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SOMALIA IN IBN BATTUTA'S TRAVEL ACCOUNT "TUHFAT
AL-NUZZAR"

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a geographical analysis of Ibn Battuta's account of Somalia. It begins with a few geographical details regarding the life of Ibn Battuta, intends to shed some light on his descriptions, and answers the reasons for his concern with some aspects of life in Somalia, especially the religious matters. The paper then proceeds to give a full translation of his travel to Somalia.

In translating the text I have depended upon the broad translations of H.A.R. Gibb and Samuel Lee. I have made a number of changes whenever I felt that these English translations did not convey the exact Arabic meaning and tried to follow the original Arabic text as closely as I could.^I The paper ends with some comments on Ibn Battuta's descriptions out of which certain facts related to some aspects of the historical geography of Somalia in the 14th century clearly emerge. For the transliteration of Arabic proper names I have used the system normally used by English speaking orientologists.

Ibn Battuta (1304 - 1368)

Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad Ibn 'Abdallah Ibn Muhammad Al-Lawati Al-Tanji Ibn Battuta, regarded as the Arab Marco Polo, has been called "the traveller of Islam". He saw more of the world than any Moslam traveller in the Middle Ages.

Little is known about Ibn Battuta's life beyond what he himself tells us. Ibn Juzayy, who wrote and edited the oral narrative of Ibn Battuta, notes that Ibn Battuta was born in Tangier on 24th February, 1304. He came of a religious background which produced a succession of 'qadis'² in Tangier where they resided continuously and were often revered by the people (McDonald 1975:17). The surname Ibn Battuta is his family name and is still to be found in today's Morocco (Gibb 1929:2). His family belonged to the Berber tribe of the Luwata, a nomadic tribe in Cyrenaica on the borders of Egypt. Ibn Battuta spent his first twenty-one years in Tangier, an important port at that time. There, his early education followed traditional lines. He was taught to read and write the Arabic letters, and trained to recite the Koran by heart. In short, he received the usual literary and scholastic education of the theologian. On 14th of June, 1325 (2nd Rajab, 725) Ibn Battuta set out from his native town with no other aim than that of making the pilgrimage to Makkah and the holy places.³

Ibn Battuta says: "I left Tangier, my birthplace, on Thursday, 2nd Rajab, 725, being at that time twenty-two lunar years of age, with the intention of making the pilgrimage to the Holy House and the Tomb of the Prophet (at Madina)."

He was interested in religious matters and very eager to visit famous shaykhs and 'awliya'a'. He embraced the Maliki jurisprudence which had spread all over North Africa.

Ibn Battuta made three journeys between 1325 and 1345. He visited all the Islamic countries of his time, and travelled farther than Marco Polo. He was more fortunate than Marco Polo because the brotherhood of Islam, which knows no difference of race or birth, has linked distant nations together with a common language in which the Koran is recited. Throughout the Islamic world, receiving a guest is held to be a great virtue. Giving alms and respect for

those who made the pilgrimage to the holy Makkah are also part of Moslem belief. Rest houses and hostels were widely spread on all pilgrimage roads where Ibn Battuta was hospitably welcomed and entertained using endowments donated by generations of benefactors. It is known that Muhammad Ibn Juzayy was commanded by the Caliph Abu 'Inan Faris to record all of Ibn Battuta's stories and narratives of events. He ended the travel-narrative on 9th December, 1355 (3rd Dhu'l-hijja, 756). He says: "I have reported all his stories and narratives without investigating their truthfulness since he himself has authenticated them with the strongest proof." (Gibb 1929:41)

Some scholars refute some of Ibn Battuta's stories. For instance, Ibn Khaldun says that Ibn Battuta reported things about the Sultan Muhammad Shah (ruler of India) that his audience considered strange and people whispered to each other that he must be a liar (Rosenthal 1967:145). As for Somalia, Ibn Battuta did not report any strange matter. Although his narrative about Somalia is typical of the descriptive approach adopted by most Moslem geographers, he had richly enhanced the geographical knowledge of his contemporaries to a considerable extent as he travelled through many countries always investigating their diversities and experiencing their customs. (Fischer et al. 1969:32-34)

Ibn Battuta in Somalia

"I went from Aden by sea, and after four days reached Zayla, the town of the Beraberah, a people of soudān of the Shafiite sect. Their country is a desert extending for two month's journey from Zayla to Maqdashū. Their cattle are camels and they have fat sheep. The greatest part of the inhabitants of Zayla are Rāfida⁶ and black coloured. Zayla is a large city with a great bazaar, but it is the

dirtyest, most abominable, and most stinking town in the world. The reason for the stench is the quantity of its fish and the blood of the camels they slaughter in the streets.

When we got there we chose to spend the night at sea, in spite of its extreme roughness, rather than in the town, because of its dirtiness. We then proceeded by sea for 15 days, and came to Maqdashū, which is an exceedingly large city. Its inhabitants are merchants and have many camels of which they slaughter hundreds everyday, and have many sheep. They are rich merchants. In Maqdashu, incomparable cloth is made and exported to Egypt and other countries.

The custom here is that whenever a vessel reaches the port, it is met by sunbugs, which are small boats, in each of which are a number of the young men of the city, each carrying a covered dish containing food. He presents this to one of the merchants on the ship saying "This is my guest" and all the others do the same.

Each merchant does not leave the ship except to the house of the young man who is his host, except those who have made frequent journeys to the town and know its people well; these live where they want. His host then sells his goods for him and buys for him, and if anyone buys anything from him at too low price or sells to him in the absence of his host, the sale is regarded by them as invalid. This practice is of great advantage to them.

When these young men came on board of our vessel, one of them approached me. My companions said "This man is not a merchant, but a theologian", whereupon the young man called out to his friends "This is the qadi's guest." There was amongst them one of the qadi's men, who went to tell him of this, so he came down to the beach with a number of students, and sent one of them to me. Then I disembarked with my party and saluted the qadi and his party, and said "In the name of God, let us go and salute the shaykh." Thereupon I said

"And who is this shaykh?". He answered "The sultan", for they call the sultan the shaykh. I said to him "When I have settled down I shall go to him", and he said to me "It is the custom that whenever a theologian, or a sharif, or a virtuous man comes here, he must see the sultan, before he takes up his abode." So I went with them as they asked.

As we mentioned before they call the sultan the shaykh. His name is Abu Bakr, son of Shaykh 'Omar, and is of Berberah origin, and talks in the Maqdashī language, though he knows Arabic. One of his customs is, whenever a ship arrives, the sunbug of the sultan goes to ask where does the ship come from? Whose ship is it? Who is its pilot? What is its weight? Who came on it, merchants or others? All these pieces of information are submitted to the sultan who welcomes those who deserve to be his guests. When we reached the palace with the qadi (the qadi was then Borhan Oddin al Misri), a young man came and saluted the qadi, who said "Inform the sultan that this man has arrived from Hijaz". He informed him, but soon returned to us with a plate containing some Tanbul leaves and fawfel nuts.⁷ He gave me ten leaves and a few nuts, did the same to the qadi, the rest to my companions and the qadi's students, and came with a bulgy of rose-water and sprayed us; and then he said "Our master commands that he be lodged in the students' house." The qadi then took me by hand and we came to this house. It was near the shaykh's house and was furnished and equipped with what is needed. The servants then brought food from the shaykh's house. With them came one of his wazirs whose duty was to look after the guests, and who said "Our master greets you and bids you welcome". Then presented food and we ate. Their food is rice roasted with fat, and placed in a large wooden dish. Over this they place a large dish of 'el-Kushan' which consists of fowl fat, meat, fish and legumes. They also cook green bananas in new milk, they

to the shaykh. Then the shaykh enters the house and the qadi, the wazirs, the secretary and four of the ranking commanders sit to solve and settle complaints and disputes between people and petitioners. The qadi decides the 'religious' cases; in other disputes wazirs and commanders are consulted. If they need the opinion of the sultan, they write to him and he writes his answer at once on the card's back as he believes; that is their custom."

Some Geographical Comments on Ibn Battuta's Account

Studying Ibn Battuta's account about Somalia, we find many geographical facts which are very helpful in the study of historical geography of Somalia in the 14th century. It is a great source of social, economic, and religious affairs of Somalia at that time. The following are some geographical observations deduced from Ibn Battuta's account.

According to Ibn Battuta the Somali people are berbers, black coloured and Moslems. They are Shafiites and most of the people of Zayla are Rafidites.⁹ The main occupation is camel and sheep rearing. Fishing and trade are to be found in Zayla and Maqdashu. Fine cloth was woven in Maqdashu and exported to Egypt.

We can estimate the population of Maqdashu at tens of thousands on the basis of Ibn Battuta's account. Ibn Battuta stated that Maqdashu is an enormous town and that its inhabitants slaughter hundreds of camels every day. It is known that a camel can supply meat for a hundred persons. Thus hundreds of camels equals ten of thousands of people.¹⁰

Place names provide much valuable evidence of the movements of people and their relation to other groups. A study of the language of the place names and their meanings may tell us important facts. Ibn Battuta mentioned only two place names: Zayla and Maqdashu. Both of them are Arabic. Concerning

Maqdashu, a Somali historian, Sharif Aidarus, says that Maqdashu is a compound of the Arabic word 'maqad', meaning 'seat' in English, and the Persian word 'shah' meaning 'ruler'. From Ibn Battuta's account we may assume that the name Maqdashu is composed of two Arabic words which are 'maqad' as Aidarus mentioned, and 'shaykh' which is the sultan or 'shiyokh' which means ruler in English.


There is no doubt that the Somali language was the first language in Somalia. Ibn Battuta mentioned 'anba' a Somali word for mango which is still used in Somalia today.¹¹ It seems that the Arabic language was well known and common. The surest evidence of this is the Somali sultan who spoke in Arabic to Ibn Battuta. Ibn Battuta reported that there was a students' house and this may reflect the importance of education at that time. On the other hand he mentioned "the qadi's students" and that points to the fact that the qadi was their teacher. We know that the qadi was Egyptian, so we can deduce that the Somali students were taught in Arabic. Every Moslem must in his daily prayers read the Koran in Arabic. So, Moslems in Somalia tried to do the same, especially the students who were taught to be theologians.

It is known from Ibn Battuta's account that Islamic habits and traditions (such as receiving a guest and respecting theologians and pilgrims) spread among Somali people. Ibn Battuta reported that they also put on dishes some of preserved lemon, bunches of preserved pepper-pods salted and pickled. The habit of an extra intake of salt is common in most arid lands, especially in the coastal deserts where salt is extracted and is a valuable trade commodity. When the human body loses an amount of salt through perspiration, cramps and eventually failure of the circulatory system will occur unless perspired sodium chloride is rapidly replaced.

Ibn Battuta described Zayla as a "large city with narrow streets". It is clear that the climate dictates the narrowing of streets and provide the necessary shade. Maqdashu, as reported by Ibn Battuta, was an enormous town. The congregational mosque in the centre of the town, the students' house and the sultan's palace are near to the mosque. This design appears to reflect the traditional Islamic town-planning.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ The book used in this paper is: Riḥlat Ibn Battuta, Kitab at Tahrir, Cairo 1966.
- ² qadis = judges
- ³ Making the pilgrimage is the fourth pillar of Islam, and a duty laid upon every Moslem who is of age and has the means to carry it out at least once in his lifetime.
- ⁶ Rafida: a kind of Shia
- ⁷ A kind of nuts used to stimulate the appetite.
- ⁸ Cabinet or stall in a mosque near the mihrab, reserved for the ruler.
- ⁹ Rafidites is one of the names given to the Shia who rejected the imamate of Abu Bakr and 'Umar.
- ¹⁰ Before the battle of Badr Moslem patrols captured some enemy water carriers. The prophet Muhammad asked them how many they were, and when they said "Many" he asked for the number, but they did not know it. He asked them how many camels they slaughtered every day, and when they said nine or ten he said "The people are between nine hundred and one thousand".

- ^{II} 'Anba' is written in Arabic  which means 'grapes'. Lee in his translation, translated it (p. 56) wrongly as he believed that it was an Arabic word.

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