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Traveling as a Stranger

Ibn Battuta’s Encounters in Foreign Land

Ibn Battuta was a Muslim traveler who grew up in Tangier, which is a city in Morocco. He grew up to become very knowledgeable in law, as well as the Islamic religion, which was something that was expected of him in Tangier due to his family’s status (19). Arabic schooling taught him how to be a man in Muslim civilization and he learn law that was common throughout all Islamic locations (22). In hopes of expanding his knowledge and abilities, Ibn decided to go on a travel exploration that ended up covering major areas of Africa and Asia. During his travels, many locations also dominated the Islam religion, but some of the teachings and practices of the various civilizations differed. While he often assembled with people of similar culture, he occasionally found himself having to adapt to different behaviors. This paper will outline the aspects of Islam civilizations that Ibn found both universal and unfamiliar, and how he was able to adapt to those that were unfamiliar.

One of Ibn’s first journeys was to Tunis, located in Northern Africa. While he entered Tunis feeling unwelcomed due to the lack of greetings he received, he was eventually able to feel a foundation of familiarity (37). In this Islam civilization, he was able to meet other scholars who were like-minded to him, as knowledge was also important in this civilization (38). Ibn even ended up being “appointed qadi of a caravan of pilgrims (38).” He was lucky early on in his trip to not experience any extreme culture shock and therefore not forced to make any major adaptations.

As Ibn made his way around land surrounding the Red Sea, he soon entered Cairo, which had an overall different structure at first sight. The city itself was extremely crowded and full of people and shops, that it caused Ibn to become nervous (46). He then had to adapt to the hectic, new environment that differed from what he was used to back home. He also encountered the Mamluk people, who had a very different political authority than Ibn was used to. He was used to seeing people who were “ethnically undifferentiated” (47) from the rest of the civilization, the Mamluks were “alien to their native Egyptian subjects” (47). This society that he witnessed was also very hierarchical, where certain people can have certain privileges, while others cannot. This was on a level that Ibn had not yet experienced back in Tangier, where the relationship of authority to the general public was much better. Ibn had the privilege to be able to adapt well here because of his status. He was still a very well educated male scholar, which allowed him to get by well. As he moved on to other areas of Cairo, he witnessed different relationships among the public. He was particularly astonished by the hospital system, as everyone was treated the same no matter their gender, race, and age (50). While this was not something that affected him directly, it was definitely an aspect of this civilization that he found very unusual, yet was amazed to see.

As Ibn Battuta arrived at Mecca, he witnessed how Islamic prayer was a more universal experience than he had previously predicted. Everyone came to Mecca to pray, no matter what they looked like (71). Prayer was one aspect to Islamic civilization that was universal, yet the way of prayer was not completely the same as Ibn was used to when he arrived at Mecca. There were certain taboos set in place in the state of ihram that had to be abided by (75). While he still wanted to keep his original intentions, Ibn did abide by these numerous taboos due to their importance in the situation (75). This exemplifies how Ibn adapted to a cultural aspect he did not find familiar.

When Ibn made it to Iran, he was immediately set at a disadvantage because of the language barrier (88). He had finally reached land that was not Arabic-speaking dominated and was forced to adapt. Luckily for Ibn, his status was once again able to allow for easy adaptation and to make the unfamiliar less frightening. He was able to stay connected to people who were like minded and in a community where “bilingualism was common and where, at the very least, the symbolic language of religious observance, civilized manners, and Sunni erudition could always see him through (88).” As he continued on his route, he came across the city of Wasit, where he also had a more unfamiliar experience, this time relating to Islamic prayer. The people of this city had a way of prayer that was much more chaotic and disorderly, in his eyes. For example, Ibn states that “some of them will take a large snake and bite its head with their teeth until they bite it clean through (91).” This seemed to be too much for Ibn’s liking, since he did not seem to stay for long, but it gave him exposure to other forms of worship in an Islam civilization.

As Ibn Battuta made his way towards Persia, he encountered herding people known as Lurs who had customs that he found to be unfamiliar. He considered their customs to be “thoroughly brutish and heterodox (94)”. Although he found this to be unusual in passing, he was still treated with respect by them, most likely due to his status, which seemed to be a universal experience throughout a majority of his travels.

Once arriving in Anatolia, Ibn noticed a difference in the civilization due to the fact that it was a majority Turkish, yet he quickly found familiarity in it because this civilization was modeled after a Persian civilization, which mimics Islam beliefs fairly closely (144). Ibn was able to use his past knowledge to link together these similarities in order to make this civilization seem as universal as possible, therefore avoiding the fearful unknowns of a completely new area. While Ibn was used to being treated well because of his reputation and status, he was exposed to an unfamiliar sense of hospitality when he encountered the fityan organization, whose main goal was to “provide structure of solidarity and mutual aid in the urban environment (146).” This was a form of culture shock to Ibn, as he was not used to such generous unsolicited respect. He described being “greatly astonished at their generosity and innate nobility (147).”

When Ibn Battuta arrived in Azak, he was immediately experiencing some culture shock within Islamic civilization due to the overall hospitality he was experiencing. Everyone around him was drinking liquor and acting in a chaotic manner, which was not something he was used to and not something he wished to partake in (166). He described it as “qumizz” which means disagreeable (167). This caused him to not spend much time in this location, as he was not willing to give up his refusal to drink liquor to stay. This was an instance where Ibn refused to adapt to the situation and instead chose to leave.

One of the major shocks that Ibn experienced in his travels through the Steppe was how different the treatment of women was. It was stated in the writing that “Ibn Battuta had a great deal to say in the Rihla about the freedom, respect, and near equality enjoyed by the Mongol and Turkish women in startling contrast to the custom in his own land and other Arab countries (168).” He acknowledged that women in this area had a lot more power than he was used to. It seemed that the men did not have as much control over women, like he was previously used to. Women in this area had a lot more political power as well, as “women in the court shared openly and energetically in the governing of the realm (168).” This reflects a lot on how other Arab countries treat women without any hesitation, because here they are given the basic freedoms that men automatically receive, and Ibn is in shock.

While Ibn did enjoy his time in China, it was still an overall experience that felt unfamiliar. It was not, at the time, dominated by the Islam religion as much as other areas he had previously visited. He greatly enjoyed being a traveler, as he writes that “China is the safest and most agreeable country in the world for a traveler (258)”. He did feel more like a tourist here, who was just wandering around unknowingly. It was not as common for him to see other Muslims there to make him feel like home and that was an overall shock for him. There were still many areas of China where Islamic civilization was prominent, but he did not feel familiar. Ibn states that “during my stay in China, whenever I saw any Muslims, I always felt as though I were meeting my own family or close kinsman (258)”. He found more familiarity and adapted by communicating with Muslim worthies such as Ch’uan-chou and Sharif al-Din al-Trabrizi. This made him feel more immersed in Islam civilization even when being so far from home.

While Ibn Battuta experienced many things in Islamic civilizations around the world that were both familiar and unfamiliar, he was able to adapt well to unfamiliar situation, mostly due to his status. He was able to be treated well in so many situations because of his class and status that he acquired back home, that it made it a lot easier for him to travel without worries. He was even able to do things and meet people that those native to the area had never been able to do. All of the important religious and political figures he met made him very fortunate. This story of his travels would have gone a lot differently if he had not been fortunate enough to gain such a prestigious status and acquire successful education back in Tangier. He was almost surprised when things did not go exactly his way, like when he was not greeted back in Tunis. It makes situations a lot easier to adapt to when the rest of a civilization has a certain view of someone, which is exactly the privilege Ibn had when making his travels around the eastern hemisphere.