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THE RACIAL INVENTIONS OF MEDIEVAL TRAVEL WRITINGS

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HIST 350: Race, Religion, and Difference in the Middle Ages
Dr. Snowden
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The famous travel writings of Ibn Battuta and Sir John Mandeville convey formative racial, political, and sociocultural dynamics that shape their respective regions and time periods. This paper investigates how their travel narratives manipulate the reader into accepting the authors' definitions of otherness through the lens of race, religion, and alterity. Their accounts address elements such as bodily difference, standards of social hospitality, and religious customs from untrustworthy yet popularly accepted standpoints, indirectly promoting reform of other cultures towards their own worldviews. Although Ibn Battuta is a historical figure whose travels across the Islamic world are documented in written accounts, the real identity of Sir John Mandeville is still unknown; despite this inherent gap between fact and fiction, their narratives are both instrumental in the social construction of race in the Middle Ages which still affect issues of racism in the modern world.

In the time of his writing, Ibn Battuta's narrative is rooted in the same dominant source of sexual objectification against West African women that encouraged captors to exploit them in sexual slavery, even if the women he encounters wield more agency. Medieval accounts exaggerating the supposed abnormality of black women's bodies frame them in a sexualized and fantastical light, such as the description of Arab military commander Ḥabīb ibn Abī 'Ubayda al-Fihri's booty of gold from Sus and Sudan, which included two women belonging to a "race" called *ijjān* or *tarājān*, each of whom "has but one breast."¹ These bodily descriptions enforce a significant impression on the exceptionality of black female bodies, implying that they could not experience the same pains that non-black women could. In describing the domestic service of enslaved women in Awdaghust, the Arab Andalusian historian al-Bakri suggests that black women reap pleasure from their work, and, "rather than preventing sexual access, facilitated it."²

¹ Michael A. Gomez, "Slavery and Race Imagined in Bilād As-Sūdān," in *African Dominion* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), 45.

² *Ibid.*, 46.

The fabricated sexual viability of black women in historical accounts accompany justifications for their subordination and abuse. In contrast to the enslaved sphere, Ibn Battuta's visit to Mali includes episodes where women are viewed as part of the political and social fabric alongside male citizens. He consistently points out instances wherein women wield outsized influence, such as in Iwalatan where the "women are of surpassing beauty and have a higher status than the men."³ He is surprised that the men in the Mali Empire trace their lineage through their maternal uncles, and that a man's heirs are the sons of his sister, rather than his own sons. According to him, Muslim women in Iwalatan lack modesty in the presence of men since they do not veil themselves despite their commitment to prayer and are free to have their own friends and companions. He makes distinctions between the kinds of relationships men should and shouldn't have with women: in marriage, he disapproves that women aren't bound to travel with their husbands; in friendship, he is scandalized that men and women can fraternize in each other's homes while their spouses are present.

This distrust towards relaxed gender relations is a fixation in Ibn Battuta's narrative. His characterization of Malian men and women has resounding consequences for modern perceptions of African sexuality. His scornful treatment of Malian customs "contributed to the formation of stereotyped images of black women's and men's sexuality for subsequent generations of Arabic-speakers."⁴ Manuscripts of his travels circulated widely among educated North Africans before Europeans translated and reproduced his writing, leading to the formation of racial and ethnic prejudice against West Africans among Arabic speakers that eventually culminated in justification for slavery by the Moroccan sultanate in 1699.⁵ The matrilineal nature

³ "Ibn Battuta," in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, ed. J.F.P Hopkins and Nehemia Levtzion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 285.

⁴ Rudolf P. Gaudio, "Trans-Saharan trade: The routes of 'African Sexuality'," *The Journal of African History* 55, no. 3 (2014): 325.

⁵ Gaudio, 325.

of Malian society differs from Ibn Battuta's own Berber clan, which is patrilineal. Ibn Battuta would classify himself as a white man, as "in much of the southern Sahara, leading clans claimed Arab Muslim patrilineal and were often referred to as 'whites' (bidān), while non-elites, who formed the majority, were termed 'blacks' (sūdān)." ⁶

Interactions between men and women are indicative of a larger point of difference in the Malian court which Ibn Battuta struggles to negotiate. As he was born into a family of Islamic legal scholars in Morocco during the Marinid dynasty, he arrived at Mali as a Marinid emissary with high expectations for Malian largesse and hospitality. In his indignation, he deems Mansa Sulayman "a miserly king from whom no great donation is to be expected." ⁷ He includes an account in which Mansa Sulayman gives a "memorial feast for our Lord Abū 'l-Ḥasan and invited the emirs and faqihs and the qadi and the khatib," ⁸ where as part of the ceremony they provide copies of the Quran and recite it in full. Abū 'l-Ḥasan, a sultan of the Marinid dynasty, formed a positive relationship with Mansā Mūsā, Sulayman's predecessor, since their respective military victories—the mansā's feat in Egypt and Abū 'l-Ḥasan's conquest of Tlemcen—granted them mutual recognition. Regarding this relationship, the historian Ibn Khaldūn speaks of "diplomatic relations and exchanges of gifts," and that "high-ranking statesmen of the two kingdoms were exchanged as ambassadors," a mark of respect between peers. ⁹ Ibn Battuta may be upholding the former Marinid sultan's reception of extravagance as the standard for hospitality, which creates a sense of cultural superiority that explains his disappointing experiences.

⁶ Gaudio, 325.

⁷ "Ibn Battuta," 289

⁸ "Ibn Battuta," 289

⁹ Michael A. Gomez, "Intrigue, Islam, and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa" in *African Dominion* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), 146.

The details of his environment throughout the journey serve to instill upon the reader the impression that nature is a gift meant for him, such as the trees between Iwalatan and Mali, which bear fruit that resemble pears, apples, peaches (*khawkh*), apricots (*mishmish*), and cucumber (*faqqus*), which West Africans sometimes grind and fry with *gharti*.¹⁰ He claims that *gharti* is similar to a sweet pear and is harmful to white men if they eat it, whereas the people of this region have abundant use for the fruit, from cooking to lighting lanterns to frying fritters to anointing themselves to coating their houses.¹¹ By insisting that it is unnatural for white men to consume what Malians have successfully incorporated into their daily foods and cultural customs, Ibn Battuta creates the myth of essentialist difference through the conception of race. The fruits he describes have counterparts that are familiar to the reader, but they remain rooted in foreign soil. While the author can purport to appreciate his exotic surroundings and demonstrate local expertise, he is more invested in presenting other cultures as strange than genuinely engaging with their ways of life.

Though the tension of Muslim conversion another religion isn't found in his account of Mali, Ibn Battuta's narrative is informed by the Arab Muslim world: of "the hundred of graves, tombs and sanctuaries of individuals he recorded for his audience, the vast majority of them were associated with the Arab Muslim world, that is Egypt, Syria (and Palestine), Arabia and Iraq."¹² Their graves are sites of blessing that visitors traveled to receive God's grace; as such, Ibn Battuta's travels artistically resemble the creation of ornamental panels used to decorate Moroccan mosques and *madrasas*. David Waines cites the panels on the walls of the Attarin madrasa in Fez, built around 1325, which features a geometrical rosette with a twelve-ray star

¹⁰ "Ibn Battuta," 286.

¹¹ "Ibn Battuta," 287.

¹² David Waines, "Tales of Sacred Places, Saints, Miracles and Marvels," in *The Odyssey of Ibn Battuta: Uncommon Tales of a Medieval Adventurer* (2010), 135.

extending outwards in interlacing bands and intertwined with other rosettes. As a testament to God's universal presence, "the ornamentation's repeated symmetry is not constrained by the surrounding frame but can be extended infinitely in any direction, suggesting that the observer sees just a part of the cosmic whole."¹³ Ibn Battuta's itineraries symbolize the piety of God's *umma* determined through *baraka* (a continuity of spiritual presence that begins with God and flows through his followers) that pervades an interconnected network of locations and persons. His disapproval of the syncretic Islam he encounters in Bilad al Sudan characterizes the tension of his experience in navigating the Malian court.¹⁴

The divine presence of God manifests itself in miracles and marvels. Due to his knowledge of scripture, "Ibn Battuta would know the Quran verse, 'It is He Who enables you to travel on the land and the sea' (Q 10:22)."¹⁵ His travels are meant to reflect the spiritual experiences as well his bodily experiences, both of which he claims as part of his religious instruction. A symbol of spirituality in his account of West Africa is what he thinks of the Nile, which he observes transcends a great number of locations, enticing him to approach it "to accomplish a need,"¹⁶ as though anticipating a miracle that only nature can provide. However, a man from the Sudanese area came between him and the river; Ibn Battuta "was amazed at his ill manners and lack of modesty," and when he mentioned it to somebody else, he was told that the interfering man protected him from the crocodile in the river. This disconnect between his expectations of singular encounters and the reality of his unpredictable surroundings results in Ibn Battuta describing himself as a superior 'white' man, in direct contrast to the ill-mannered black people of Bilad al Sudan. He does not express gratitude for the stranger's protection nor

¹³ Waines, 135.

¹⁴ Fiona F. Moolla, "Border crossings in the African travel narratives of Ibn Battuta, Richard Burton and Paul Theroux," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 49, no. 4 (2013), 7.

¹⁵ Waines, 119.

¹⁶ "Ibn Battuta," 288.

reflect on his presumptions, but holds onto his narrative claim over the natural world and its spiritual properties.

In the decision to distinguish himself from black people, Ibn Battuta describes himself as white, as are the Berbers he meets en route.¹⁷ His whiteness leads him to demand higher levels of hospitality, such as when he mentions that he has reached out to the “white community” to secure private housing before arriving at the capital of Mali, even though it is their custom to prevent people from entering it except by authorization. He emphasizes that when he “reached the aforementioned river [he] crossed it by the ferry without anyone preventing [him].” Upon entering Mali, he heads for the designated white quarter, wherein he is greeted with candles and food. Ibn Battuta judges these gifts of hospitality as his due, praising the qadi’s cow, the interpreter’s bullock, and the faqīh’s two sacks of *funi* and a gourd of *gharti* (the same fruit that he professes to be harmful to white men). He claims that these messengers accomplish their duty towards him in “the most complete fashion,” so “may God reward them for their good deeds.”¹⁸ He is more concerned with the gesture of ostentatious offerings, even if they include fruit he claims he cannot eat.

To prove his condemnation of the local food, the narrative asserts that the porridge Ibn Battuta and his companions consume in Mali is the source of their illness, since they contain regional ingredients that Malians particularly favor. Even worse, Ibn Battuta cannot perform the dawn prayer due to fainting, and the remedy an Egyptian brings—*baydar* mixed with aniseed and sugar—causes him to vomit and fall ill for two months. The spiritual side of his travels is inextricably linked to the visceral side, thereby suggesting that any cultural conflict he feels in Mali is harmful towards his health and body. Demonstrating his disdain for the local food and

¹⁷ Moolla, 7.

¹⁸ “Ibn Battuta,” 288.

hospitality, Ibn Battuta describes his disappointment over the sultan's reception gift after his rest from illness: “” 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 *gharti* and a gourd containing yoghurt. When I saw it I laughed, and was long astonished at their feeble intellect and their respect for mean things.”¹⁹ In the act of assigning undignified and crude traits to an entire group of people, he frames his lack of regard for the sultan as an inevitable reaction to Malian intellect and worth.

John Mandeville exists in a similar space of inventing fantasies about race and religion out of questionable biases. Like Ibn Battuta, he published his travels in the 1350s, indicating that the author is aware he would fabricate this account in a time where fascination about the global world is rampant throughout Western Europe. Indeed, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* became a commercial success in Europe, igniting the imaginations of mapmakers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Audiences regarded the text as an authority on the world and a guide by actual travelers, as Mandeville was referenced in Walter Raleigh's 1596 *Discoverie of the Empyre of Guiana*.²⁰ The multiple language editions of *Travels* in Europe confirms that the author was successful in crafting a singular image of obscure countries through the guise of scientific discovery, promising the reader that the world can be circumnavigated by bringing up technological inventions that evoke wonder. As a narrative *Travels* occupies various genres—romance, geographical guide, satire—since its author engages the reader through both story and performance of expertise.

At the start of the narrative, Mandeville describes the important sites of Western Christendom discovered while on the way to Jerusalem. When he arrives at the Greek Orthodox

¹⁹ “Ibn Battuta,” 288.

²⁰ Geraldine Heng, “World II: The Mongol Empire: Global Race as Absolute Power” in *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 350.

domains, he evokes differences by remarking that “the Greeks are Christian, yet they vary from our faith.”²¹ He scrutinizes the Greeks’ ideas about purgatory, sin, and customs of Mass, which differ from Latin Christianity. The author addresses the tensions of cultural difference, noting to his reader that “that I have hight you, that is [to] say of the customs and manners and diversities of countries.”²² He insists he has the responsibility to demonstrate the diversity of the lands and people he visits, persuading the reader to trust his insight. He places Greece as the official boundary between the familiar and the exotic, as “the first country that is discordant in faith and in belief, and varieth from our faith, on this half the sea, therefore I have set it here, that ye may know the diversity that is between our faith and theirs. For many men have great liking, to hear speak of strange things of diverse countries.”²³ He embraces the fascination that his readers harbor for the customs of foreigners, and subsequently fulfills their imagination by imposing his definitions of difference on Greeks, gradually deepening this sense of otherness as he travels further East.

In forming the narrative core of alterity, Mandeville has to delve into fantastical bodies and miracles through a racialized lens. He possibly inherited his literary embellishments such as bestial peoples from older encyclopedic sources such as Pliny and medieval compendia,²⁴ thus continuing a tradition of presenting otherness as adventurous spectacle. The monstrous races which he encounters function to complement the civilized nature of humans; in Ethiopia, he reminds his audience “in that country be folk that have but one foot, and they go so blyve that it is marvel. And the foot is so large, that it shadoweth all the body against the sun, when they will

²¹ John Mandeville, *The Adventures of Sir John Mandeville* (London: Penguin, 2005), 13.

²² Mandeville, 14.

²³ Mandeville, 14.

²⁴ Andrew Fleck, “Here, There, and In between: Representing Difference in the Travels of Sir John Mandeville,” *Studies in Philology* 97, no. 4 (2000): 384, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4174679.pdf>.

lie and rest them. In Ethiopia, when the children be young and little, they be all yellow; and, when that they wax of age, that yellowness turneth to be all black.” Dark skin is portrayed as an unnatural condition, both inherited and performative, the physiognomic evidence of a miraculous and unbelievable existence. Bodily disfigurements are invented as racial characteristics; visual manifestations which easily differentiate Ethiopians from Europeans, bringing their humanity into question.

Mandeville proceeds to describe folk of various shapes and figures across the islands near Ceylon and Java. This list includes Plinian races such as the Troglodytes, Cynocephali, Epiphagi, Panotii, Hippopodes, Hermaphrodites, Cyclopes, and Astomi,²⁵ more mythical creatures than diverse groups of people. Mandeville seems to be testing the limits of what his audience is willing to accept as reality, sprinkling in descriptions such as “And in another isle be folk that go upon their hands and their feet as beasts. And they be all skinned and feathered, and they will leap as lightly into trees, and from tree to tree, as it were squirrels or apes.”²⁶ The animalistic, primitive image of Eastern people is already imprinted in the minds of European audiences, so either this detail comes as little surprise or they are eager to believe it for their entertainment. The willingness to cling onto Mandeville’s inventions stems from pleasure in passing, evidenced in the thrill of performance as “Mandeville” dares the audience to trust his authorial identity.²⁷

With hyperbolic authority, Mandeville conveys the cultural and religious beliefs of various groups while maintaining that their attitudes towards Christians and their customs are flawed. Of the ‘Saracens,’ he recounts a conversation he had with the Sultan, who claims that Christians do not know the right way to serve God. On “festival days” when they should go to

²⁵ Fleck, 384.

²⁶ Mandeville, 135.

²⁷ Linda Lomperis, “Medieval Travel Writing and the Question of Race,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001): 160, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/4/article/16482/pdf>.

church, they go to the taverns to be there “in gluttony all day and all night, and eat and drink as beasts that have no reason, and wit not when they have enough.”²⁸ Mandeville strongly rejects to the Sultan’s judgment, asserting that it is a slander “to our faith and to our law, when folk that be without law shall reprove us and undernim us of our sins.”²⁹ His usage of first-person plural draws the reader into his grasp, and is indicative that he assumes his reader to be a European Christian like himself. As such, they should be converted to Christianity and to the “law of Jesus” by good Christian example.

He recognizes, however, that both Muslims and Christians believe in the most essential tenets of Christian-like salvation since the former “keep entirely the commandment of the holy book *Alkaron* [the Quran] that God sent them by his messenger Mahomet, to the which, as they say, Saint Gabriel the angel oftentime told the will of God.”³⁰ This perceived similarity evokes anxiety in Mandeville, and thus he views their scripture as an imitation of Christianity that needs to be tamed through assimilation. Once Mandeville demystifies Muslim customs, “they can function satirically by providing a moral example for Christians to emulate.”³¹ He further points out that Muslims abstain from drinking, though some drink in private since public drinking would bring them disapproval. In attempting to place the divide between the Christian self and the Other, Mandeville tells us that Christian men convert to Islam for poverty and simplicity, “or else for their own wickedness.”³² Much like Ibn Battuta, Mandeville portrays his interaction with his host—the Sultan—as a representational episode of Muslim ignorance. But rather than place them in an entirely different belief system in which their beliefs are entirely devoid of shared Christian values, Mandeville treats Muslims as disgraceful Christians whose worship should be

²⁸ Mandeville, 93.

²⁹ Mandeville, 95.

³⁰ Mandeville, 95.

³¹ Fleck, 391.

³² Mandeville, 96.

reformed to the latter's standards of virtue. He cannot fathom a world in which Christian superiority does not influence the faith of others.

Mandeville elevates Ibn Battuta's entitlement into the realm of the mythically outrageous by using exotified descriptions of the natural world to demonstrate the alienness of other people and regions. A particularly harmful example is his characterization of Jewish people, as he describes them as bereft of official land except for the border between the mountains where they pay tribute to the Queen of Amazonia.³³ The parts surrounding their dwelling include such mythic extremities as waterless desert, dragons, and beasts, but Jewish people still venture out into Christendom to destroy the Christians. Meaningfully, he adds, the rivers that surround the country near where these nonexistent Jewish people reside are "full bitter, three sithes more than is the water of the sea."³⁴ Mandeville invokes well-poisoning, an antisemitic canard that was highly documented in the fourteenth century; in fact, the "popular belief in the wholesale poisoning was so strong that the rumors of Jewish plots to murder a large part of Christendom, which began to circulate widely in the early fourteenth century, won immediate acceptance."³⁵ By promulgating the anxieties of the Other, he places Jews as villainously inferior to Christians, leading the reader to the conclusion that there is a right way to exist in the world and all other examples of wrongness must be feared and eradicated.

Both men are confident in their self-identity and authority in the navigation of locations and populations. There is limited room in their stories left for ambiguity and compassion, as cruel depictions of Muslims and Jews in Mandeville's account and the unfair characterization of black Africans in Ibn Battuta's pilgrimage are shaped by hegemonic points of view. Both of these authors ignore or exaggerate the realities of unfamiliar cultures so they could justify their

³³ Mandeville, 176.

³⁴ Mandeville, 177.

³⁵ Fleck, 398.

preconceived notions of the world, and therefore invent polarizing definitions of race, religion, and alterity that the people described do not consent to. The authors seek to educate and entertain their respective valued audiences of Western European and Arab Muslim societies, and obscure the complex truth of the societies they traveled to in favor of the authors' versions of ideal religious and social order.

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