

A Moroccan Visitor in Sub-Saharan Africa



105 ▼ *Ibn Battuta,*

A DONATION TO THOSE INTERESTED IN CURIOSITIES

The life and world travels of Abu Abdallah Muhammad ibn Battuta (1304–1369) provide eloquent testimony to the cosmopolitanism of fourteenth-century Islam. Ibn Battuta was born into the religious upper class of Tangier, Morocco, where he received an education in Islamic law and Arabic literature. In 1325 he left home to make the first of what would be several pilgrimages to Mecca. In the course of the next three decades he visited Constantinople, Mesopotamia, Persia, India (where he resided and worked as a *qadi*, or religious judge, for eight years), Burma, Sumatra, Spain, Mali, and probably southern China. In all, his travels covered about 73,000 miles, and most of his stops along the way were within the cultural confines of *Dar al-Islam*, where the sacred law of the Quran prevailed.

In 1351 Ibn Battuta returned to Morocco, but one more journey awaited him. In February 1352 he joined a camel caravan of merchants as he embarked on his last great adventure — a trip to the West African kingdom of Mali, which lay some 1,500 miles to the south of Morocco across one of the world's most inhospitable deserts. Two years later he arrived back home with marvelous tales to tell of this land of gold, whose leaders had converted to Islam in the early thirteenth century.

His days of long-distance travel now over, Ibn Battuta narrated his many travel experiences and observations to Ibn Juzayy, a professional scribe who fashioned these stories into one of the most popular forms of literature in the Islamic World: a *rihla*, or book of travels centering on the *hajj* to Mecca.

The following selection does not describe any of Ibn Battuta's several pilgrimages to Mecca; rather, it tells of his last great journey into the kingdom of Mali in West Africa's Niger River region.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What did Ibn Battuta admire most about these people? What did he find hardest to accept? Why?
2. Did Ibn Battuta understand fully all he encountered? Can you find any evidence of tension or misunderstanding?
3. In what ways were the cultures of the people whom Ibn Battuta encountered a mixture of indigenous West African and Islamic elements?
4. How organized and controlled does the state of Mali appear to be?
5. Compare fourteenth-century Mali with eleventh-century Ghana (source 91). What are their similarities and differences? Which seem more significant? What do you conclude from that answer?
6. Based on a careful study of sources 91 and 93, as well as of this document, what inferences do you draw about the social status of women in sub-Saharan West Africa?

Then we reached the town of Iwalatan . . . after a journey . . . of two whole months. It is the first district of the Sudan and the sultan's¹ deputy there is Farba Husayn. *Farba* means "deputy." When we arrived there the merchants² placed their belongings in an open space, where the Sudan³ took over the guard of them while they went to the *farba*. He was sitting on a carpet under a *saqif*⁴ with his assistants in front of him

with lances and bows in their hands and the chief men of the Masufa⁵ behind him. The merchants stood before him while he addressed them, in spite of their proximity to him, through an interpreter, out of contempt for them. At this I repented at having come to their country because of their ill manners and their contempt for white men.⁶ I made for the house of Ibn Badda, a respectable man of Sala to whom I had written to

¹The sultan, or king, of Mali, for whom this was an outlying province.

²Berbers and Arabs from North Africa.

³Here this Arabic word, which means "blacks," refers to the local people and not to the region.

⁴A colonnade.

⁵A Berber people of the western Sahara.

⁶Merchants from North Africa: Berbers and Arabs.

rent a house for me. He had done so. Then the *musbrif*⁷ (of Iwalatan), who is called the *manshaju*, invited those who had come with the caravan to receive his reception-gift (*diyafa*). I declined to go but my companions entreated me urgently, so I went with those who went. Then the *diyafa* was brought. It was *anili*⁸ meal mixed with a little honey and yogurt which they had placed in half a gourd made into a kind of bowl. Those present drank and went away. I said to them: "Was it to this that the black man invited us?" They said: "Yes, for them this is a great banquet." Then I knew for certain that no good was to be expected from them and I wished to depart with the pilgrims of Iwalatan. But then I thought it better to go to see the seat of their king.

My stay in Iwalatan lasted about fifty days. Its inhabitants did me honor and made me their guest. Among them was the qadi⁹ of the place Muhammad b. Abd Allah b. Yanumur and his brother the faqih¹⁰ and teacher Yahya. The town of Iwalatan is extremely hot. There are a few little palm trees there in the shade of which they sow watermelons. . . . Mutton is abundant there and the people's clothes are of Egyptian cloth of good quality. Most of the inhabitants there belong to the Masufa, whose women are of surpassing beauty and have a higher status than the men.

THE MASUFA LIVING IN IWALATAN

These people have remarkable and strange ways. As for their men, they feel no jealousy. None of them traces his descent through his father, but from his maternal uncle, and a man's heirs are the sons of his sister only, to the exclusion of his own sons. This is something that I have seen nowhere in the world except among the Indian infidels in the land of Mulaybar, whereas these are Muslims who observe the prayer and study fiqh¹¹ and memorize the Quran. As for their women, they

have no modesty in the presence of men and do not veil themselves in spite of their assiduity in prayer. If anybody wishes to marry one of them he may do so, but they do not travel with the husband, and if one of them wished to do so her family would prevent her.

The women there have friends and companions among the foreign men, just as the men have companions from among the foreign women. One of them may enter his house and find his wife with her man friend without making any objection. . . .

One day I went into the presence of Abu Muhammad Yandakan al-Masufi in whose company we had come and found him sitting on a carpet. In the courtyard of his house there was a canopied couch with a woman on it conversing with a man seated. I said to him: "Who is this woman?" He said: "She is my wife." I said: "What connection has the man with her?" He replied: "He is her friend." I said to him: "Do you acquiesce in this when you have lived in our country and become acquainted with the precepts of the Shar?"¹² He replied: "The association of women with men is agreeable to us and a part of good conduct, to which no suspicion attaches. They are not like the women of your country." I was astonished at his laxity. I left him, and did not return thereafter. He invited me several times but I did not accept.

When I resolved to travel to Mali . . . I hired a guide from the Masufa, since there is no need to travel in company because of the security of that road, and set off with three of my companions. . . .

Then we . . . arrived at the River Sansara, which is about ten miles from the capital of Mali. It is their custom to prevent people from entering it except by authorization. I had written before this to the white community . . . to ask them to rent a house for me. When I reached the aforementioned river I crossed it by the ferry without

⁷The sultan's overseer of the town's markets.

⁸Millet.

⁹An Islamic religious judge.

¹⁰A teacher of religion.

¹¹Religion.

¹²*Sharia*, or Islamic Sacred Law (source 58).

anybody preventing me. I arrived at the town of Mali, the seat of the king of the Sudan. . . .

THE SULTAN OF MALI

He is the sultan Mansa Sulayman.¹³ *Mansa* means "sultan" and Sulayman is his name. He is a miserly king from whom no great donation is to be expected. It happened that I remained for this period without seeing him on account of my illness. Then he gave a memorial feast for our Lord Abul-Hasan¹⁴ (may God be content with him) and invited the emirs and faqihs and the qadi and khatib,¹⁵ and I went with them. They brought copies of the Quran and the Quran was recited in full. They prayed for our lord Abul-Hasan (may God have mercy on him) and prayed for Mansa Sulayman. When this was finished I advanced and greeted Mansa Sulayman and the qadi and the khatib and Ibn al-Faqih told him who I was. He answered them in their language and they said to me: "The sultan says to you: 'I thank God.'" I replied: "Praise and thanks be to God in every circumstance."

THEIR TRIVIAL RECEPTION GIFT AND THEIR RESPECT FOR IT

When I departed the reception gift was sent to me and dispatched to the qadi's house. The qadi sent it with his men to the house of Ibn al-Faqih. Ibn al-Faqih hastened out of his house barefooted and came in to me saying: "Come! The cloth and gift of the sultan have come to you!" I got up, thinking that it would be robes of honor and money, but behold! it was three loaves of bread and a piece of beef fried in *gharti*¹⁶ and a gourd containing yogurt. When I saw it I laughed, and was long astonished at their feeble intellect and their respect for mean things.

MY SPEAKING TO THE SULTAN AFTER THIS AND HIS KINDNESS TOWARDS ME

After this reception gift I remained for two months during which nothing was sent to me by the sultan and the month of Ramadan¹⁷ came in. Meanwhile I frequented the *mashwar* [council-place] and used to greet him and sit with the qadi and the khatib. I spoke with Dugha the interpreter, who said: "Speak with him, and I will express what you want to say in the proper fashion." So when he held a session at the beginning of Ramadan and I stood before him and said: "I have journeyed to the countries of the world and met their kings. I have been four months in your country without your giving me a reception gift or anything else. What shall I say of you in the presence of other sultans?" He replied: "I have not seen you nor known about you." The qadi and Ibn al-Faqih rose and replied to him saying: "He greeted you and you sent to him some food." Thereupon he ordered that a house be provided for me to stay in and an allowance to be allotted to me. Then, on the night of 27 Ramadan, he distributed among the qadi and the khatib and the faqihs a sum of money which they call *zakab*¹⁸ and gave to me with them 33 1/3 mithqals.¹⁹ When I departed he bestowed on me 100 mithqals of gold. . . .

THE SELF-DEBASEMENT OF THE SUDAN BEFORE THEIR KING AND THEIR SCATTERING OF DUST ON THEMSELVES BEFORE HIM AND OTHER PECULIARITIES

The Sudan are the humblest of people before their king and the most submissive towards him. They swear by his name, saying: "*Mansa Sulay-*

¹³The brother of Mansa Musa (source 60), Mansa Sulayman ruled Mali from 1341 to 1360.

¹⁴The late sultan of Morocco (r. 1331–1351).

¹⁵A public preacher at Friday mosque services.

¹⁶A vegetable oil.

¹⁷The month during which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset.

¹⁸Alms distributed at the end of Ramadan (source 58).

¹⁹One *mithqal* was 4.72 grams of gold.

man ki." When he calls to one of them at his sessions in the pavilion which we have mentioned the person called takes off his clothes and puts on ragged clothes, and removes his turban and puts on a dirty *shashiyya*²⁰ and goes in holding up his garments and trousers half-way up his leg, and advances with submissiveness and humility. He then beats the ground vigorously with his two elbows, and stands like one performing a *raka*²¹ to listen to his words.

If one of them addresses the sultan and the latter replies he uncovers the clothes from his back and sprinkles dust on his head and back, like one washing himself with water. I used to marvel how their eyes did not become blinded. . . .

WHAT I APPROVED OF AND WHAT I DISAPPROVED OF AMONG THE ACTS OF THE SUDAN

One of their good features is their lack of oppression. They are the farthest removed of people from it and their sultan does not permit anyone to practice it. Another is the security embracing the whole country, so that neither traveler there nor dweller has anything to fear from thief or usurper. Another is that they do not interfere with the wealth of any white man who dies among them, even though it be *qintar* upon *qintar*.²² They simply leave it in the hands of a trustworthy white man until the one to whom it is due takes it. Another is their assiduity in prayer and their persistence in performing it in congregation and beating their children to make them perform it. If it is a Friday and a man does not go early to the mosque he will not find anywhere to pray because of the press of the people. It is their habit that every man sends his servant with his prayer-mat to spread it for him in a place which he thereby has a right to until he goes to the

mosque. Their prayer-carpet is made from the fronds of the tree resembling the palm which has no fruit. Another of their good features is their dressing in fine white clothes on Friday. If any one of them possesses nothing but a ragged shirt he washes it and cleanses it and attends the Friday prayer in it. Another is their eagerness to memorize the great Quran. They place fetters on their children if there appears on their part a failure to memorize it and they are not undone until they memorize it.

I went into the house of the qadi on the day of the festival and his children were fettered so I said to him: "Aren't you going to let them go?" He replied: "I shan't do so until they've got the Quran by heart!" One day I passed by a youth of theirs, of good appearance and dressed in fine clothes, with a heavy fetter on his leg. I said to those who were with me: "What has this boy done? Has he killed somebody?" The lad understood what I had said and laughed, and they said to me: "He's only been fettered so that he'll learn the Quran!"

One of their disapproved acts is that their female servants and slave girls and little girls appear before men naked, with their privy parts uncovered. During Ramadan I saw many of them in this state, for it is the custom of the *farariyya*²³ to break their fast²⁴ in the house of the sultan, and each one brings his food carried by twenty or more of his slave girls, they all being naked. Another is that their women go into the sultan's presence naked and uncovered, and that his daughters go naked. On the night of 25 Ramadan I saw about two hundred slave girls bringing out food from his palace naked, having with them two of his daughters with rounded breasts having no covering upon them. Another is their sprinkling dust and ashes on their heads out of good manners. . . . Another is that many of them eat carrion, and dogs, and donkeys.²⁵

²⁰A skull cap.

²¹A set sequence of utterances and gestures that form the *salah*, or obligatory ritual prayer, that Muslims must engage in five times daily (sources 57 and 58).

²²"Weight upon weight" (i.e., a large amount of wealth).

²³Emirs, or chief men.

²⁴The daily fast of the month of Ramadan ends at sunset (note 17).

²⁵Unclean meat, according to quranic law.