IBN KHALDÜN ON MAGIC AND THE OCCULT*

MUSHEGH ASATRIAN
(Yerevan State University)

Introduction

The present work is dedicated to the analysis of the views on magic and the occult sciences of the fourteenth-century Arab Muslim thinker Wali al-Dīn Abū Zaid ʿAbd al-Rāhmān ibn Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn. He was born in Tunis in 1332 and died in Cairo in 1406. During his life he was in service in various courts in the Maghrib and Muslim Spain, where his life was quite restless, marked by courtly intrigues and even imprisonment for 21 months, when he was at the court of Fez (1354-1362). He lived the last 24 years of his life in Egypt where he was appointed judge on a number of occasions.1

His main work is the Muqaddima, meaning prolegomenon,2 a treatise on human civilisation and state, where he discusses at length the nature of state, kingship, and related matters. This book constitutes the first volume of a larger treatise dedicated to the history of the Arabs and those states and peoples that had played, in Ibn Khaldūn’s view, a historically significant role.

Several sections of this work are about magic and the occult sciences, and a whole prolegomenon3 on the problem of human knowledge, in which the author examines the nature of prophecy, divination, sainthood, and the types of human perception. In a separate section of the sixth chapter he speaks also about Sufism, highlighting the way of Sufi mystics and the properties of their knowledge. Furthermore, an important part of Ibn Khaldūn’s occult lore is constituted by section 53 from the third chapter, which is on the eschatological divination (jāfi). Finally, in his treatise on the Sufis, called “The Cure for One Who Asks, for the Improve-

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3 Ibn Khaldūn’s Muqaddimah consists of six chapters, the first of which contains seven prolegomena; each of them focuses on a particular topic connected with human life, such as the influence of the climate and geographical zones on human temper, and so on.
ment of Questions" (Shīfā' al-sā'il li tahdhib al masā'il), Ibn Khaldūn examines the nature of the mystical knowledge of the Sufis. In the sixth chapter he considers in certain sections each of the occult sciences: magic and talismanic art, alchemy, astrology, and dream interpretation. I have examined here also his refutation of philosophy, which is a section in the same chapter of Muqaddima. Although philosophy does not belong to the "occult sciences", I have, however, tried to analyse his views on this branch of knowledge as well, since it may give us a better understanding of Ibn Khaldūn's epistemology. In the third chapter of his Shīfā' al-sā'il Ibn Khaldūn offers a detailed discussion of the magic of letters and numbers. A section on eschatological divination, the so-called jahl, is in the third chapter of Muqaddima.

Most of the mentioned sciences are refuted by the author (with the exception of oneiromancy) on different grounds, theological, epistemological, natural-scientific, and so on. However, in all of them one can see the author's concern for the state and human civilisation; in fact, what all these refutations have in common, is the evaluation according to their significance for the well being of state.

In fact, this part of Ibn Khaldūn's writings is not well examined. There are, to my knowledge, only a few remarks on his writings on magic and the occult sciences, and even these mostly either have a summarising character, or, being incorporated into the framework of larger publications, are very general, containing relatively little analysis.

In order to understand Ibn Khaldūn's positions on magic and the occult properly, a brief presentation of the views of the renown Ash'arite theologian al-Baqillānī would be of some interest, as Ibn Khaldūn, being himself an Ash'arite, was the representative of the same school of Islamic Weltanschauung and, therefore, bearer of the same religious mentality. Al-Baqillānī is the author of a unique treatise on the nature of miracles, called Kitāb al-Bayān 'an al-fīraq bayna al-mu'jizāt wa al-karāmāt wa al-hiyāl wa al-khāhānītī wa al-sīhīrī wa al-nīrānjāt (A treatise on the nature of the apologetic miracle and its differentiation from charisms, trickery, divination, magic and spells). The main topics which al-Baqillānī's Kitāb al-

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5 See Al-Azmeh, op. cit.: 115.
6 Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Baqillānī, Kitāb al-Bayān 'an al-fīraq bayna al-mu'jizāt wa al-karāmāt wa al-hiyāl wa al-khāhānītī wa al-sīhīrī wa al-nīrānjāt (A Treatise on the Nature of