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Topic 1: Traveling as a Stranger

Familiar and Foreign Aspects of Islamic Culture

In the book *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century*, author Ross Dunn uses Ibn Battuta’s own thoughts and dictations to tell the story of his many travels throughout the Muslim world. Ibn Battuta came from a family of Berber origin that was a part of the scholarly elite class in Tangier. Due to his family’s social status, he received a good education during which he studied law as well as Islamic sciences, being a strong believer in his faith (pg. 19). After having studied extensively at a local college in Tangier, Ibn Battuta was ready to see the world and experience Islamic cultures that were both similar and different to his own. *Rihlas* were very common in North Africa for people of Ibn Battuta’s class and allowed for learned men to use the knowledge they had acquired and apply it elsewhere throughout the world. Leaving his homeland behind, Ibn Battuta began his own *rihla* on June 14, 1325 (2 Rajab 725 A.D. in the Muslim calendar) during which he experienced many things both familiar and unfamiliar to him in the many Islamic civilizations that he visited (pg. 30).

Whilst traveling across the Muslim world, the adventurer Ibn Battuta came across many things that he found universal. One of the similarities that he noticed in most of the countries he visited was the kindness and generosity of the native peoples. This is evident in one of the first cities that he visited: Tunis. When Ibn Battuta first arrived in Tunis with the shaykh Abu ’Abdallah al-Zubaydi, he felt scared and lonely. While the local people all swarmed around the shaykh, offering him warm greetings, not one person greeted Ibn Battuta; his sadness growing. Soon however, one of the local people noticed his distress and quickly welcomed him to the city as a friend (pg. 36-37). As he proceeded on with his travels, Ibn Battuta continued to experience the generosity of the people he met. After spending some time in Damascus, Ibn Battuta found himself low on funds and feared that he would not be able to travel with the caravans set for Mecca in order to take part in the *hajj.* Already having fallen ill in Damascus, this would have been an even bigger setback in his plans. Luckily, he had made the acquaintance of a Maliki jurist who offered to buy him camels and supplies for the journey (pg. 65). It is also evident that throughout his travels, Ibn Battuta came into the company of many wealthy people who found his charming personality, intelligence and good breeding worthy of generosity and gifts. Leaving Mecca, Ibn Battuta joined a caravan of pilgrims headed by the *amir al-hajj*, Pehlewan Muhammad al-Hawih. Taking a liking to Ibn Battuta, the *amir al-hajj* bought him several camels which helped him travel comfortably across the Arabian Peninsula (pg. 88-89). It is likely that without the many gifts and charities he received, Ibn Battuta’s journey would not have been nearly as successful.

Throughout his journey, Ibn Battuta also witnessed many religious celebrations that were similar to those conducted in his homeland of Tangier. By the time Ibn Battuta arrived in Tunis in September 1325, it was time for the ’Id al-Fitr: a grand feast commemorating the end of Ramadan, during which people of Islamic faith fast throughout the day. During the celebration, the sultan led a parade of people from the citadel to a *musalla* (an area of prayer) (pg. 37). Being of Islamic faith himself, Ibn Battuta was familiar with the customs and traditions of Ramadan and was able to see how other Islamic civilizations celebrate it as well. Another important celebration of the Islamic faith that Ibn Battuta was able to experience was the *hajj* in Mecca. Although this was his first time taking part in the *hajj*, Ibn Battuta knew the rituals and ceremonies that had become tradition for all pilgrims traveling to Mecca during that time of the year. Dunn notes that, “The grand mosque, called the Haram… was the one place in the world where the adherents of the four main legal schools… prayed together in one place…” (pg. 71). Here, Ibn Battuta was able to participate in important religious practices while surrounded by his brothers in faith.

Though there were many familiar things that Ibn Battuta noticed as he traveled throughout the Muslim world, there were even more things that he found to be unfamiliar and foreign; one of these things being the politics of some of the countries that he visited. When in Egypt, Ibn Battuta found the Mamluk government to be very strange as they were of a different origin than the people they ruled. In Morocco, the Marinids were Berbers like many of the common people who lived there. Due to their differences, the Mamluks used their power to keep the local Egyptians out of politics at all costs. They also built an army of foreigners that would be loyal to them and keep the commoners at bay (pg. 47). Another place where Ibn Battuta witnessed governmental practices which he found odd was in Delhi. It was known throughout the Muslim world that Muhammad Tughluq, the sultan of Delhi during Ibn Battuta’s visit, often rewarded foreign travelers with gifts and high positions in his court (pg. 189). Dunn states that, to the sultan, “Alien origin had become a more important criterion for office than distinction and experience” (pg. 199). The sultan even made Ibn Battuta a *quadi*, or judge, despite the fact that he was not familiar with the Hanafi school, related to the legal system in India (pg. 199-200). While in Ma’bar, Ibn Battuta witnessed another type of ruling style which he found to be violent and brutish. Ghiyath al-Din was Ibn Battuta’s ex-brother-in-law and ruler of Ma’bar. During his visit, Ibn Battuta proposed that the two work together to gain control of the Maldives but, the plan fell apart before it had hardly begun. Ibn Battuta disliked Ghiyath al-Din’s tactics because he allowed his troops to wander through villages, murdering innocents by impaling them with sharp stakes. Such actions were forbidden to Muslim rulers as stated in the Qur’an and, Ibn Battuta could not continue their partnership (pg. 244-245).

Another area of unfamiliar territory that Ibn Battuta noticed throughout his travels was the different practices and traditions of the cultures he came into contact with. Some of these cultures were even shocking to Ibn Battuta because they were so different from what was common in his homeland. While staying as a guest of a shaykh in Antalya, Ibn Battuta and his friends were approached by a local Turkish man who invited them to have dinner in his home. Though Ibn Battuta accepted at first, he soon protested to the shaykh that the man was obviously poor and should not have to provide them with dinner. However, the shaykh simply laughed and explained to Ibn Battuta that this man was a cobbler as well as a shaykh of the Akhis and that it was common of them to invite guests to their hospice. Though Ibn Battuta found the situation strange, he agreed to go to the dinner and was pleasantly surprised by the Akhis (pg. 145-146). Ibn Battuta also found himself surprised by the use of Turkish wagons during his time in the steppe. Not common in the Arab world, he was only familiar with using camels and other animals to carry heavy loads. Two- and four-wheel carts where pulled by horses and camels and followed one another in caravans. When making camp, the wagon covers could even be taken apart and placed on the ground to form a shelter to rest in. Ibn Battuta especially enjoyed the privacy that the wagons provided while traveling long distances (pg. 165). Another interesting cultural difference Ibn Battuta noticed while in the steppe was the treatment of women. When presenting himself to Khan Ozbeg and his family, Ibn Battuta noted that, while his children were seated below him, his wives were seated on either side of him. This show of equality and power of the Mongol women is very different to how women from Ibn Battuta’s home are treated by their husbands and society as a whole. Ibn Battuta states that Ozbeg’s *khatuns* (or wives) were even allowed to openly take part in the governing of their husband’s lands (pg. 168). All of the cultural differences that Ibn Battuta experienced during his travels allowed him to see how other Islamic civilizations differed from his own.

Although Ibn Battuta witnessed many religious aspects of other cultures that he found familiar, there were also significant differences in some of the religious practices of the places he visited. During his travels, Ibn Battuta stopped to rest at al-Najaf; “…the burial place of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph and son-in-law of the Prophet” (pg. 89-90). Though Ali’s mausoleum was a holy place to the Muslim people, its importance compared to other holy places differed between the Sunni and the Shi’i. The Shi’i believed that, according to the doctrine of the Imam, a descendent of Ali would one day come to earth and bring with him the “Last Judgement”. Therefore, they saw Ali’s mausoleum as an important center of holy pilgrimage. The Sunni, however, did not believe in the doctrine of Imam and only saw Ali for what he was: a Caliph and relation of Muhammad. Being a Sunni himself, Ibn Battuta’s only reason for going to the mausoleum was his respect of Islamic history (pg. 90). Ibn Battuta also experienced a difference in religious practices which he did not enjoy while spending time in Kaffa. As he and his friends rested in a local mosque, they suddenly heard the sound of Catholic church bells ringing throughout the town. Here, Dunn says that, “Pious Muslims in general regarded church bells as one of the more odious manifestations of Christian sacrilege” (pg. 164). Annoyed by the disturbance, Ibn Battuta and his companions rebelled against the racket by drowning it out with readings from the Qur’an and the call to prayer (pg. 164). Both of these situations in which Ibn Battuta witnessed religious practices that were different from his own allowed him to gain more knowledge about them, helping him throughout the rest of his journey.

While on his adventure traveling throughout the Muslim world, Ibn Battuta was able to experience many things that were familiar as well as foreign to him, broadening his knowledge and giving him a new appreciation for the world around him. His *rihla* showed him that although there are many cultures that practice his same faith, there are also many differences between them that make them all unique. The world today knows so much more about the Islamic civilizations of the fourteenth century because of his journey.