



# Contemporary Notions: Ibn Khaldun's '*Asabiyyah* Revisited

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**Abstract:** The phrase '*asabiyyah*' was profoundly foregrounded 600 years ago by Ibn Khaldun in his magnum opus, the *Mukadimah*, as the principal determinant to the rise and fall of a civilisation. Nevertheless, the debate on contemporary concepts such as nationalism, patriotism, national identity and sense of belonging are adopted in addressing statehood and nation which are deeply related to the discussion of Ibn Khaldun's '*asabiyyah*'. Accordingly, this article presents the revisiting act of discussing Ibn Khaldun's '*asabiyyah*' within contemporary notions. This discussion involves a qualitative approach through content analysis from various literatures which considers the views of scholars on the concepts of patriotism, nationalism, national identity and sense of belonging and these concepts were derived from Ibn Khaldun's '*asabiyyah*'. Ergo, many scholars have recognised the contribution of Ibn Khaldun's '*asabiyyah*', and it stays relevant in today's contemporary concepts.

**Keywords:** Ibn Khaldun, '*asabiyyah*', nationalism, patriotism, national identity, sense of belonging, civilisation

## 1. Introduction

The terminology of '*asabiyyah*' was communicated profoundly by Ibn Khaldun in his magnum opus, the *Mukadimah*, since the 14th century and it received recognition from leading scholars of the past and present of its endurance. His work is categorised as of exceptional quality, relevance, being the core of civilisation, and appropriate to almost every world's civilisation (Alatas, 2011; Darling, 2007; Muhsin Mahdi, 1957; Toynbee, 1962; Sarton, 1975). Next, the concepts of nationalism, patriotism, national identity and sense of belonging are broad subjects of discussion among western scholars, especially concerning the discussion of statehood and nationhood which carries a vital influence to society for the past few centuries. The researchers believe that the study of these contemporary concepts is an act of revisiting the discussion of Ibn Khaldun's '*asabiyyah*' that is being comprehensive and not limited to the term itself. Hence, this article discusses the revisiting of Ibn Khaldun's '*asabiyyah*' within the contemporary notions, which are patriotism, nationalism, national identity and sense of belonging.

## 2. Methodology

This discussion is the result of qualitative analysis approach using content analysis from various literature. Apart from Ibn Khaldun's '*asabiyyah*' literatures, the researchers focus on literatures in the fields of patriotism, nationalism, national identity and sense of belonging. Although the definition of '*asabiyyah*' is broader than many terms discussed by the Western scholars, the researchers want to make the findings more concise and focus on the selected contemporary

notions which highly discussed and in intention for the further analysis to continue discussing the relevance of Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* to other contemporary notions.

### 3. Ibn Khaldun's *'Asabiyyah*

Ibn Khaldun coined the term *'asabiyyah* in his discussion on the three stages of the cyclical development of civilisation. These stages are i) the early stage or the birth characterised by a sentiment of *'asabiyyah* to fulfil fundamental necessities, ii) the civilised stage, characterised by the emergence of a system of government that produces a ruling class separate from the population, filled by wealth and, consequently, it, weakens *'asabiyyah* among its people, and iii) the decline and fall stage, caused by the expansion in prosperity and the weakening of the *'asabiyyah*, which then leads to political and economic collapse (Muhsin Mahdi, 1957; Wan Hashim Wan Teh, 1997).

The *'asabiyyah*, the basis of civilisation, is guided by complete loyalty and obedience to the excellent leadership, cultural norms, and the community. This idea concerns mutual love among the community, which leads to cooperation, collaboration, respect, concern, and avoiding catastrophe. *'asabiyyah* too, promotes its community to share its prosperity and hardship. The spirit then evolves into courage and a willingness to fight and sacrifice for their community and homeland. These people who are engaged in *'asabiyyah* would not stay put when a member of their community is oppressed and would fight for their rights (Ibn Khaldun, 1967). *'asabiyyah* is a natural sentiment (Alatas, 2014; Dion, 2007), and it plays its role when a member of its community is oppressed, harmed, or murdered (Dion, 2007).

The discussion scrutinizes significantly on oppression and the struggle for rights, which Ibn Khaldun (1967) explains that civilisation is reinforced based on two characteristics: i) *Syawkah* (strength) based on *'asabiyyah*, and ii) wealth. Through a strong sense of *'asabiyyah*, the leadership can ensure the loyalty of his people, who collaborates with them in building their civilisation. Nevertheless, the reverse situation occurs when a leader strays far from a shared *'asabiyyah* with his people and establishes a barrier between himself and his people because he regards them as the enemy (Zainab al-Khudairi, 1979). A leader who does not share his people's *'asabiyyah* is believed to be corrupt and his wealth hoarded away from the people, then onerous systems of taxations are introduced, which leads to a weakened economy and the plummet in *'asabiyyah* among the people due to the hardships in life. The people who still firmly hold on the *'asabiyyah* will issue demands to obtain their proper rights. Conversely, if the people lose their sense of *'asabiyyah*, they will obey their leadership without question, even when oppression inflicts upon them (Ibn Khaldun, 1967).

Hence, *'asabiyyah* comprises positive traits, mutual love, cooperation, respect, and the courage to fight for society and country and bravery in voicing out demands for the public benefit. A respected leader will inspire loyalty and obedience among his community who shares *'asabiyyah* on leadership and societal norms and culture. A shared objective, experience, norms, and culture further strengthens and stabilizes *'asabiyyah*. Religion represents an essential part of Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah*, as religion serves to resolve conflict and envy within the community. In understanding society, we must return to comprehend the *'asabiyyah* concept as expounded by Ibn Khaldun (Akbar Ahmed, 2002). Therefore, Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* has been translated into several terms, among them are social cohesion, esprit de corps, solidarity, sense of belonging, patriotism and nationalism, but this article opts to retain the term *'asabiyyah*, as Ibn Khaldun's concept has its own identity and could not be completely delineated through other terms (Simon, 2002).

### 4. Patriotism

The western scholar considered patriotism in broad definitions. By referring to loyalty as the primary definition, Keller (2007) and Costa (2011) agreed that patriotism is usually sustained by bad faith, which shows people tend to be loyal if there are any valuable characteristics of the country that makes it worthy of loyalty. Nevertheless, patriotism without bad faith cannot be utilised to build a better future for the country because there is less critical consciousness to fix weaknesses (Costa, 2011). In exhaustive discussion, patriotism refers as an evaluation of a country through critical conscious, shaping of opinions based on the country's elite class, supporting an alternative system if the country no longer adheres to humanistic values, realigning collective history by considering different views, supporting democracy, rejecting of unquestioned acceptance of state authority, accepting negative emotion towards the state, moderating individual self-concept in relation to national ideology, being temporal comparisons that bear a high relevance, and being an objectivist criteria in defining membership in a group in rejected (Blank & Schmidt, 2003).

Local scholars focus more on discussions that emphasises one emotion-driven value and action, which is love and loyalty to a country and a willingness to act in order to defend their homeland and this emerges through the use of certain symbols such as borders and a capital to determine the status of a nation-state, national identity, citizenship, national language, economy, culture and arts, flag, national anthem, and so on (Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar, 2012; Ku Hasnita Ku Samsu & Mohd Haizam Mohd Nor, 2009).

## 5. Nationalism

Nationalism's discussion offers both positive and negative undertones. The western scholars are more inclined to define nationalism in a negative sense. It is because, it concerns a sentiment and act which are based on the idea that their country is supreme, having an uncritical acceptance of state and political authority, bearing extreme national ideology, and suppressing conflicting points of view (Blank & Schmidt, 2003), carrying a negative attitude towards ethnic minorities (Kleinpenning & Hagendoorn, 1993). These situations materialise due to identification of the group as homogeneous based on their lineage, nation, and culture (Blank & Schmidt, 2003). In this context, nationalism refers to ethnocentrism; an idea that one's ethnicity is superior to other ethnic groups (Karasawa, 2002).

Nonetheless, Islamic scholars embrace a more positive view of nationalism, emerging from the necessities of societal life and leading to cooperation and togetherness, a very distinctive concept from negative nationalism that creates racism, hatred and hostility with others (Syeikh Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady, 2012; Said Nursi, 2001).

In the Malay realm, the nationalism that arises from the Islamization movement works as an initiating factor to the Malay independence. Furthermore, the Malay nationalism does not concern ethnocentrism. It is because, within the Malay nationalism, there are Islamic values that induce cooperation with other ethnics.

## 6. National Identity

The expression of national identity has been broadly considered in interpreting group sentiment, with a positive emotion bond to the nation and contributing to the shaping of individual identity based on national cohesion (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Mummendey & Klink, 2001). Nevertheless, Blank & Schmidt (2003) emphasise that there is no definite definition of national identity, but among the characteristics that could define national identity involves a positive view of the nation, the merging of significant national sentiment within individual identity, the individual knowledge to own and be owned by the nation, a belief based on national objectives and problems, a faith in opportunities and challenges for individual behavior and a willingness to appreciate the national culture. This unclear definition is indistinguishable from patriotism.

Hence, nationalism and patriotism can be regarded as consequences of national identity (Blank & Schmidt, 2003), patriotism being the love of a nation, and nationalism being a positive evaluation of their society, viewing their nation as supreme and better than other nations, and act as the most dominant one (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Blank & Schmidt, 2003).

However, there have been scholars that merged both nationalism and patriotism, without presenting the negative connotations and not distinguishing the two concepts. Adorno et al. (1950) combined patriotism and nationalism and put forward a term called "genuine or true patriotism". These terms are continuity from the term "blind patriotism," referring to uncritical support of the collective (similar to nationalism), while "constructive patriotism" refers to an awareness to criticise a group support (Schatz & Staub, 1997). For instance, the act of burning a national flag is seen as unpatriotic, but it could also be a sign of dissatisfaction with the current situation based on ideal or constructive thought and love for the country (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999).

National identity that covers both patriotism and nationalism is dynamic and recognised by both western and eastern scholars, as this national identity is adaptable to the stability of norms, cultural values, and actual behaviour depending on current changes involving constraints, opportunities, institutions, and socio-economic conditions (Goby, 2004; Tartakovsky, 2011), and will continue to interact with its environment to adapt and remain functional and relevant to the times, and this is dependent on the 'dignity' and 'pride' as well as unity among members of the collective (Zainal Kling, 2012). The necessity of the two concepts are interconnected as nationalism is supported by the presence of an authoritarian structure between the state and the citizen, while patriotism supports aspects of nationalism through dispersion of authoritarian relationship (Blank & Schmidt, 2003), and patriotism serves as the core of nationalism (Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar, 2012).

## 7. Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is a concept that is discussed in prominent theories such as Maslow's Theory of Motivation and Personality and Glasser's Choice Theory. Sense of belonging concerns the experience of the person's involvement in the system or environment that makes one feel that he or she is an essential part of that system and environment (Hagerty, et. al 1992). There is no substantial evidence to deny (Jones, 2009) that sense of belonging is a human need (Jones, 2009; Maslow, 1987). McMillan & Chavis (1986) also realise that the spirit of belonging is an accepted and vital individual in a group of members of society. Each member feels needed and united for the benefit of their community. Individual needs will be met as a result of the consolidation of this commitment. In the discussion of self-identity instability, the essence of the sense of belonging is almost in line with the definitions of "self-pride" (the way one values one's self or esteem) and "oneness" (ability to belong to a group, feeling proud and confident of their membership) (Zainal Kling, 2012).

Thus, individuals with low sense of belonging are often associated with loss of psychological well-being (Thompson-Fullilove, 1996), reported to have high levels of anxiety disorder, depression and suicidal tendencies, thus, sense of belonging in society can improve an individual's mental health (McLaren, Jude, & McLachlan, 2007).

## 8. Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* Revisited in Contemporary Concepts

This scholarly representation of the concepts of patriotism, nationalism and the spirit of self-preservation is the spirit of national identity and these concepts existed in Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah*.

National identity in the context of patriotism, nationalism is believed to be a spirit of love for the nation. It is the result of loyalty to the homeland and community. It is this spirit that motivates us to devote our energy and resources to fight to defend the country; hold the same views, goals, experiences, values and cultures; making religion and sense of belonging as the basis; are also essential concepts in Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah*. *'asabiyyah* emphasizes the love of fellow believers who also encouraged them to love their people and their homeland. The sentiment of loyalty to a nation is based on the quality of the country is also discussed by Ibn Khaldun (1967) which is present in the three phases of civilization, varied levels of *'asabiyyah* according to the civilization situation. "A strong *'asabiyyah* existed in the early stages of civilization because, at this time, all members of the community held the same goal and desire in developing their civilization. However, the *'asabiyyah*'s strength weakened as the national leadership began to distance itself from society, live in luxury, engage in corruption and begin to oppress the society with high tax. It proves that Ibn-Khaldun's discussion also takes into account the quality inherent in a country can determine the level of *'asabiyyah* of society as it discusses the concept of patriotism and national identity.

In addition, *'asabiyyah* existence is driven by a number of related desires such as the inclination to live together in sharing and friendship; cooperate; experience ups and downs together by helping and protecting those close to them; and the desire that the same feeling felt by his companion (Ibn Khaldun, 1967; Muhsin Mahdi, 1957). This concept of *'asabiyyah* by Ibn-Khaldun does not differ much from the discussion of the sense of belonging since it discusses the feeling of included and having a group in which he or she feels important and being valued and shared and complementing each other. *'asabiyyah* also assures individuals' safety and security when members of their community help one another in need. This spirit drives the individual to feel, belong and be appreciated by his community. Individuals too, play the role of fellow *'asabiyyah* since they feel that they belong to the community.

On the idea of "true" or "genuine" patriotism or "constructive patriotism" that is to accept critical thinking to criticize the nation based on fixing weaknesses for mutual benefit is in line with Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah*. The spirit of unity is following Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah*, that can produce the ability to defend one's self and to make claims; absolute obedience will destroy the spirit of belonging (Ibn Khaldun, 1957). The "strong *'asabiyyah*" occurs when the people can rise to defend their rights even when the leadership of his country is of poor quality. The power to make demands is in line with the will of the community is crucial to making a civilisation that lasts longer. Healthy *'asabiyyah* will lead to an attempt to prevent oppression against its people. Hence, this discussion is not different in comparison to the concept of patriotism that promotes the development of ideas based on rational and critical thinking in assessing and conveying views on leaders and governments to develop the country. Nevertheless, this spirit falters when the quality of the country no longer exists as expected. However, if members of the public dare to rise to critical consciousness to deliver on their recommendations, then there will be opportunities for the quality of a country to be restored.

Thus, it can be concluded here that the concepts brought about by national identity which embody the spirit of patriotism, nationalism and sense of belonging were first discussed 600 years ago in Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* concept. The term Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* has been translated in various terms as esprit de corps, solidarity, nationalism and patriotism by some scholars (Dover, 1952). Al-Khudairi also translated *'asabiyyah* as something related to the spirit of nationalism and patriotism (Indriaty Ismail, 2015). Said Nursi too validated that Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* is a positive essence of nationalism (Sheikh Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady, 2012).

The need to revisit Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* is important in reviving concepts discussed by leading Islamic scholars, whereby such inclinations existed prior to contemporary notions that were popularised and adopted through discussions by Western scholars. The discussions of ancient Islamic scholars are indeed significant and capable of creating a dialogue in a broader context that would be relevant to all ages, including those of the later era. Thus, in order to restore the civilisation of Islam today, the supremacy of these ancient Islamic scholars needs to be revisited in an appropriate manner to discuss the knowledge and findings of Western scholars in contradictions, equality and legitimacy, and can be considered an ultimate highlight in the credibility of the Islamic civilisation itself.

## 9. Conclusion

The researcher aspires to stress that this discussion is to gauge the revisited of Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* within the contemporary atmosphere, which is more focused on the patriotism, nationalism, national identity and sense of belonging. The emphasis here is because Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* contains an important concept that could serve as an umbrella to other contemporary concepts within the field of sociology.

The concepts of loving one's country and society, sharing of goals, objectives, and values, bravely sacrificing, feeling of being owned by the society and the interest in voicing out ideas and suggestions are too detailed by Ibn

Khaldun when discussing the sentiment of togetherness that determines the strength of civilisation. Malik Bennabi also elucidates that human civilization cannot exist without a shared unique identification and characteristics (Berghout, 2015).

Even though Ibn-Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* discussion concerned the Arab community of his era, but many sergeants acknowledge its relevance. It makes the notion applicable to all ages and civilizations up to the present day. Ibn Khaldun's *'asabiyyah* also does not deny and addresses the needs of a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic modern society. An individual with the awareness for national development will sow the seeds of love for the country through *'asabiyyah* shared by all ethnicities within the civilization.

Ergo, the power of Islamic scholars in the past has to be revisited in contemporary concepts around the globe. As a matter of fact, the discussion of the Islamic scholars in the past was all-embracing and not limited to single denomination.

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