Ibn Khaldun and Frederick Jackson Turner: Islam and the Frontier Experience*

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The occasion for this paper was the conference on Ibn Khaldun at Duke University, but the paper reflects a long term interest of mine in the Islamic frontier. It is my hope that putting Ibn Khaldun, Islam’s first theoretician of the frontier, in the context of a discussion of frontier studies will provoke a discussion that will lead to a thorough investigation of the interaction of peoples along Islam’s boundaries, past and present. For this reason, I have chosen in this paper to stress the similarities between Ibn Khaldun’s conception of the frontier and that conception expressed in the ever-increasing body of frontier literature. I do not mean to lead my readers to believe that I see no differences between the American and North African autochthons. It is, rather, that I see a similarity in the way in which the frontiers I mention are treated in the romanticized and retrospective views of the historians and poets. The romanticization of the frontier experience seems to be a common theme in frontier literature which is now so voluminous that much of it is, I regret to say, beyond the scope of this paper. Also beyond the scope of this paper, but interesting for speculation, is the underlying psychology of those who, from the vantage and safety of the urban study, pursue the vicarious frontier and idealize the frontiersman as the embodiment of strength, virtue, courage, and valor.

Nearly a century ago in 1893, an American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, read a paper before the American Historical Association in which he offered the then novel proposition that the frontier could explain the development of America. He was writing at the end of the era of the frontier, for just three years earlier the Superintendent of the Census had declared that there no

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longer existed a line of frontier between the settled and the unsettled lands. For Turner, the existence of unsettled areas and the interaction between the settled and the unsettled helped form the character of American culture and civilization. "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advancement of American settlement westward, explain American development." For him, there was "... a recurrence of the process of evolution in each western area reached in the process of expansion." Development was not "... along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area." Development was a process of continual rebirth through contact with new opportunities which through "... its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization."  

Shortly after Professor Turner presented his "Frontier Thesis", as it has come to be called, a storm of criticism, defense, revisionism, and support arose so that today there is a nearly inexhaustible supply of "frontier" studies. Nor are they all confined to the American frontier. Studies, have been written on the Roman frontier, the frontiers of Hispanic America, the frontiers of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, China, and most recently Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson have written a comparison of the North American and the South African frontiers. The notion of the frontier, the interaction of peoples in that plasma state between settled and wild, civilized and savage, urban and pastoral, has become a significant factor in our understanding of the formation of cultures and societies.  

To my knowledge, Frederick Jackson Turner did not read the writings of Ibn Khaldun, for if he had, he would have most likely recognized that he and Ibn Khaldun were kindred spirits in the craft of historical analysis. Ibn Khaldun, who was active half a millenium before Frederick Jackson Turner, had developed his own notions of the relationship between the settled and the savage in his famous *Muqaddimah*, and it is these notions that I would like to examine in this essay.  

Somewhat against the historian's spirit, I would first like to lift Ibn Khaldun from his time and place him alongside Frederick Jackson Turner and the neo-Turnerites in order to examine his theories of the frontier together with the rest of the "modern" authors, for I feel that Ibn Khaldun can be understood as "modern" in many of his perspectives and methods of analysis. I would then like to explore aspects of the Islamic frontier experience, particularly the values that have become distilled from that process, so as to show how Ibn Khaldun's views are the product of first the Arab and then the Islamic historical experience.  

Ibn Khaldun, who lived from 1332 to 1406, wrote his *Muqaddimah* after the great periods of expansion in Islam. Indeed, from the perspective of the Western Mediterranean, Islam was contracting during his lifetime. The great tribal movements were in the past, and yet there were in North Africa, regions that were inhabited by pastoral nomads and rural agriculturalists, Bedouin,