

Al-Bekri on the Kingdom of Ghana

By: Abu Ubayd al-Bekri, an historian and geographer from Muslim Spain. Al Bekri wrote in Arabic and learned about Ghana talking to Arab and Berber (North Africans) merchants who had traveled in Africa. He also used older writings by travelers to West Africa.

The city of Ghana consists of two towns situated on a plain. One of these towns, which is inhabited by Muslims, is large and possesses twelve mosques, in which they assemble for the Friday prayer. There are salaried imams and muezzins, as well as jurists and scholars. In the environs are wells with sweet water, from which they drink and with which they grow vegetables. The king's town is six miles distant from this one...

Between these two towns are continuous habitations. ...In the king's town, and not far from his court of justice, is a mosque where the Muslims who arrive at his court pray. Around the king's town are domed buildings and groves and thickets where the sorcerers of these people, men in charge of the religious cult, live. In them too are their idols and the tombs of their kings. These woods are guarded and none may enter them and know what is there.... The king's interpreters, the official in charge of his treasury and the majority of his ministers are Muslims. Among the people who follow the king's religion only he and his heir apparent (who is the son of his sister) may wear sewn clothes. All other people wear robes of cotton, silk, or brocade, according to their means. All of them shave their beards, and women shave their heads. The king adorns himself like a woman (wearing necklaces) round his neck and (bracelets) on his forearms, and he puts on a high cap decorated with gold and wrapped in a turban of fine cotton. He sits in audience or to hear grievances against officials in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses covered with gold-embroidered materials. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold, and on his right are the sons of the (vassel) kings of his country wearing splendid garments and their hair plaited with gold. The governor of the city sits on the ground before the king and around him are ministers seated likewise. At the door of the pavilion are dogs of excellent pedigree who hardly ever leave the place where the king is, guarding him. Round their necks they wear collars of gold and silver studded with a number of balls of the same metals. The audience is announced by the beating of a drum which they call *duba* made from a long hollow log. When the people who profess the same religion as the king approach him they fall on their knees and sprinkle dust on their head, for this is their way of greeting him. As for the Muslims, they greet him only by clapping their hands....

Their religion is paganism and the worship of idols....

On every donkey-load of salt when it is brought into the country their king levies one golden dinar and two dinars when it is sent out. ... The best gold is found in his land comes from the town of Ghiyaru, which is eighteen days' traveling distance from the king's town over a country inhabited by tribes of the Sudan whose dwellings are continuous...

The king of Ghana when he calls up his army, can put 200,000 men into the field, more than 40,000 of them archers.

Selected by Dorian Bowman, Winsor School from Al-Bakri,
The Book of Routes and Realms, cited in Levitzion and Hopkins,
Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History,
(Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 79-81.

BU African Studies Center, *Kingdom of Ghana*, retrieved from: http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/resources/k_o_ghana/

Al-Umari on Mansa Musa's Visit to Cairo

The following description of the visit to Cairo in 1324 by the King of Mali, Mansa Musa, was written by Al-Umari, who visited Cairo several years after the Mansa Musa's visit. (BU African Studies Center, Kingdom of Mali, retrieved from: http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/resources/k_o_mali/)

From the beginning of my coming to stay in Egypt I heard talk of the arrival of this sultan Musa on his Pilgrimage and found the Cairenes eager to recount what they had seem of the Africans' prodigal spending. I asked the emir Abu...and he told me of the opulence, manly virtues, and piety of his sultan. "When I went out to meet him {he said} that is, on behalf of the mighty sultan al-Malik al-Nasir, he did me extreme honour and treated me with the greatest courtesy. He addressed me, however, only through an interpreter despite his perfect ability to speak in the Arabic tongue. Then he forwarded to the royal treasury many loads of unworked native gold and other valuables. I tried to persuade him to go up to the Citadel to meet the sultan, but he refused persistently saying: "I came for the Pilgrimage and nothing else. I do not wish to mix anything else with my Pilgrimage." He had begun to use this argument but I realized that the audience was repugnant to him because he would be obliged to kiss the ground and the sultan's hand. I continue to cajole him and he continued to make excuses but the sultan's protocol demanded that I should bring him into the royal presence, so I kept on at him till he agreed.

When we came in the sultan's presence we said to him: 'Kiss the ground!' but he refused outright saying: 'How may this be?' Then an intelligent man who was with him whispered to him something we could not understand and he said: 'I make obeisance to God who created me!' then he prostrated himself and went forward to the sultan. The sultan half rose to greet him and sat him by his side. They conversed together for a long time, then sultan Musa went out. The sultan sent to him several complete suits of honour for himself, his courtiers, and all those who had come with him, and saddled and bridled horses for himself and his chief courtiers....

This man [Mansa Musa] flooded Cairo with his benefactions. He left no court emir nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold. The Cairenes made incalculable profits out of him and his suite in buying and selling and giving and taking. They exchanged gold until they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its price to fall." ...

Gold was at a high price in Egypt until they came in that year. The mithqal did not go below 25dirhams and was generally above, but from that time its value fell and it

cheapened in price and has remained cheap till now. The mithqal does not exceed 22 *dirhams* or less. This has been the state of affairs for about twelve years until this day by reason of the large amount of gold which they brought into Egypt and spent there.

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Selected by Dorian Bowman, Winsor School from Al-Bakri,
The Book of Routes and Realms, cited in Levitzion and Hopkins,
Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History,
(Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp 269-273.

Ibn Battuta in West Africa [1351-1353 CE]

After [traveling](#) through much of the Islamic world and returning home to Morocco, Ibn Battuta took a [last journey](#) across the Sahara into West Africa. As you read, consider what his words tell us about the African societies he visits, **and** his own [North African] society. How do his complaints or observations about West Africans' behavior give you a clue about what is normal to him? Does the "stuff" that is mentioned tell you anything in particular about the movement of goods into and out of West Africa? (Introduction above and text below retrieved from *Ibn Battuta's Travels (West Africa Excerpts* <http://www.lasalle.edu/~mcinneshin/344/wk05/battutaTVLs.htm>)

The caravan reaches the oasis of Walata [[Walata Today](#)]

Thus we reached the town of Iwalatan [Walata] after a journey from Sijilmasa of two months to a day. Iwalatan is the northernmost province of the negroes, and the sultan's representative there was one Farba Husayn, "farba" meaning deputy [in their language]. When we arrived there, the merchants deposited their goods in an open square, where the blacks undertook to guard them, and went to the farba. He was sitting on a carpet under an archway, with his guards before him carrying lances and bows in their hands, and the headmen of the Massufa behind him. The merchants remained standing in front of him while he spoke to them through an interpreter, although they were close to him, to show his contempt for them. It was then that I repented of having come to their country, because of their lack of manners and their contempt for the whites [Battuta means himself here].

Life at Walata

My stay at Iwalatan lasted about fifty days; and I was shown honour and entertained by its inhabitants. It is an excessively hot place, and boasts a few small date-palms, in the shade of which they sow watermelons. Its water comes from underground waterbeds at that point, and there is plenty of mutton to be had. The garments of its inhabitants, most of whom belong to the Massufa tribe, are of fine Egyptian fabrics.

Their women are of surpassing beauty, and are shown more respect than the men. The state of affairs amongst these people is indeed extraordinary. Their men show no signs of jealousy whatever; no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother's brother. A person's heirs are his sister's sons, not his own sons. This is a thing which I have seen nowhere in the world except among the Indians of Malabar. But those are heathens; these people are Muslims, punctilious in observing the hours of prayer, studying books of law, and memorizing the Koran. Yet their women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves, though they are assiduous in attending the prayers. Any man who wishes to marry one of them may do so, but they do not travel with their husbands, and even if one desired to do so her family would not allow her to go... [map at left retrieved



from *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, "Chapter 12", <http://ibnbattuta.berkeley.edu/12westafrica.html>]

From Walata to the river Niger

When I decided to make the journey to Malli [the city of Mali], which is reached in twenty-four days from Iwalatan if the traveller pushes on rapidly, I hired a guide from the Massufa--for there is no necessity to travel in a company on account of the safety of that road--and set out with three of my companions...

A traveller in this country carries no provisions, whether plain food or seasonings, and neither gold nor silver. He takes nothing but pieces of salt and glass ornaments, which the people call beads, and some aromatic goods. When he comes to a village the womenfolk of the blacks bring out millet, milk, chickens, pulped lotus fruit, rice, "funi" (a grain resembling mustard seed, from which "kuskusu" [couscous] and gruel are made), and pounded haricot beans. The traveller buys what of these he wants, but their rice causes sickness to whites when it is eaten, and the funi is preferable to it.

Ibn Battuta reaches the Niger river, which he mistakenly believes to be the Nile

...I saw a crocodile in this part of the Nile [Niger], close to the bank; it looked just like a small boat. One day I went down to the river to satisfy a need, and lo, one of the blacks came and stood between me and the river. I was amazed at such lack of manners and decency on his part, and spoke of it to someone or other. [That person] answered. "His purpose in doing that was solely to protect you from the crocodile, by placing himself between you and it."...

Ibn Battuta meets the king of Mali

The sultan of Malli is Mansa Sulayman, "mansa" meaning [in Mandingo] sultan, and Sulayman being his proper name. He is a miserly king, not a man from whom one might hope for a rich present. It happened that I spent these two months without seeing him, on account of my illness. Later on he held a banquet in commemoration of our master [the late sultan of Morocco] Abu'l-Hasan, to which the commanders, doctors, qadi and preacher were invited, and I went along with them. Reading-desks were brought in, and the Koran was read through, then they prayed for our master Abu'l-Hasan and also for Mansa Sulayman.

The court ceremonial of king Sulayman of Mali

On certain days the sultan holds audiences in the palace yard, where there is a platform under a tree, with three steps; this they call the "pempi." It is carpeted with silk and has cushions placed on it. [Over it] is raised the umbrella, which is a sort of pavilion made of silk, surmounted by a bird in gold, about the size of a falcon. The sultan comes out of a door in a corner of the palace, carrying a bow in his hand and a quiver on his back. On his head he has a golden skull-cap, bound with a gold band which has narrow ends shaped like knives, more than a span in length. His usual dress is a velvety red tunic, made of the European fabrics called "mutanfas." The sultan is preceded by his musicians, who carry gold and silver guimbris [two-stringed guitars], and behind him come three hundred armed slaves. He walks in a leisurely fashion, affecting a very slow movement, and even stops from time to time. On reaching the pempi he stops and looks round the assembly, then ascends it in the sedate manner of a preacher ascending a

mosque-pulpit. As he takes his seat the drums, trumpets, and bugles are sounded. Three slaves go out at a run to summon the sovereign's deputy and the military commanders, who enter and sit down. Two saddled and bridled horses are brought, along with two goats, which they hold to serve as a protection against the evil eye. Dugha stands at the gate and the rest of the people remain in the street, under the trees. ...

Ibn Battuta judges the character of the people of Mali

The negroes possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveller nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence. They do not confiscate the property of any white man who dies in their country, even if it be uncounted wealth. On the contrary, they give it into the charge of some trustworthy person among the whites, until the rightful heir takes possession of it. They are careful to observe the hours of prayer, and assiduous in attending them in congregations, and in bringing up their children to them.

Their piety

On Fridays, if a man does not go early to the mosque, he cannot find a corner to pray in, on account of the crowd. It is a custom of theirs to send each man his boy [to the mosque] with his prayer-mat; the boy spreads it out for his master in a place befitting him [and remains on it] until he comes to the mosque. Their prayer-mats are made of the leaves of a tree resembling a date-palm, but without fruit.

Another of their good qualities is their habit of wearing clean white garments on Fridays. Even if a man has nothing but an old worn shirt, he washes it and cleans it, and wears it to the Friday service. Yet another is their zeal for learning the Koran by heart. They put their children in chains if they show any backwardness in memorizing it, and they are not set free until they have it by heart. I visited the qadi in his house on the day of the festival. His children were chained up, so I said to him, "Will you not let them loose?" He replied, "I shall not do so until they learn the Koran by heart."

The nakedness of the women

Among their bad qualities are the following. The women servants, slave-girls, and young girls go about in front of everyone naked, without a stitch of clothing on them. Women go into the sultan's presence naked and without coverings, and his daughters also go about naked. Then there is their custom of putting dust and ashes on their heads, as a mark of respect, and the grotesque ceremonies we have described when the poets recite their verses. Another reprehensible practice among many of them is the eating of carrion, dogs, and asses. ...