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*A Study of the Adventures of Ibn Battuta*

Ibn Battuta was a Moroccan scholar and explorer who lived in the 14th century. A significant portion of his life was dedicated to travel and exploration, in a journey called a *rihla*. During his travels, he took notes and recorded journal entries of his findings, thoughts, and experiences. In thirty years, Ibn Battuta had travelled far across Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and China, before returning to Africa. In his vast journey, he encountered many different cultures and civilizations. He found certain facets of these civilizations familiar, while others he found unfamiliar. His detailed recordings provide a look at his reactions to cultures that he considered different, and most of the time, when met with differences, Ibn Battuta responded negatively. His judgements towards cultures different than his own proves that he was extremely ethnocentric.

The basis for Ibn Battuta's beliefs and views come from his upbringing while living in Tangier, a city on the Moroccan coast. Ibn Battuta was "growing up there, being educated, and moving in the secure circles of his parents, kinsmen, teachers, and friends" (Dunn, 13). Ibn Battuta had a very well-rounded upbringing, and his education and the culture of Tangier contributed to his "urge to travel" (Dunn, 19). Ibn Battuta had the very best schooling in the field of law and other Islamic sciences, leading him to quickly develop the values of an educated man. The culture of Tangier made it common for educated families to specialize in certain tasks, and while most young men his age wouldn't go further than a middle-range level of education, Ibn Battuta's family status allowed him to move through further advanced studies. Most of his studies and experiences in Tangier molded him to become a great scholar and gentleman, and he continued in his studies to focus on law. His "juridical training was entirely integrated with his

theological and literary education” (Dunn, 21), so his education was tightly interwoven alongside his morals and values. Becoming closely associated with the cultural style of a Muslim lawyer allowed his speech and manners to match many other Muslim cultures around the world.

Leaving Tangier, the first stop in Ibn Battuta’s journey was the Maghrib, which is the name given to the region of North Africa bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Leaving his home was bittersweet, but as a 21-year-old eager for adventure, he began his journey. Arriving in Constantine, Ibn Battuta was welcomed by the governor who presented him with gifts. Ibn Battuta was considered a wayfarer, which meant he was an individual who would come to experience random acts of kindness over the course of his journey, receiving gifts and special treatment. When he arrived in another Maghribi city, called Tunis, he experienced the “forlornness of a young man in a strange city” (Dunn, 36). He was taken back by Tunis, mainly because he was not greeted by the people of the city in the way he thought he should have been.

Because no one said any word of greeting to him, he was lonely and began to cry. When someone noticed him crying, he was welcomed in, and he decided to stay there for a while in the company of other gentleman scholars. These are the people Ibn Battuta constantly aligned himself with, as this was what he was taught was culturally acceptable in his upbringing. He felt a sense of belonging there, and whenever he was in a place or situation not among people like himself, such as when he arrived in Tunis, he felt unwelcome and considered the location strange. This situation shows Ibn Battuta’s ethnocentrism. His reactions to Tunis demonstrate that he felt his own culture was superior to others, especially when his comfort level in the city immediately changed when he was in the company of other people like him.

When Ibn Battuta travelled through Persia and Iraq, he was faced with more cultural practices different from his own, and his reactions in these locations further prove he was

ethnocentric. One group he interacted with in this time was the Shi'i. Ibn Battuta made it "clear that he had little time for the Shi'i's, Twelver or otherwise. At several points in the *Rihla* he takes righteous potshots at their beliefs or recounts disparaging little anecdotes about their fanatical and misguided observances" (Dunn, 90). He even referred to these groups by terms of depreciation, going out of his way to avoid certain towns so he didn't have to interact with them. This was a culture different from his own, that he was unfamiliar with, and rather than reacting with a mindset of acceptance, he shuns the Shi'i, calling them names and taking steps to avoid interacting with them. He did not experience much in Persia and Iraq like his own culture, but in the instances where he encountered something unfamiliar, he reacted with judgement and negativity.

Ibn Battuta made a point of visiting Basra, a city that had been the home of "numerous early Muslim luminaries: theologians, philosophers, poets, scientists, and historians" (Dunn, 92). When he feels like a place will be in line with his own cultural mindset, his behaviors change, and he goes into these settings with more intent and excitement. In Basra, he attended a worship service in the mosque, and he was "appalled to hear the preacher committing dreadful errors of grammar in his sermon" (Dunn, 92). This experience is another example of Ibn Battuta reacting to something different with judgment and anger, rather than understanding.

Leaving Basra, he journeyed to Abadan. There, he met up with a local hermit. It is interesting to see Ibn Battuta seem so welcome in the presence of a hermit, after seeing him only be comfortable with people who share his high status, but this lines up with a previous statement made by author Ross E. Dunn that Ibn Battuta "embarked on his travels prepared to show as much equanimity in the company of holy hermits in mountain caves as in the presence of the august professors of urban colleges (Dunn, 24). In the presence of this hermit in Abadan, Ibn

Battuta states he felt “deeply moved”, and “for a moment (he) entertained the idea of spending the rest of (his) life” with the hermit (Dunn, 93). In the company of the shaykh, he felt at ease and comfortable. This is likely because he was in the presence of a holy man, so despite his societal status, Ibn Battuta connected with the man over religion. His positive reaction to something he deemed familiar still lends credibility to the fact that he was ethnocentric in nature, because he is comfortable in situations that culturally line up with his beliefs, and he demonstrates judgement whenever interacting with something remotely foreign.

Later, Ibn Battuta comes to interact with herding peoples called the Lurs. In this interaction, “Ibn Battuta regarded some of the Lurs customs that came to his attention as thoroughly brutish and heterodox, but the *atabeg* and the little groups of literate men of the villages and hospices treated him well and gave him the usual presents owing to wayfarers” (Dunn, 94). The Lurs show him respect and kindness, giving him gifts and treating him well, but he still has a negative mindset towards their cultural customs. This is very closed minded of him, and strange to see that even though they show him kindness, he still uses his own culture as a frame of reference to judge other people. This response is flipped when he later interacts with the Shiraz, where he responds to them with positivity and attraction because of their religious views, as well as their strong reputation and status, that are similar to his own.

Towards the end of his journey, Ibn Battuta traveled to China. Ross E. Dunn states “Ibn Battuta praises China as vast and bounteous, noting the quality of its silk and porcelain, the excellence of its plums and watermelons, the enormous size of its chickens, and the advantages of its paper money” (Dunn, 258). Ibn Battuta had a very surface level appreciation of China. In the quote it is apparent his appreciation for China has nothing to do with the people themselves, it mainly has to do with the atmosphere and the products. Ibn Battuta viewed China as a safe and

agreeable country to travel in, stating how “you can travel all alone across the land for nine months without fear, even if you are carrying much wealth” (Dunn, 258). Despite all his praise for China, this was the place he felt the worst culture shock out of his entire journey. Ibn Battuta was not able to easily understand what he was seeing, and stated “China was beautiful, but it did not please me. On the contrary, I was greatly troubled thinking about the way paganism dominated this country. Whenever I went out of my lodging, I saw many blameworthy things” (Dunn, 258). Because of his view on China, he stayed indoors as much as he could. In the same statement where he speaks poorly of China, he states “whenever I saw any Muslims I always felt as though I were meeting my own family and close kinsmen” (Dunn, 258). Ibn Battuta feels a great culture shock in China, so much so that he responds by staying away, only going outside when he must, despite his recognition of the country’s beauty. He is so taken back by the culture he refuses to interact with it.

Ibn Battuta’s experience in China is a huge representation of his views on cultures unlike his own; he lacks respect for different cultures, but as soon as he comes to face with something familiar, he feels at ease. He begins his journey with what seems to be an open mind and a spirit of adventure, but whenever he engages with a culture different than his own, he reacts negatively. It is only when he feels comfortable with someone who shares his views from his upbringing in Tangier that Ibn Battuta responds with positivity. Throughout his journey Ibn Battuta consistently uses his own culture as a frame of reference to judge other people and their practices. His reactions constantly give the sense that he believes his culture is better than the others he interacts with, which is the exact behavior that defines ethnocentrism.