

Ibn Battuta and the Geographical Variation of Islam

Ibn Battuta was a Muslim scholar who travelled across the Islamic world (and more), from West Africa to Eastern China, and documented his experiences. In doing so he was able to witness a diverse spectrum of Muslims, linked by the flourishing trade routes that permeated the Indian Ocean and its surrounding landmasses. We will analyze his work regarding his travels to the Maldives and to East Africa. I will argue that these two regions are similar in their respect for, and practice of, Islam at a basic level (respect for the Quran), but at the same time different as their respective practices of Islam have been fused with diverse local culture and customs; in both cases Ibn Battuta shows respect for devoutness of Islamic practice and law, but also disdain for local culture and practices he finds distasteful.

Ibn Battuta first arrives in the Maldives. Very early on in his work (232) he states that the locals are “upright and pious,” and their mosques are “beautiful.” This is intermingled with neutral descriptions at length of their food, culture, politics, and geography; for example, he discusses their female ruler, or his fondness for their vermicelli in coconut milk (236). We gain a clear image of the culture of the island, and how it is influenced by the tropical environment. There are two events which clearly show how the Maldives has its own distinct flavor of Islam. The first of which is how their women dress. Ibn Battuta complains how they walk topless everywhere (234), and how he, later as the qadi, tried to end the practice, without success. Clearly, this is poor Islamic practice, but it persists regardless because of the initial culture of the Maldives. This culture has combined with Islam to make a society of Muslims who are pious yet still dress inappropriately (for Muslims). The second key event is how the locals became Muslim: they were initially plagued by children-killing evil spirits (235), until recitations of the Quran drove the spirits away. We can see that in contrast with how other areas became Muslim,

such as North Africa (by military conquest), the Maldives are proactively Muslim because they value the Quran's protective power. In general, Ibn Battuta's attitude is mostly neutral, with clear tones of respect when he discusses the locals' religiosity. His neutral accounts clearly suggest that he is at least accepting of the general state of affairs in the region; since Ibn Battuta appears to have respect for religiosity and orthopraxy, we can then infer that even though "Maldives Islam" has its distinct cultural and historical flavors, it is still a definite Islamic realm at its core.

Ibn Battuta then turns his attention to North Africa, where he first arrives in Salé (present-day Morocco). Like with the Maldives, he discusses many cultural and geographic details in a non-discerning tone. We realize obvious contrasts with the Maldives; there are deserts of sand instead of water, the people are of a different color ("the Country of the Blacks" (281)), and slaves are prevalent. All such geographic factors and cultural developments before the arrival of Islam again result in another distinct flavor of Islam. Ibn Battuta realizes that like in the Maldives, people in North Africa also greatly respect the Quran, forcing their children to memorize it, and being "punctilious in praying" (290). In this sense, "African Islam" is very similar to how it seems to be practiced in the Maldives: through the absolute reverence of the Quran. There are three main factors that make "African Islam" stand out. Firstly, Ibn Battuta mentions how "women, servants, slave girls and young daughters appear naked before people" (290) – this is similar to the female nudity found in the Maldives, but obviously this resulted from a very different distillation of cultural practices. In fact, Ibn Battuta says that "the women ... do not veil themselves, yet [are] punctilious about prayers," (284) expressing a similar sentiment of surprise at the mixture of Islam and local culture. Another factor is that people seem to have very close relationships with people of the opposite gender outside of marriage, something that caused Ibn Battuta to be "astonished at them" (285). Both these things are

indicative, once again, of local culture mixing with Islam. Finally, we know that Islam was introduced to North Africa primarily through military conquest, very differently to how the people of the Maldives embraced its protective power.

In conclusion, I have discussed Ibn Battuta's accounts of two very different Islamic regions, and shown that as Islam spread to more and more places, it began to mix with diverse local cultures, forming different "flavors" of Islam united in their core beliefs, but very diverse otherwise.

References

- [1] Ibn Battuta, and Tim Mackintosh-Smith. *The Travels of Ibn Battutah*. Macmillan Collectors Library, 2016.