

Journey of Ibn Battuta



Date ★ 1352 to 1354

Place ★ Sijilmasa, Morocco to Gao, Mali Empire

Type of Source ★ Eyewitness (traveler's account)

Author ★ Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Battuta, usually known as Ibn Battuta

Context ★ Ibn Battuta was born in Tangier, Morocco, in 1304. In 1325, he began the *hajj*, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, which became an epic 24-year journey. Working as a lawyer and religious scholar, he travelled north to Russia, east to China, and south to modern Tanzania. After returning to Morocco in 1350, he left on another journey, this time to Muslim Spain then south to the empires of West Africa. Upon his return in 1354, he dictated *Rihla* (Journey) describing his 75,000-mile travels. It remains one of the best eyewitness accounts of West Africa at the height of its wealth and power.

At *Sijilmasa* I bought camels and a four months' supply of **forage** for them. Thereupon I set out on the **1st Muharram of the year 53** with a caravan including, amongst others, a number of the merchants of Sijilmasa.

After twenty-five days, we reached **Taghaza**, an unattractive village, with the curious feature that its houses and mosques are built of blocks of salt, roofed with camel skins. There are no trees there, nothing but sand. In the sand is a salt mine; they dig for the salt, and find it in thick slabs, lying one on top of the other, as though they had been tool-squared and laid under the surface of the earth. A camel will carry two of these slabs.

No one lives at Taghaza except the slaves of the **Massufa** tribe, who dig for the salt; they subsist on dates imported from [the] **Draa** [Valley] and Sijilmasa, camels' flesh, and millet imported from the **Sudan**. The blacks come up from their country and take away the salt from there. At **Oualata** a load of salt brings eight to ten **mithqals**; in the town of **Niani** it sells for twenty to thirty, and sometimes as much as forty. The blacks use salt as a **medium of exchange**, just as gold and silver is used; they cut it up into pieces and buy and sell with it. The business done at Taghaza, for all its **meanness**, amounts to an enormous figure.

We passed ten days of discomfort there, because the water is **brackish** and the place is **plagued** with flies. Water supplies are laid in at Taghaza for the crossing of the desert which lies beyond it, which is a ten-nights' journey with no water on the way except on rare occasions.



My stay at Oualata lasted about fifty days; and I was shown honor and entertained by its inhabitants. It is an excessively hot place, and boasts a few small date-palms, in the shade of which they sow watermelons. ...Their women are of **surpassing** beauty, and are shown more respect than the men. The state of affairs amongst these people is indeed extraordinary. Their men show no signs of jealousy whatever; no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother's brother. A person's heirs are his sister's sons, not his

forage
food

1 Muharram of the year 53

*Muslim year 753;
February 13, 1352*

Taghaza

*town in present-day
northern Mali*

Massufa

*Berber tribe in present-day
Mauritania*

Draa

*River valley in southern
Morocco*

Sudan

*In Arabic, Sudan means
"land of blacks". In this
case, it does not refer to the
modern country of Sudan.*

Oualata

*town in present-day
southeastern Mauritania*

mithqal

*about one-tenth of an
ounce of gold dust*

Niani

*village in present-day
northwestern Guinea; in
Ibn Battuta's time, capital
of the Mali Empire*

medium of exchange

money

meanness

poverty

own sons. This is a thing which I have seen nowhere in the world except among the Indians of **Malabar**. But those are **heathens**; these people are Muslims, **punctilious** in observing the hours of prayer, studying books of law, and memorizing the Koran. Yet their women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves, though they are **assiduous** in attending the prayers.



When I decided to make the journey to Niani, which is reached in twenty-four days from Oualata if the traveller pushes on rapidly, I hired a guide from the Massufa—for there is no necessity to travel in a **company** on account of the safety of that road—and set out with three of my companions.

On the way there are many trees [baobabs], and these trees are of great age and **girth**; a whole caravan may shelter in the shade of one of them. There are trees which have neither branches nor leaves, yet the shade cast by their trunks is sufficient to shelter a man. Some of these trees are rotted in the interior and the rain-water collects in them, so that they serve as wells and the people drink of the water inside them. In others there are bees and honey, which is collected by the people. I was surprised to find inside one tree, by which I passed, a man, a weaver, who had set up his loom in it and was actually weaving.

A traveller in this country carries no **provisions**, whether plain food or seasonings, and neither gold nor silver. He takes nothing but pieces of salt and glass ornaments, which the people call beads, and some **aromatic goods**. When he comes to a village the women of the blacks bring out millet, milk, chickens, pulped lotus fruit, rice, "funi" (a grain resembling mustard seed, from which couscous and gruel are made), and pounded green beans. The traveller buys what of these he wants, but their rice causes sickness to whites when it is eaten, and the funi is preferable to it.

The [Niger] flows from there down to **Kabara**, and thence to **Zagha**. In both Kabara and Zagha there are sultans who owe allegiance to the king of **Mali**...Thence the [Niger] descends to **Timbuktu** and **Gao**.



The sultan of Mali is Mansa Sulayman, "mansa" meaning sultan, and Sulayman being his proper name. He is a **miserly** king, not a man from whom one might hope for a rich present. It happened that I spent these two months without seeing him, on account of my illness. Later on he held a banquet in commemoration of our master **Abu al-Hasan**, to which the commanders, doctors, **qadi** and preacher were invited, and I went along with them. Reading-desks were brought in, and the Koran was read through, then they prayed for our master Abu al-Hasan and also for Mansa Sulayman.

When the ceremony was over I went forward and saluted Mansa Sulayman. The qadi, the preacher, and **Ibn al-Faqih** told him who I was, and he answered them in their tongue. They said to me, "The sultan says to you 'Give thanks to God,'" so I said, "Praise be to God and thanks under all circumstances." When I withdrew the [sultan's] hospitality gift was sent to me. It was taken first to the qadi's house, and the qadi sent it on with his men to Ibn al-Faqih's house. Ibn

brackish

salty

plagued

infested

surpassing

superior

Malabar

southwestern coast of India

heathens

non-Muslims, in this case Hindus

punctilious

attentive

assiduous

thorough

company

caravan

girth

width

provisions

supplies

aromatic goods

perfumes or incenses

Niger

Ibn Battuta mistakenly believed the Niger River was the Nile.

Kabara and Zagha

smaller cities on the Niger River; location is uncertain

Mali

the main empire of northwestern Africa in Ibn Battuta's time; does not have the same boundaries as modern Mali

Timbuktu

city in present-day central Mali, northernmost point of the Niger River

Gao

city in present-day eastern Mali, in the 1500s capital of the Songhai Empire

miserly

cheap, stingy

Abu al-Hasan

sultan of Morocco

qadi

Muslim judge

al-Faqih came hurrying out of his house barefooted, and entered my room saying, "Stand up; here comes the sultan's stuff and gift to you." So I stood up thinking—since he had called it "stuff"—that it consisted of robes of honor and money, and lo!, it was three cakes of bread, and a piece of beef fried in native oil, and a **calabash** of sour curds. When I saw this I burst out laughing, and thought it a most amazing thing that they could be so foolish and make so much of such a **paltry** matter.

Note: Mali had been nearly bankrupted by Mansa Sulayman's predecessor Mansa Musa. Mansa Sulayman was trying to get the empire's treasury back in order, so he was often seen as cheap. Ibn Battuta was clearly unsympathetic.

On certain days the sultan holds audiences in the palace yard, where there is a platform under a tree, with three steps; this they call the "pempi." It is carpeted with silk and has cushions placed on it. [Over it] is raised the umbrella, which is a sort of **pavilion** made of silk, surmounted by a bird in gold, about the size of a falcon. The sultan comes out of a door in a corner of the palace, carrying a bow in his hand and a **quiver** on his back. On his head he has a golden skull-cap, bound with a gold band which has narrow ends shaped like knives, more than a span in length. His usual dress is a velvety red tunic, made of the European fabrics called "mutanfas." The sultan is preceded by his musicians, who carry gold and silver **guimbris**, and behind him come three hundred armed slaves. He walks in a leisurely fashion, **affecting** a very slow movement, and even stops from time to time. On reaching the **pempi** he stops and looks round the assembly, then ascends it in the **sedate** manner of a preacher ascending a pulpit. As he takes his seat the drums, trumpets, and bugles are sounded. Three slaves go out at a run to summon the sovereign's deputy and the military commanders, who enter and sit down. Two saddled and bridled horses are brought, along with two goats, which they hold to serve as a protection against the evil eye. **Dugha** stands at the gate and the rest of the people remain in the street, under the trees.

The blacks are of all people the most **submissive** to their king and the most **object** in their behavior before him. They swear by his name, saying "**Mansa Sulayman ki**." If he summons any of them while he is holding an audience in his pavilion, the person summoned takes off his clothes and puts on worn garments, removes his turban and dons a dirty skullcap, and enters with his garments and trousers raised knee-high. He goes forward in an **attitude** of humility and **dejection** and knocks the ground hard with his elbows, then stands with bowed head and bent back listening to what he says. If anyone addresses the king and receives a reply from him, he uncovers his back and throws dust over his head and back, for all the world like a bather splashing himself with water. I used to wonder how it was they did not blind themselves. If the sultan delivers any remarks during his audience, those present take off their turbans and put them down, and listen in silence to what he says.



The blacks possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater **abhorrence** of injustice than any other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the **least** act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveller nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from

Ibn al-Faqih

an Arab living in Mali who was Ibn Battuta's host in Niani

calabash

gourd

paltry

insignificant

pavilion

tent

quiver

case for arrows

guimbris

two- or three-stringed guitars

affecting

assuming

sedate

calm

Dugha

Mansa Sulayman's interpreter

submissive

obedient

object

miserable

Mansa Sulayman ki

Sultan (King) Sulayman has commanded in Mandinka

attitude

position

dejection

depression

abhorrence

hatred

least

smallest

robbers or men of violence. They do not **confiscate** the property of any white man who dies in their country, even if it be **uncounted** wealth. On the contrary, they give it into the charge of some trustworthy person among the whites, until the rightful heir takes possession of it. They are careful to observe the hours of prayer, and assiduous in attending them in congregations, and in bringing up their children to them.

On Fridays, if a man does not go early to the **mosque**, he cannot find a corner to pray in, on account of the crowd. It is a custom of theirs for each man to send his **boy** [to the mosque] with his prayer-mat; the boy spreads it out for his master in a place befitting him [and remains on it] until he comes to the mosque. Their prayer-mats are made of the leaves of a tree resembling a date-palm, but without fruit.

Another of their good qualities is their habit of wearing clean white garments on Fridays. Even if a man has nothing but an old worn shirt, he washes it and cleans it, and wears it to the Friday service. Yet another is their **zeal** for learning the **Koran** by heart. They put their children in chains if they show any backwardness in memorizing it, and they are not set free until they have it by heart. I visited the qadi in his house on the day of the festival. His children were chained up, so I said to him, "Will you not let them loose?" He replied, "I shall not do so until they learn the Koran by heart."

Among their bad qualities are the following. The women servants, slave-girls, and young girls go about in front of everyone naked, without a stitch of clothing on them. Women go into the sultan's presence naked and without coverings, and his daughters also go about naked. Then there is their custom of putting dust and ashes on their heads, as a mark of respect... Another **reprehensible** practice among many of them is the eating of **carrion**, dogs, and donkeys.

The date of my arrival at Niani was **14th Jumada I, 53**, and of my departure from it **22nd Muharram of the year 54**.



Then we went on to Timbuktu, which stands four miles from the river [Niger]. Most of its inhabitants are of the Massufa tribe, **wearers of the face-veil**. Its governor is called **Farba Musa**. I was present with him one day when he had just appointed one of the Massufa to be **emir** of a section. He assigned to him a robe, a turban, and trousers, all of them of dyed cloth, and **bade** him sit upon a shield, and the chiefs of his tribe raised him on their heads. In this town is the grave of the meritorious poet Abu Ishaq as-Sahili, of **Granada**, who is known in his own land as **at-Tuwayjin**.

From Timbuktu I sailed down the [Niger] on a small boat, hollowed out of a single piece of wood.

confiscate
take

uncounted
uncountable (because it is so large)

mosque
Muslim place of worship

boy
young male servant

zeal
enthusiasm

Koran
Muslim holy book

reprehensible
disgusting

carrion
rotting animals

14th Jumada I, 53
June 28, 1352

22nd Muharram of the year 54
February 27, 1353

wearers of the face-veil
Berber men cover their faces, originally to keep out dust and sand. Arabs, such as Ibn Battuta, often found this odd since only Muslim women were expected to cover their faces.

Farba Musa
Governor Musa

emir
leader

bade
asked, offered

Granada
city in southern Spain, at the time a Muslim city

at-Tuwayjin
"Little Saucepan"

I went on . . . to Gao, which is a large city on the [Niger], and one of the finest towns in the Sudan. It is also one of their biggest and best-provisioned towns, with rice in plenty, milk, and fish, and there is a species of cucumber there called "inani" which has no equal. The buying and selling of its inhabitants is done with **cowrie-shells**, and the same is the case at Niani. I stayed there about a month, and then set out in the direction of **Takadda** by land with a large caravan of merchants from **Ghadamis**.

cowrie-shells

shells from the Indian Ocean

Takadda

town of uncertain location, probably Azelik in present-day northwestern Niger

Ghadamis

town in modern Libya just south of Tunisia

Source: From Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, tr. and ed. H. A. R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929)