

MOGADISHU IN 1331

1350s

Ibn Battuta

In 1325, the young lawyer Ibn Battuta set out from his home in Morocco on a pilgrimage to Mecca. A love for travel was born in him along the way. Battuta's travels eventually took him through Africa, Southwest Asia, and all the way to China, about 75,000 miles, and lasted three decades. In the following excerpt from his book, he describes his visit to Mogadishu, a thriving city on the Indian Ocean in present-day Somalia, and the customs of its inhabitants.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions

Based on this account, what qualities do you think made Battuta such a successful traveler?

From [Zeila]¹ we sailed fifteen nights and arrived at Mogadishu, which is a very large town. The people have very many camels, and slaughter many hundreds every day. They have also many sheep. The merchants are wealthy, and manufacture a material which takes its name from the town and which is exported to Egypt and elsewhere.

Among the customs of the people of this town is the following: when a ship comes into port, it is boarded from *sanbuqs*, that is to say, little boats. Each *sanbuq* carries a crowd of young men, each carrying a covered dish, containing food. Each one of them presents his dish to a merchant on board, and calls out: "This man is my guest." And his fellows do the same. Not one of the merchants disembarks except to go to the house of his host among the young men, save frequent visitors to the country. In such a case they go where they like. When a merchant has settled in his host's house, the latter sells for him what he has brought and makes his purchases for him. Buying anything from a merchant below its market price or selling him anything except in his host's presence is disapproved of by the people of Mogadishu. They find it of advantage to keep to this rule.

When the young men came on board the ship on which I was, one of them approached me. My companions said to him: "He is not one of the merchants: he is a lawyer." Then the young man called his companions and said: "This man is a guest of the Qadi."² One of the Qadi's friends came among them, and he told him of this. The Qadi came down to the beach with some of his pupils and sent one on board to fetch me. Then I disembarked with my companions, and greeted the Qadi and his followers. He said to me: "In the name of God, let us go and greet the Shaikh." "Who is the Shaikh?" I asked, and he replied: "The Sultan." For it is

1. Zeila: a port city in northwest Somalia on the Gulf of Aden

2. Qadi: judge

their custom here to call the Sultan "Shaikh." I answered the Qadi: "I will visit him as soon as I have found lodging." He replied: "It is the custom here, whenever a lawyer, or a Sharif or a holy man comes, that he should not go to his lodging until he has seen the Sultan." So I did what I was asked in accordance with their custom.

As we have said, the Sultan of Mogadishu is called Shaikh by his subjects. His name is Abu Bakr ibn Shaikh Omar, and by race he is a Berber. He talks in the dialect of Mogadishu, but knows Arabic. When a ship arrives, it is the custom for it to be boarded by the Sultan's *sanbuq*, to inquire whence it has come, who are the owners and who its captain is. They also inquire the nature of the cargo and what merchants or other persons are on board. All this is told to the Sultan, who invites as his guest anyone worthy of such honor.

When I arrived at the palace with the Qadi, whose name was Ibn Burhan al-Misri, a eunuch came out and greeted him. The Qadi said: "Go and do your duty, and inform our master the Shaikh that this man has arrived from the Hijaz." He delivered the message and returned with a dish of betel leaves and areca nuts. He gave me six leaves of betel and some nuts, and the same amount to the Qadi: the rest he divided among my companions and the pupils of the Qadi. Then he brought a bottle of Damascus rosewater, and sprinkled some on me and on the Qadi, and said: "Our master orders that he be lodged in the house of the pupils."

This house was built specially for them. The Qadi took me by the hand, and we went to this house, which is near that of the Shaikh. It was decorated with carpets and contained everything needful. Later the same eunuch brought us food from the Shaikh's house. He was accompanied by one of the wazirs, whose particular duty it was to look after guests. He said to us: "Our master greets you and bids you welcome." After this the meal was served and we ate.

The food of these people is rice cooked with butter, served on a large wooden dish. With it they serve side-dishes, stews of chicken, meat, fish, and vegetables. They cook unripe bananas in fresh milk, and serve them as a sauce. They put curdled milk in another vessel with peppercorns, vinegar, and saffron, green ginger and mangoes, which look like apples but have a nut inside. Ripe mangoes are very sweet and are eaten like fruit; but unripe mangoes are as acid as lemons, and are cooked in vinegar. When the Mogadishu people have taken a mouthful of rice, they take some of these pickles. One of them eats as much as several of us: they are very fat and corpulent.

When we had eaten, the Qadi went away. We stayed there for three days, and each day they brought us food three times a day, as is their custom. The fourth day, which was a Friday, the Qadi, his pupils and one of the wazirs of the Shaikh came and brought me a suit of clothes. Their dress consists of a loincloth, which is fastened round the waist, instead of drawers, of which they are ignorant. There was a tunic of Egyptian linen with a border, a cloak of Jerusalem stuff, doubled, and a fringed turban of Egyptian material. They also brought my companions clothes suitable to their rank.

We went to the chief mosque, and prayed behind the *maqsurah*, the enclosure for the Shaikh. When he came out of the *maqsurah*, I greeted him with the Qadi. He replied with his good wishes for us both, and talked to the Qadi in the local language, and then said to me in Arabic: "You are welcome: you have honored our country by coming and have rejoiced us." He went out into the courtyard of the mosque and stopped at the tomb of his son, which is there. He recited a passage from the Koran and prayed. Then came the wazirs, the amirs and military commanders and greeted him. In doing this they observed the same customs as are followed in the Yemen. The man who gives his greeting places his forefinger on the ground, and then on his head, and says: "May God make you glorious!"

After that the Shaikh went out of the door of the mosque and put his sandals on. He ordered the Qadi and myself to do likewise, and set off on foot to his house, which is near the mosque, everyone else following barefoot. Over his head they carried a silk canopy, its four poles topped with a golden bird. He wore a sweeping cloak of green Jerusalem stuff, over clothes of Egyptian linen. He had a silk girdle and a large turban. In front of him they beat drums and played trumpets and oboes. He was preceded by the amirs of the army, and followed by the Qadi, the lawyers and the Sharifs.

With this ceremony he entered his audience hall. The wazirs, amirs and military commanders took their places on a bench set for them. A special carpet was spread for the Qadi on which he sat alone. He was accompanied by the lawyers and Sharifs. There they all remained until the afternoon prayer, which they said together with the Shaikh. Then all the soldiers were drawn up in lines according to their rank, and the drums, oboes, trumpets, and flutes played. While they played, everyone stayed in his place, and anyone, who happened to be moving about, immediately stood still. When the band stopped playing, those present greeted the Shaikh with their fingers in the manner we have described and then went away. This is their custom every Friday.

On Saturday the people come to the door of the Shaikh's house and sit on benches outside. The Qadi, the lawyers, the Sharifs, the holy men, the shaikhs and those who have made the pilgrimage enter an outer room and sit on wooden benches arranged for that purpose. The Qadi sits on his bench alone, and each of these classes of person has its own bench, which is not shared with any other. The Shaikh then takes his place in his hall of audience, and sends for the Qadi. He takes his place on the Shaikh's left, and then the lawyers come in, and the chief of them sit in front of the Shaikh. The others greet the Shaikh and go back again. Then the Sharifs enter, and the chief of them sit before him: the remainder greet him and go back outside. But if they are guests of the Shaikh, they sit on his right hand. The same ceremonial is observed by persons of position and pilgrims, and then by the wazirs, the amirs and the military commanders, each rank by itself.

Then food is brought, and the Qadi, the Sharifs and those who are in the audience chamber eat in the presence of the Shaikh, and he with them. If he wishes to honor one of the chief amirs, he sends for him and has him eat with them. The

rest eat in a refectory. There they observe the same precedence as that of their entering the Shaikh's audience chamber.

After this the Shaikh retires to his private apartments, and the Qadi, the wazirs, the private secretary and four of the chief amirs sit to hear causes and complaints. Questions of religious law are decided by the Qadi; other cases are judged by the council, that is, the wazirs and amirs. If a case requires the views of the Sultan, it is put in writing for him. He sends back an immediate reply, written on the back of the paper, as his discretion may decide. This has always been the custom among these people.

Source: Excerpt from *East African Coast*, edited by G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962). Reprinted by permission of Dr. G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Ibn Battuta respects the customs of the local inhabitants. He readily assumes their dress and eats their food. He seems to have a healthy curiosity for Mogadishu customs. He comments on the customs objectively and without criticizing.