

Ibn Battuta Visits the Mali Empire

Drawing conclusions

Ibn Battuta has been called the greatest Muslim traveler of his time. In 1325, when he was twenty-one, he left his native town of Tangier, in northern Africa. For the next thirty years he traveled through the Middle East, India, China, and Africa, covering more than 75,000 miles (120,701 km). When he ceased his travels, Ibn Battuta returned to Morocco, where a royal secretary wrote down the tales of his journeys. More than 450 years later his journal was translated into English by the Reverend Samuel Lee, a professor at Cambridge University in England. It is still considered a major source of information about the people and customs of the time.

- The following narrative from *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* is one of the few firsthand accounts of the kingdom of Mali. As you read, think about Ibn Battuta's attitude, or point of view, toward the people of Mali.

It happened that Mansa Soleiman, the Sultan of Mali, a most avaricious [greedy] and worthless man, made a feast by way of kindness. I was present at the entertainment with some of our theologians [religious scholars]. When the assembly broke up, I saluted him, having been brought to his knowledge by the theologians.

When I left the place, he sent me a meal, which he forwarded to the house of the judge [where Ibn Battuta was staying]. Upon this occasion the judge came walking hastily to me, and said: "Up, for the sultan has sent you a present." I hastened, expecting that a dress of honor, some horses, and other valuables had been sent; but, behold! they were only three crusts of bread with a piece of fried fish and a dish of sour milk. I smiled at their simplicity and the great value they set on such trifles as these.

I stayed here, after this meal, two months; but saw nothing from him [the Sultan], although I had often met him in their friendly meetings. I one day, however, rose up in his presence, and said: I have traveled the world over and have

seen its kings; and now I have been four months in thy territories, but no present, or even provision from thee, has yet reached me. Now what shall I say of thee, when I shall be interrogated [questioned] on the subject hereafter? Upon this, he gave me a house for my accommodation, with suitable provisions.

One of the best things in these parts is, the regard they pay to justice. The safety too is very great; so that a traveler may proceed alone among them without the least fear of a thief or robber. Another of their good properties [qualities] is that when a merchant happens to die among them, they will make no effort to get possession of his property but will allow the lawful successors [heirs and descendants] to take it. Another is their constant custom of attending prayers with the congregation; for unless one makes haste, he will find no place left to say his prayers in. Another is their insisting on the Koran's being committed to memory: for if a man finds his son defective in this, he will confine him till he is quite perfect, nor will he allow him his liberty until he is so.

Continued on page 20.

IBN BATTUTA VISITS VISITS THE MALI EMPIRE

● Use Ibn Battuta's narrative on page 19 to answer the following questions.

1. Why do you think Ibn Battuta wanted to write about the Mali Empire?

2. For what reasons did Ibn Battuta respect the Mali people?

3. In what way was he offended?

4. Why do you think Ibn Battuta included the story of his behavior to the sultan?

5. Does any part of Ibn Battuta's account seem like an exaggeration, or stretching the truth? Which part?
