

**The Anthropological Principles in the Works of Muslim Travelers:  
Ahmad ibn Fadlan as a Case Study**

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**Received :05/01/2026**

**Accepted :08/02/2026**

**Published :16/03/2026**

**Abstract**

This article addresses one of the significant topics in the history of anthropological thought: the origins of anthropological principles among Muslim travelers. It highlights the works of one of the most distinguished figures in this domain, the explorer Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who visited numerous regions, including the lands of the Turks, the Saqaliba (Slavs), the Rus, and others. Through a detailed examination of his *Risala* (travel account), the study classifies his observations within the general field of anthropology. Specific examples are drawn to illustrate that his contributions encompassed the three main branches of anthropology—physical, social, and cultural. The article concludes that, although this work did not reach the level of formal anthropology as a modern scientific discipline, it can nevertheless be classified within what is termed anthropological thought, which collectively contributed to the emergence of this scientific field.

**Keywords** Anthropology, traveler, Ahmad ibn Fadlan, Muslim travelers, anthropological thought.

**Introduction**

It is universally acknowledged that no scientific discipline exists today in its current advanced and crystallized form without having emerged through a process of accumulated intellectual and research efforts. This cumulative character constitutes one of the most fundamental features of scientific knowledge. This principle applies equally to all branches of the human and social sciences, as well as the natural sciences, and it is particularly true of the discipline of anthropology. Anthropology arose as the outcome of a long trajectory of interacting and accumulating ideas. Most scholarly works that have addressed this science indicate that its foundations rest upon numerous contributions whose roots extend deep into the thinkers of ancient civilizations, the medieval period, and the modern and contemporary eras.

However, the majority of studies dealing with the history of anthropology in general, and the development of anthropological thought in particular, tend to overlook the contributions of those designated as Muslim travelers and explorers. These figures produced significant observations that can be classified within the domains of this science (physical, social, and cultural). One of the most prominent figures who asserts himself in this context is the traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan. Accordingly, the following question arises: What are his most important contributions in this field?

## 1. Determining the Meaning of Anthropology and Its Subject Matter

Etymologically, the word “anthropology” consists of two components: the first is *anthropos*, meaning “human,” and the second is *logos*, meaning “science” or “study.” The literal translation of the name of this discipline is therefore “the science of humanity” (Al-Jawhari, 2007, p. 18). Because the human being can be studied from multiple angles, some researchers have proposed classifications that delineate the domains in which anthropology intervenes in the study of humankind. These domains are as follows:

First, viewing the human being as a living creature created among other creatures led to the emergence of the branch of physical or biological anthropology (*Physical Anthropology*) (Hamada, 2013, p. 15).

Second, perceiving the human being as inherently social by nature and living in diverse groups gave rise to the branch of social anthropology (*Social Anthropology*) (Hamada, 2013, p. 15).

Third, regarding the human being as the bearer and transmitter of culture across generations contributed to the development of the branch of cultural anthropology (*Cultural Anthropology*) (Hamada, 2013, p. 15).

Building on the above, anthropology can be considered a science concerned with the study of humankind in its physical (biological), social, and cultural dimensions. This derived definition immediately directs us to a discussion of the scope and dimensions of what are called the branches of anthropology.

## 2. The Branches of Anthropology

Most writings in this field agree that the branches of the science of humanity consist of physical (biological) anthropology, social anthropology, and cultural anthropology. In this context, Ralph Linton states: “Anthropology is divided into two major sections; the first researches the human being and is known as physical anthropology, while the second deals with the works of human beings and is known as cultural anthropology or the study of civilization” (Linton, 1967, pp. 16–17).

It should be noted that this classification (physical anthropology, social anthropology, and cultural anthropology) has undergone evolution and has given rise to sub-specializations. Linton further confirms that these two main divisions have experienced additional branching and subdivision. Physical anthropology has been divided into two branches: human paleontology and human morphology. Cultural anthropology, for its part, has been subdivided into three branches: prehistoric archaeology, ethnology (the science of human races), and linguistics (Linton, 1967, p. 17).

Based on the foregoing, it can be affirmed that the anthropological approach to the study of humankind touches upon three fundamental aspects: the physical (biological), in which the focus is on describing the human body from a morphological perspective (height, facial shape, eye and skin color, etc.). It also examines the social and cultural dimensions (customs and traditions, rituals and social practices, systems of communication, symbols and their meanings, and so forth).

Anthropological thought, throughout its historical development, has passed through a series of stages that contributed to its advancement and crystallization. Among the most

important of these stages—which we believe contained highly significant scientific and empirical contributions—are those that witnessed the emergence of Muslim travelers and explorers such as Ibn Fadlan, Al-Mas‘udi, the Ikhwan al-Safa, Al-Maqdisi, Al-Baghdadi, Al-Qazwini, and others. These explorers undertook journeys to numerous countries and peoples, lived among them, experienced their customs and traditions firsthand, and succeeded in describing them with remarkable precision. Among the most important works in this domain is that of the traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan.

### **3. The Early Precursors of Anthropological Thought in the Works of the Traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan**

Professor Hussein Hamad Hussein Al-Faqih states: “Muslim scholars have known the science of humanity (anthropology) since the first Islamic era (the dawn of Islam). What led to the development of this science was the practice of the Muslim caliphs in dispatching delegations, envoys, explorers, and travelers to various parts of the earth in order to understand the nature of those countries and lands, to observe the character, customs, behavior, and cultures of their inhabitants, and to study their habits, morals, and crafts” (Al-Faqih, 2021, p. 2016). Before discussing the contributions of this traveler (Ahmad ibn Fadlan), it is necessary to introduce him.

#### **3.1. Who Was Ahmad ibn Fadlan?**

Professor Omar Reda Kahala described him as follows: “He lived around 309 AH / 921 CE. Ahmad ibn Fadlan ibn al-Abbas ibn Hamid. He was one of the ambassadors of the Abbasid state. He undertook a journey to the lands of the Turks (present-day Turkey), the Khazars (an empire spanning Eurasia: present-day Russia and Ukraine), the Rus (western Russia today), and the Saqaliba (Slavic peoples, Bulgars, and the Caucasus), a journey known through his famous *Risala* (Ibn Fadlan’s account)” (Kahala, 1993, p. 220).

When discussing Ahmad ibn Fadlan, it must be noted that no detailed biographical works exist that address the life of this distinguished traveler. In this regard, Professor Zaki Muhammad Husayn provides a brief glimpse, stating: “He is Ahmad ibn Fadlan ibn al-Abbas ibn Rashid. He was a client (*mawla*) of one of the Abbasid caliphs and of the commander Muhammad ibn Sulayman, who succeeded in defeating the Tulunid state and restoring Egypt to the fold of the Caliphate in 292 AH (905 CE). We know little about Ibn Fadlan’s biography. What we can assert with certainty is that in 309 AH (921 CE) he undertook a journey to the land of the Bulgars. These were a people who established two states at the beginning of the Middle Ages: the older one in the middle Volga basin (called the Itil River in Arabic sources), and the other in the Danube basin. It was the former that Ibn Fadlan visited, and it was there that Islam spread” (Zaki, 1981, p. 26).

It is therefore clear that no detailed biography of the traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan exists. Despite its importance, such a biography is not the primary objective of the present study. Consequently, the focus must be placed on the distinctive features of his journey and his contributions, which we believe belong to the field of anthropology.

#### **3.2. The Itinerary of Ahmad ibn Fadlan’s Journey**

Professor Sami al-Dahan (editor of Ibn Fadlan’s *Risala*) comments on the journey as follows: “The delegation departed from Baghdad on Thursday, 11 Safar 309 AH (corresponding

to 21 June 921 CE) and continued eastward and northward, passing through the mountainous region (Iran and its northern environs), Hamadan, then al-Rayy (near present-day Tehran), crossed the Oxus River (Central Asia), reached Bukhara (present-day Uzbekistan), and then advanced through the steppes and deserts until it arrived at the Volga (the Bulgars) at the court of the king of the Saqaliba on Sunday, 12 Muharram 310 AH (corresponding to 11 May 922 CE). The outward journey lasted eleven months, during which the delegation encountered numerous hardships and astonishing perils, which Ibn Fadlan described in a beautiful and masterful manner” (Ibn Fadlan, n.d., p. 25).

As for the background of this journey, Dr. Zaki Muhammad Husayn explains: “In truth, this journey possessed a special character; for Ibn Fadlan was part of an official delegation sent by the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir bi-Allah to the king of the Bulgars. After the king had embraced Islam, he wrote to the Caliph requesting that scholars be sent to instruct him in religious matters, to teach him the laws of Islam, to build a mosque for him, to erect a minbar so that the call to prayer could be delivered throughout his kingdom, and to construct a fortress in which he could take refuge from rival kings. The Caliph responded to his request and dispatched this embassy, in which Ibn Fadlan served as the religious expert, while the head of the mission was a representative of the Caliph responsible for political and military affairs” (Zaki, 1981, p. 27).

Thus, Ahmad ibn Fadlan’s journey took place within the framework of a diplomatic embassy whose primary mission was religious: the dissemination of Islam in the land of the Bulgars. He utilized this opportunity to provide clear and precise descriptions of the various countries and regions traversed by the mission. His descriptions are characterized by remarkable clarity and accuracy, approaching what is today termed anthropological inquiry.

### **3.3. Contributions That Can Be Classified Within Anthropology**

It should be noted that the present study aims to demonstrate the works of the traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan that can be classified within the field of anthropology. This is accomplished by examining selected passages from his *Risala*, which he composed after his journey to the lands of the Turks, the Khazars, the Rus, and the Saqaliba in 921 CE. The analysis adopts a classificatory approach linked to the main branches of general anthropology: physical (biological) anthropology, social anthropology, and cultural anthropology. The following sections provide a detailed treatment of these contributions.

#### **3.3.1. Contributions in the Field of Physical (Biological) Anthropology**

Demonstrating his contributions in this domain requires careful examination of the *Risala*. This can be clarified through the following excerpts:

- Ibn Fadlan states in his description of one of the Turkish tribes (Central Asia): “After we had traveled for fifteen nights, we reached a great mountain full of stones, in which there were springs that carved channels through it, and the water settled in the hollows. When we crossed it, we came upon a tribe of the Turks known as the Ghuzziya. They live in tents made of felt; they move and migrate, and one sees their dwellings in one place and then in another, following the custom of the nomads who transport them. They are in a state of misery. Nevertheless, they are like stray donkeys: they profess no religion to God, they do not return to reason, and they worship nothing. Instead, they call their chiefs lords. When one of them consults his chief about something, he says to

him: ‘O lord, what shall I do in such-and-such a matter?’ However, when they agree upon something and resolve to do it, the most worthless and the best among them come and annul what they had collectively decided” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 10).

- Regarding his journey to the land of the Saqaliba (Slavs), he described the moment of his audience with their king: “...I brought out the letter and said to him: ‘It is not permissible to sit while the letter is being read.’ He and all the notables of his kingdom who were present stood on their feet. He is a very stout and corpulent man” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 17).

He also described the peculiarity of night and day among them: “I saw that the day among them is extremely long; it lengthens for a period of the year and the night shortens, then the night lengthens and the day shortens. On the second night, I sat outside the tent and observed the sky. I saw only a small number of stars—about fifteen scattered stars. The red twilight before sunset never disappears at all, and the night has so little darkness that a man can recognize another from more than an arrow’s range” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 20).

- Concerning his journey to the land of the Rus (present-day Russia), he described them as follows: “I saw the Rus who had come for trade and had settled on the River Itil. I have never seen bodies more perfect than theirs; they are like palm trees, fair and reddish. They wear neither coats nor tunics, but each man wears a cloak that covers one side of his body, leaving one hand free. Every one of them carries an axe, a sword, and a knife that never leaves him. ... Their swords are Frankish, flat, and grooved. From the tip of one of their fingernails to his neck is a green tattoo of trees and other figures” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 28).

Building on the above, it becomes evident that the traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan provided precise descriptions of the peoples of the countries he visited (the Turks, the Saqaliba, and the Rus). These descriptions can therefore be classified among the contributions to what is today termed physical (biological) anthropology. But what of his contributions in the domains of social and cultural anthropology?

### **3.3.2. Contributions in the Fields of Social and Cultural Anthropology**

Before discussing these contributions, it must be noted that the present study has combined the social and cultural domains because of the difficulty of separating what is strictly cultural from what is strictly social. His contributions in this area can be discerned from the following passages:

- The traveler Ibn Fadlan, while staying as a guest among a tribe of the Turks known as the Ghuzziya, states: “I heard them saying: ‘There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah,’ drawing near with this utterance to any Muslims who passed by, but not believing in it. When one of them is wronged or something happens to him that he dislikes, he raises his head to the sky and says: ‘Bir Tengri’—which in Turkish means ‘One’ and ‘Tengri’ means ‘God’ in the language of the Turks. They do not cleanse themselves after defecating or urinating, nor do they wash after sexual impurity or anything else. They have no dealings with water, especially in winter. Their women do not veil themselves from men or from anyone else. Likewise, a woman does not conceal any part of her body from any person” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 10).

Ibn Fadlan adds certain social customs peculiar to the Turkish tribes, mentioning among them those related to death: “When one of their men dies, they dig for him a large pit in the shape of a house. They go to him, dress him in his *qurtuq* (tunic), gird him with his bow, place in his hand a wooden cup containing wine, and leave before him a wooden vessel full of wine. They bring all his wealth and place it with him in that house. Then they seat him inside, roof the house over him, and build above it a kind of dome of clay. They take his horses—according to their number—and kill between one hundred and two hundred, or only one, and eat their flesh except for the heads, the legs, the hides, and the tails, which they hang on wooden poles. They say: ‘These are his horses on which he will ride to Paradise.’ If he has killed a man and was brave, they carve wooden figures equal to the number of men he killed and place them on his grave, saying: ‘These are his servants who will serve him in Paradise’” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 12).

He further describes the phenomenon of religious belief among one of the Turkish tribes: “Some of them claim to have twelve gods: a god for winter, a god for summer, a god for rain, a god for wind, a god for trees, a god for people, a god for animals, a god for water, a god for night, a god for day, a god for death, and a god for the earth. The god in the sky is the greatest among them, yet he coordinates with the others by mutual agreement; each is satisfied with what his partner does. Exalted is God far above what the wrongdoers say” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 15).

- With regard to the land of the Saqaliba (Slavs), and concerning the greeting of the king, Ibn Fadlan says: “All of them wear the *qalansuwa* (felt cap). When the king rides, he rides alone without a servant or anyone accompanying him. When he passes through the market, no one remains seated; each stands and removes his *qalansuwa* from his head and places it under his armpit. When the king has passed them, they return their caps to their heads. Likewise, everyone who enters the king’s presence—whether small or great, even his sons and brothers—as soon as they see him, they take off their *qalansuwa* and place it under their armpits. Then they bow to him with their heads and sit down. They remain standing until he commands them to sit. Everyone who sits does so cross-legged and does not take out his *qalansuwa* or show it until he leaves the king’s presence, at which time he puts it on” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 22).

The traveler Ibn Fadlan adds, regarding the bathing practices of the Saqaliba: “Men and women descend to the river and bathe together completely naked, without any of them covering themselves from the others. They do not commit adultery, nor is there any reason for it. Whoever among them commits adultery—whether man or woman—they drive four stakes into the ground for him, tie his hands and feet to them, and cut him with an axe from his neck to his thighs. They do the same to the woman as well. Then they hang every piece of him or her on a tree... And they kill the thief in the same manner as they kill the adulterer” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 23).

When addressing the phenomenon of illness and death, Ibn Fadlan describes it as follows: “I have not seen any of them with a ruddy complexion; most of them are sickly. Many of them die of colic (a disease affecting the large intestine). When a Muslim dies among them, or the husband of a Khwarizmian woman, they wash him according to the Muslim rite of washing the

dead. Then they place him on a cart drawn by animals, with a spear in front of him, until they reach the place where they will bury him. Once there, they remove him from the cart, lay him on the ground, draw a line around him, and dig his grave inside that line. They make a niche (lahd) for him and bury him. They do the same with their own dead. The women do not weep for the deceased; rather, the men weep for him. They come on the day he dies, stand at the door of his tent, and wail in the most hideous and horrifying manner” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 25).

- Regarding the land of the Rus, and concerning their custom of washing their faces, Ibn Fadlan says: “They must wash their faces and heads every day with the dirtiest and foulest water imaginable. This is because a slave girl comes every morning with a large basin filled with water, which she presents to her master. He washes his hands and face in it, and washes and combs his hair in the same basin. Then he blows his nose and spits into it. He does not leave any form of filth without doing it in that water. When he has finished what he needs, the slave girl carries the basin to the person next to him, who does the same as his companion. She continues to pass it from one to another until she has gone around everyone in the house. Each of them blows his nose, spits into it, and washes his face and hair in it” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 29).

As for how some of the inhabitants of the land of the Rus deal with cases of illness, Ibn Fadlan states: “When one of them falls ill, they erect a tent for him away from the others, place him inside it, and leave with him some bread and water. They neither approach him nor speak to him, nor do they check on him throughout the days of his illness, especially if he is weak or a slave. If he recovers and stands up, he returns to them; but if he dies, they burn him. If he is a slave, they leave him as he is to be eaten by dogs and birds of prey” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 29).

Regarding their customs in dealing with their dead, he says: “When their chieftains die, they do things of which the least is burning. I wished to witness this until I was informed of the death of one of their distinguished men. They placed him in his grave and roofed it over for ten days while they finished cutting and sewing his clothes. For a poor man among them, they make a small boat, place him in it, and burn it. For a rich man, they gather his wealth and divide it into three parts: one third for his family, one third to cut cloth for his garments, and one third to prepare mead which they drink on the day his slave girl kills herself and is burned with her master” (Ibn Fadlan, 1444, p. 30).

Based on the foregoing, the significant contributions made by Ibn Fadlan in the field of what later came to be called social and cultural anthropology become clearly evident. He described with precision the customs and traditions of the peoples in the countries he visited (the Turks, the Saqaliba, and the Rus). It is important to note here that he did not limit himself merely to describing their social and cultural rituals; rather, he delved into their core and extracted the symbolic dimensions and meanings that these peoples attached to their various actions, in accordance with the beliefs that governed and directed them. This intellectual level is precisely what this branch of anthropology (social and cultural) demands.

## Conclusion

A critical reading of this article enables us to draw the following conclusions:

- The discipline of anthropology did not emerge suddenly in its present form but arose as a result of accumulated intellectual efforts and systematic research that interacted with one another, contributing to its crystallization and development into its current state.
- Researchers in the history of this discipline have customarily traced its origins back to ancient civilizations, particularly ancient Greek civilization, and then moved to the Middle Ages. In this context, they usually mention only Ibn Khaldun as a representative of Arab-Islamic civilization, before proceeding to discuss Western thinkers successively (in the modern and contemporary periods).
- When returning to the most prominent figures representing Arab-Islamic civilization, most studies in this field focus exclusively on the scholar Ibn Khaldun. No one can deny the contributions of this distinguished thinker; however, we must not overlook the works of those who preceded him in this field, particularly the traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan in the tenth century CE (921 CE). He visited numerous countries, lived among their peoples, became familiar with their customs and traditions, and produced a detailed *Risala* in which he addressed the physical, social, and cultural specificities of these societies. Moreover, he provided doctrinal and symbolic interpretations that governed their rituals and social practices.
- Another important observation is that the works presented by the traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan regarding the societies he visited and studied encompassed the various branches of anthropology: physical (biological), social, and cultural. Although his works may be classified as being at the core of the science of humanity, we firmly believe that it is more appropriate to classify them within what is termed “anthropological thought,” which contributed, through accumulation and interaction, to the emergence of the discipline of anthropology as a specialized field.

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European Journal of Philosophical Research. 2026. 13(1)

E-ISSN: 2413-7286

Volume-13/Issue-1/2026

**Ahmad Ibn Fadlan** (1444). *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan Describing the Journey to the Lands of the Turks, Khazars, Rus, and Slavs*. No place of publication: Dar Al-Mustarsil Al-Arabi.