more seaworthy craft capable of bigger payloads and safer transportation. Borrowing extensively from the Arabs and other maritime cultures, Chinese and Western European sailors adopted and created better navigational tools, including superior coastal charts. Such efforts paid rich rewards to the merchant mariners of China and the West. By the mid-thirteenth century Chinese mariners were a major force in the seaborne commerce of Southeast Asia, and Western Europeans, especially the Italians, dominated the shipping lanes of the Mediterranean.

Early in the fifteenth century Ming China sent seven massive naval expeditions into the Indian Ocean, and portions of several of those fleets reached the shores of East Africa and Arabia. Also in the fifteenth century, Western Europe, finding the overland roads to Cathay now mostly blocked, began to seek sea routes to the Indies. The consequences of those explorations were astounding. Before the century was over Europeans had sailed to East Africa, India, and the Americas.

Developments in naval engineering and navigation held the key to a new stage in human history—the joining of the Eastern and Western hemispheres—but long-distance transportation across Inner Asia also enjoyed a brief renaissance in the period following the dissolution of the Mongol Ecumene. We might think of it as the Silk Road’s Indian Summer. From 1380 to 1405 the armies of Tamerlane swept across Eurasia, from Anatolia to the borders of China, from Russia to India. Their destructive fury became legendary and deservedly so. But they also established a new but short-lived Central Asian empire, whose capital, Samarqand, became the dynamic meeting place for merchants, travelers, and artisans from all over Eurasia.

The land routes of Inner Africa, particularly of West Africa, were equally vital in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and remained so until new markets blossomed along Africa’s west coast in the sixteenth century. Between about 1230 and 1591, the grasslands trading empires of Mali and Songhai successively flourished as a consequence of their ability to control the traffic in gold, goods, salt, and slaves that passed along the trans-Saharan caravan routes.

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 Tā’fīl, 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 qādi, 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 *ribla*, 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’s deputy there is Farba Husayn. *Farba* means “deputy.” When we arrived there the merchants placed their belongings in an open space, where the Sudan’s took over the guard of them while they went to the *farba*. He was sitting on a carpet under a *saqif* with his assistants in front of him with lances and bows in their hands and the chief men of the Masufa 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. I made for the house of Ibn Badda, a respectable man of Sala to whom I had written to

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1. The sultan, or king, of Mali, for whom this was an outlying province.
2. Berbers and Arabs from North Africa.
3. Here this Arabic word, which means “blacks,” refers to the local people and not to the region.
4. A colonnade.
5. A Berber people of the western Sahara.
rent a house for me. He had done so. Then the munsif7 of Iwalatan, who is called the manhaja-
ju, 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 anili8 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 pil-
grims 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. Yanurur and his
brother the faqih10 and teacher Yahya. The town of Iwalatan is extremely hot. There are a few lit-
tle 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 be-
long 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 com-
pany 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 pre-
cepts 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 Sanssara, which is about ten miles from the capital of Mali.
It is their custom to prevent people from enter-
ing it except by authorization. I had written be-
fore this to the white community . . . to ask them
to rent a house for me. When I reached the afo-
mentioned river I crossed it by the ferry without

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7The sultan's overseer of the town's mariners.
8Millet.
9An Islamic religious judge.
10A teacher of religion.
11Religion.
12Shar'ia, 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. 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-Hasan (may God be content with him) and invited the emirs and faqih and the qadi and the khatib, 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 gharbi 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 Ramadan came in. Meanwhile I frequented the madhwar [council-place] and used to greet him and sit with the qadi and the khatib. I spoke with Dughra 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 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 faqih a sum of money which they call zakat and gave to me with them 33 1/3 mithqals. 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-
man bi." 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 shaihibiya 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 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. They simply leave it in the hands of a trust-worthy 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-carpets are 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 fararinya to break their fast 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.

20A skull cap.
21A set sequence of utterances and gestures that form the salab, 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).
23Emits, or chief men.
24The daily fast of the month of Ramadan ends at sunset (note 17).
25Unclean meat, according to qur'anic law.