ghazālī and Imam al-Qushayrī with his own legal acumen. What emerges is a compelling argument for the necessity of spiritual guidance, framed within the rigorous structure of Islamic law. This book, brought to life through Baugh's careful translation, is not merely a historical artifact but a living dialogue between the heart's mystical yearnings and the mind's demand for order, a conversation as relevant today as it was in the 14th century. To fully appreciate the significance of this work, we must first understand the intellectual legacy of Ibn Khaldūn, whose contributions to human heritage remain unparalleled. In the following sections, we will explore the life and legacy of Ibn Khaldūn, the art of translation that brings his voice to modern readers, and the profound insights this book offers into the Sufi Path.

Ibn Khaldūn's Life and Legacy

Ibn Khaldūn is considered the founder of sociology and the first to establish it on modern scientific foundations. He arrived at remarkable theories in this field regarding the laws of human civilization (*al-'umrān al-basharī*), the outcomes of human civilization, the theory of social cohesion (*'aṣabiyyah*), and the rise, development, and fall of states. His thoughts and theories preceded those of later renowned scholars by several centuries.

Historians have attributed numerous works to Ibn Khaldūn in the fields of history, mathematics, logic, Islamic studies, and philosophy. However, his most famous work is titled *Kitāb al-'Ibar wa-Dīwān al-Mubtada' wa-l-Khabar fī Ayyām al-'Arab wa-l-'Ajam wa-l-Barbar wa-man 'Āṣarahum min Dhawī al-Sulṭān al-Akbar* (The Book of Lessons and the Register of Beginnings and Events in the Days of the Arabs, Foreigners, and Berbers, and Their Powerful Contemporaries Rulers). This book spans seven volumes, the first of which is *Al-Muqaddimah* (The Introduction), which is the most widely circulated of Ibn Khaldūn's works and is also famously known as *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn*. *Al-Muqaddimah* constitutes approximately one-third of the book and serves as an extensive introduction. In it, Ibn Khaldūn discusses and lays the foundation for his views on geography, human civilization, urban development, philosophy, human conditions, and the factors that distinguish one society from another.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Ibn Khaldūn's thought is his treatment of history as a science. He invented a philosophy of history that is undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of human thought across all eras and nations. His concept of *'aṣabiyyah* (social cohesion) explains how tribes and small kinship groups rise to power, only to decline as they assimilate into the refined

cultures they conquer. This cyclical view of history, where civilizations rise and fall due to internal and external factors, remains a cornerstone of his legacy.

The social status of Ibn Khaldūn's family played a significant role in his upbringing, enabling him to study under the best teachers in the Great Maghreb. He was born in Tunis in 1332 into a family of scholars and literary figures. He memorized the Qur'an during his childhood, and his father was his first teacher. His ancestors held high-ranking positions in Andalusia and Tunisia and were people of influence and prestige. His family migrated from Andalusia in the mid-13th century and settled in Tunisia.

Ibn Khaldūn's personality combined the essential practical and intellectual elements that make a true historian. Unlike other historians who observed events and facts from a distance, he actively participated in shaping those events and facts from positions of responsibility. Over a long professional career spanning more than 50 years, and within a geographical scope extending from Andalusia to the Levant, he demonstrated that historical events do not occur by mere chance or due to unknown external forces but are the result of underlying factors within human societies. Therefore, he approached the study of historical events from the internal, essential movement of history.

Ibn Khaldūn states in *Al-Muqaddimah*:

"إن التاريخ لا يزيد في ظاهره عن أخبار الأيام والدول، إنما هو في باطنه نظر وتحقيق وتعليل للكانات ومبادئها
دقيق، وعلم بكيفيات الوقائع وأسبابها عميق، لذلك فهو أصيل في الحكمة عريق، وجدير بأن يعد في علومها
وخليق"

Translation: "History, in its outward appearance, is no more than accounts of days and states, but in its essence, it is examination, verification, and explanation of the nature and principles of existence. It is a profound science of the modalities and causes of events, and thus it is deeply rooted in wisdom and worthy of being counted among its sciences."

By this, he followed a methodology in studying history that ties all events to "human civilization" (*al-ʿumrān al-basharī*) and operates according to a fixed law. Thus, while he did not discover the subject matter of history, he made it a science and established a philosophy and critical scientific methodology for it. He transformed it from superficial description and unanalyzed narration to rational analysis and events explained by logical, universal causes, within what is now called "historical determinism". This applies not only to his own society but to all human societies across all eras, making him the first to venture into what is known as the history of civilizations or comparative history.

Consequently, Ibn Khaldūn's scientific approach to history led him to the discovery of sociology. This methodology is based on the idea that all social phenomena are interconnected, with each phenomenon having a cause and simultaneously being the cause of the next phenomenon. Therefore, his concept of "human civilization" (*al-ʿumrān al-basharī*) encompasses all phenomena, whether demographic, social, political, economic, or cultural.

Ibn Khaldūn passed away in 1406 in Cairo, Egypt. Over the course of his 74-year life, he spent 24 years in Tunisia, 26 years between the Maghreb and Andalusia, and 24 years in Egypt and the Levant. His activities spanned administration, politics, oratory, judiciary, teaching, research, and authorship. Throughout his life, he experienced the luxuries of palaces and the hardships of prisons, engaged in public life, and held various positions, including minister, chamberlain, ambassador, teacher, judge, and orator. Ibn Khaldūn endured profound sorrow, losing his parents and teachers to the Black Death plague in Tunis when he was only 16 years old, and later losing his wife and children in a shipwreck. There were also some adventures that almost cost him his life several times while he was escaping from Morocco or Tunisia to Egypt, perhaps the most prominent of which was his meeting with Timur Lenk, the Tatar prince in the Levant, and his escape from him afterwards.

Ibn Khaldūn played a prominent role in defining the features of civilizations, which are reflected in the intellectual output of its scholars and thinkers. This intellectual output, in turn, reflects the civilizational characteristics of the era in which it was produced.

The Translation: A Bridge Between Languages

Carolyn Baugh's translation of Ibn Khaldūn's *The Requirements of the Sufi Path* is a remarkable achievement, combining clarity, precision, and innovative presentation. The dual Arabic-English format, with each Arabic section numbered and its translation placed directly opposite, transforms the reading experience, making the text accessible to a wide audience while preserving the depth of the original work. This parallel-text approach is a testament to Baugh's scholarly rigor and her ability to navigate the intricate interplay of language, law, and mysticism in Ibn Khaldūn's text.

1. Dual-Language Format for Deep Engagement

The parallel-text format is a deliberate choice that serves multiple purposes. For scholars and students of Arabic, it provides an invaluable resource for comparative analysis. Readers can move seamlessly between the original Arabic and the English translation, examining how Baugh renders complex legal and mystical terminology. For example, in §1.10, where Ibn Khaldūn discusses the relationship between the internal (*al-bāṭin*) and external (*al-zāhir*) aspects of piety, the reader can see how Baugh translates these terms while also referring to the original Arabic to grasp the full depth of his argument. This format encourages active engagement, inviting readers to participate in the process of understanding and interpreting the text.

For bilingual readers, the dual-language presentation offers the intensity of Ibn Khaldūn's prose in the original Arabic alongside the clarity of Baugh's English translation. This approach bridges the gap between scholarly precision and general readability, making the work valuable for both specialists and non-specialists. It also highlights Baugh's skill as a translator, as her choices are laid bare for readers to evaluate and appreciate. For instance, in §3.7, where Ibn Khaldūn discusses the concept of *irādah* (will) in the Sufi context, the reader can see how Baugh translates it as "a surrendering of will" while also examining the original Arabic to understand the broader implications of this term in Sufi thought.

2. Preserving the Integrity of the Original Text

The parallel-text format preserves the integrity of the original Arabic text, allowing readers to verify the accuracy of the translation or explore alternative interpretations. This is particularly

important for a text like *The Requirements of the Sufi Path*, where subtle differences in wording can carry significant theological or legal implications. For example, in §4.30, where Ibn Khaldūn discusses the power of divine names and letters, the reader can compare Baugh's translation of terms like *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* (the beautiful names) and *tawātur* (multiple parallel chains of transmission) with the original Arabic, fostering a deeper understanding of these concepts. This format also allows readers to appreciate the beauty and complexity of Ibn Khaldūn's language, creating a dialogue between the Arabic and English languages. By presenting the text in this way, Baugh invites readers to explore the interplay between language, culture, and thought, enriching their understanding of Ibn Khaldūn's work and its historical context.

3. Navigating Complex Terminology

Translating a work like *The Requirements of the Sufi Path* is no small feat, given its dense legal and mystical terminology. Baugh faced several challenges, particularly in rendering Sufi concepts into English. For example, terms like *wahdah* (Oneness), *wāḥidiyyah* (Inclusive Oneness), and *aḥadiyyah* (Exclusive Oneness) are difficult to translate, but Baugh adopted William Chittick's translations for these terms, ensuring that the nuanced meanings were preserved. Similarly, in Chapter Four, where Ibn Khaldūn discusses lettrism and talismanic practices, Baugh relied on the expertise of scholars like Noah Gardiner to accurately translate terms like *nufūs rabbāniyyah* (divinely compelling forces) and *taksīr* (decomposition). Her willingness to draw on the expertise of others and her transparency about her own limitations make her work all the more credible.

Baugh's translation also succeeds in preserving Ibn Khaldūn's voice as a jurist and scholar. She captures his methodical, no-frills approach to legal argumentation, as well as his occasional impatience with overly complex Sufi terminology. For example, in §4.20, Ibn Khaldūn dismisses certain Sufi thinkers with the remark, "All of this goes on in great detail, explained using ambiguous expressions and anomalous technical terminology." Baugh's translation conveys this tone perfectly, allowing readers to hear Ibn Khaldūn's voice clearly.

4. A Model of Scholarly Translation

Carolyn Baugh's translation of *The Requirements of the Sufi Path* is a model of how to balance scholarly rigor with readability. Her careful handling of multiple manuscripts, her thoughtful approach to challenging terminology, and her ability to make a complex text accessible to modern readers all demonstrate her skill as a translator and scholar. By providing a clear, accurate, and well-contextualized translation, she has made an important contribution to the study of Ibn Khaldūn and Sufism, ensuring that this work can be appreciated by a wider audience. Her work is a testament to the power of translation to bridge languages, cultures, and centuries, and it deserves high praise for its depth and clarity.

The Book: Ibn Khaldūn's Legal and Mystical Synthesis

The Requirements of the Sufi Path is a unique work in Ibn Khaldūn's corpus, not originally intended as a book but rather as a long *fatwa* (legal opinion) in response to a pressing question among scholars in 14th-century Fez. The central issue was whether a seeker on the Sufi path required the guidance of a Sufi master (*shaykh*) or if self-study of Sufi texts was sufficient. Ibn Khaldūn's response, though framed as a legal opinion, evolved into a comprehensive exploration of Sufism, blending his expertise in Islamic law with his insights into mystical practice. Interestingly, he never included this work in his list of writings, likely because he viewed it as a

fatwa rather than a formal book. Yet, its depth and rigor have ensured its place as a significant contribution to both Sufi thought and Islamic jurisprudence.

The book is divided into six chapters, each addressing a distinct aspect of Sufism and its relationship to Islamic law. **The first chapter** lays the foundation by defining Sufism and distinguishing it from other forms of Islamic practice. Ibn Khaldūn begins by outlining two types of divine law: the exterior law, which governs outward actions such as worship, customs, and social relations, and the interior law, which focuses on the heart's inner states, beliefs, and motivations. He argues that while both are essential, the interior law holds greater importance because it is the source of all outward actions. A sound heart produces sound actions, while a corrupt heart leads to corruption in behavior.

Ibn Khaldūn then connects these two types of law to three levels of religious obligations: submission (*islām*), faith (*īmān*), and virtue (*ihsān*). These levels correspond to the disparities in how individuals fulfill their religious duties. The station of submission is concerned with external acts of worship, which are either accepted or rejected based on their outward validity. The station of faith involves harmony between the exterior and interior during worship, though it may still include lapses in attention. Even so, there is hope for salvation at this level. The station of virtue represents the highest level, where the believer achieves perfect harmony between their inner and outer states, carefully supervising all acts of devotion to ensure no distraction intrudes. This is the most perfect level, reserved for those who seek true salvation.

Having established this framework, Ibn Khaldūn defines Sufism as “maintaining the finest comportment in the sight of God in both interior and exterior actions, observing the limits ordained by God, prioritizing the inner workings of hearts and supervising their hidden dimensions, and thereby eagerly seeking salvation”. This definition captures the essence of the Sufi path as it was understood by the early generations of Sufis and the pious ancestors. For Ibn Khaldūn, Sufism is not merely a set of practices but a holistic approach to spirituality that integrates the heart's inner states with outward acts of worship.

In the second chapter, Ibn Khaldūn also explores how the divine subtle entity, the spiritual essence within humans, attains knowledge and perfection. He distinguishes between three types of knowledge: *acquired knowledge*, which comes through study and reasoning; *inspired knowledge*, which arises from purification and spiritual struggle; and *revelation*, which is reserved for prophets. Inspired knowledge, he argues, is the key to unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*shuhūd*), the highest forms of spiritual experience. This knowledge is not merely intellectual but experiential, leading to a direct encounter with divine truths.

Ibn Khaldūn further discusses the concept of happiness, which he defines as the fulfillment of the instincts' desires according to their nature. Just as anger finds pleasure in revenge and bodily desire delights in food and sex, the divine subtle entity finds its greatest delight in attaining knowledge and learning. This delight varies depending on the object of knowledge: mundane knowledge, such as grammar or poetry, pales in comparison to the joy of knowing God, His attributes, and His acts. The highest form of happiness, Ibn Khaldūn asserts, comes from *gnosis* (*ma'rifah*) of God, which is both the most noble and the most pleasurable form of knowledge. He describes this gnosis as an “unveiled illumination”, a direct experience of divine truths that transcends ordinary perception.

This state of unveiling is likened to a dream-vision, where the barriers of the physical world are lifted, and the heart perceives with clarity. He uses the analogy of seeing a figure in dim light: when the light increases, the figure becomes clear, though it remains unchanged. Similarly, after death, when the bodily impediments are removed, the soul's perception of divine truths becomes even clearer and more profound.

In the third chapter, Ibn Khaldun addresses the question of whether a spiritual seeker requires a teacher or guide (*shaykh*) to navigate the Sufi path. He argues that a guide is indispensable, particularly for the advanced stages of spiritual struggle. This chapter reaches into the spiritual struggles (*mujāhadāt*) that Sufis undertake, dividing them into three hierarchical levels: piety (*taqwā*), rectitude (*istiḳāmah*), and unveiling (*kashf*). Ibn Khaldūn explains that each level serves as a prerequisite for the next, with the first two attainable through self-study but the third requiring the guidance of a master. This distinction reflects his broader concern with maintaining the integrity of the Sufi path while preventing the spread of heretical practices. Ibn Khaldun outlines five essential conditions that must be met for a seeker to progress on this path under the guidance of a teacher. These conditions reflect his characteristic blend of spiritual wisdom and practical, sociological insight.

The first condition is *piety (taqwā)*, which Ibn Khaldun sees as the foundational stage of spiritual development. The seeker must adhere to God's limits, avoid sin, and maintain a vigilant awareness of their internal states. This stage prepares the heart for the more advanced struggles that follow. The second condition is *rectitude (istiḳāma)*, which involves disciplining the self to follow the straight path. The seeker must align their behavior with the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet's example, overcoming base desires and cultivating virtuous traits. This stage refines the soul and prepares it for deeper spiritual experiences.

The third condition is the *emulation of a teacher*. Ibn Khaldun emphasizes that a qualified spiritual guide is essential, as the teacher has already traversed the path and can provide guidance based on their own experience. The teacher helps the seeker navigate the challenges and pitfalls of the spiritual journey, offering corrections and support when needed. This reflects Ibn Khaldun's broader belief in the importance of mentorship and the transmission of knowledge within any discipline, including spirituality.

The fourth condition is *severing attachments*, which requires the seeker to detach from worldly distractions and focus entirely on God. This involves practices such as seclusion, fasting, and silence to purify the heart and mind, creating the inner stillness necessary for divine connection. Ibn Khaldun acknowledges the difficulty of this stage, noting that it requires significant discipline and self-control, qualities that are cultivated under the watchful eye of a teacher.

The fifth and final condition is *sincerity of will (ṣidq al-irāda)*, where the seeker's intention must be pure and focused solely on God. The heart must be entirely devoted to the divine, with no room for worldly desires or distractions. This complete surrender to God's will is essential for achieving the higher stages of spiritual realization. Ibn Khaldun warns that without this sincerity, the seeker risks falling into spiritual error or self-deception.

In chapter 4, Ibn Khaldun draws a clear distinction between the authentic Sufism of the early masters and the later deviations that have distorted its original teachings. He emphasizes that the true goal of Sufism is spiritual purification and closeness to God, achieved through piety, rectitude, and guidance from a qualified teacher. However, he critiques later Sufis who have distorted the original teachings of Sufism by delving into speculative and esoteric knowledge, such as *lettrism* (the study of the mystical properties of letters) and *astral magic*, which he considers deviations from the true path. He argues that these practices are not only unnecessary but also potentially harmful, as they distract from the core goal of Sufism: purification of the heart and closeness to God.

Ibn Khaldun also criticizes the philosophical Sufism of figures like Ibn al-‘Arabī, Al-Būnī, and Ibn Sab’īn, who developed complex metaphysical systems to explain the nature of existence and the divine. He argues that their ideas are often speculative, lack clear evidence, and can lead to confusion and heresy. He contrasts this with the early Sufis, who focused on practical spiritual training and adherence to the Qur’an and the Prophet’s example. Finally, he warns against the dangers of premature unveiling and the pursuit of spiritual experiences without proper guidance. He stresses that the true path of Sufism is one of discipline, humility, and adherence to the Law, and that any deviation from this path risks leading the seeker into error or even heresy.

Chapter 5 discusses the role of the Sufi guidance/Teacher, emphasizing that in the struggle for unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*mushahada*), a teacher is absolutely necessary. This advanced stage of the Sufi path involves navigating complex spiritual states and unseen realities that are beyond the seeker’s control. A Sufi master is essential because this path is highly specialized, with its own rules, protocols, and hidden dangers. Without a guide, the seeker risks falling into corruption of spiritual states, which can lead to unbelief, licentiousness, or rejection of the Law. The teacher, having already walked this path, can identify pitfalls, hidden obstacles, and dangerous points, ensuring the seeker navigates the journey safely and effectively.

Moreover, the struggle for unveiling is described as an "*artificial death*" where the seeker must extinguish their human faculties to achieve a perspective akin to that of natural death. This process requires precise spiritual exercises that cannot be learned independently or from books. The teacher’s role is crucial in guiding the seeker through these exercises, distinguishing between beneficial and harmful spiritual states, and helping the seeker understand mystical experiences that are beyond ordinary perception. Without a teacher, the seeker is like a blind man walking along a perilous path, unable to discern the way forward or avoid the dangers that lie ahead. Thus, the teacher is indispensable for achieving the ultimate goal of witnessing divine realities.

Chapter 6 presents a debate between those who argue for the necessity of a Sufi teacher in the spiritual journey and those who believe the journey can be undertaken without one. The advocate for a teacher emphasizes that the path of unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*mushahada*) involves complex spiritual states and mystical experiences that cannot be navigated alone. A teacher is essential to guide the seeker through these challenges and prevent spiritual deviation. The deniers, however, argue that the journey can be based on the Qur’an, Prophetic Practice, and books, making a teacher unnecessary. They cite examples of people who have succeeded without a guide.

Ibn Khaldun sides with the advocate, concluding that a teacher is indispensable for the path of unveiling, as it involves experiences beyond ordinary perception. However, for the struggles for piety (*taqwa*) and rectitude (*istiqama*), a teacher is not strictly necessary, as these can be learned from conventional sources. The author also discusses the rare case of the ecstatic (*majdhub*), who has attained a high level of spiritual realization and no longer needs a teacher. Ultimately, the author emphasizes that while books are useful for general knowledge, the advanced stages of the spiritual journey require the guidance of a teacher who has experienced the path firsthand.

Conclusion

Ibn Khaldūn's *The Requirements of the Sufi Path* stands as a testament to his intellectual breadth, skillfully merging legal reasoning with mystical depth. His argument for the necessity of a Sufi guide is not just a historical stance but a thought-provoking contribution to ongoing debates about spiritual authority and self-guided learning. Carolyn Baugh's meticulous translation ensures that Ibn Khaldūn's voice resonates with clarity, making this work accessible to both scholars and students of Sufism. More than a legal treatise, this book serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, challenging readers to reconsider the intersections of law, spirituality, and human experience.

Dr. Eslam ElBahlawan is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow 2024 (MSCA, Agreement No. 101210680) at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. He holds a PhD in Cultural and Social Anthropology from the University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, where his research explored the intersections of migration, everyday life, and religious practices, particularly within Middle Eastern and European diaspora communities. His current work focuses on Islamic studies and the socio-cultural dimensions of Sufism, building on his multidisciplinary expertise in economics, development studies, and economic sociology. Dr. ElBahlawan's research in Cultural and Social Anthropology contributes to broader understandings of cultural identity, migration, and religious transformations in global contexts.