Abu Abdallah ibn Battuta was a North African intellectual who recorded his vast number of travels throughout Bilad-al-Islam (the Islamic world) during the 14th century. He traversed the heartlands of Eurasia, the Arabian peninsula, the Bay of Bengal, and even reached coastal China. He crossed North Africa a number of times, and also journeyed into the regions where Islam had been growing, inland West Africa and the East African coast. Although the breadth of his journeys were perhaps unparalleled, in one sense he was a perfectly ordinary Islamic scholar: extensive travel was quite normal for someone of his station.

Ibn Battuta in East Africa


(1329 or 1331)
[I] arrived at the city of Zeila, the city of the Barbar, who are a people of the blacks; Shafi'i [following Sunni Muslim laws] by rite. Their country is a desert which extends for two months' journey, its beginning is at Zeila and its ending is at Mogadishu. Their livestock are are camels and their sheep are famed for their fatness. The inhabitants ... are black in color and the majority are Rejecters [Shi'ite]. It is a big city and has a great market but it is the dirtiest, most desolate and smelliest town in the world. The reason for its stink is the quantity of fish and the blood of the camels they butcher in its alleyways. ... We did not spend the night in the town because of its squalor.

[to Mogadishu] a town endless in its size. Its people have many camels, of which they slaughter hundreds every day and they have many sheep. Its people are powerful merchants. In it are manufactured cloths named after it which have no rival, and are transported as far as Egypt and elsewhere.

... When the young people [of Mogadishu] came to the ship on which I was, one of them came to me. My companions told him, "This is not a merchant but a faqih [scholar]. He shouted to his companions and said to them, "This is the guest of the qadi [Arabic for judge, legal official]. ... The qadi came to the shore of the sea with a group of students and sent one of them to me. I disembarked with my travelling companions and saluted the Qadi and his company. He said to me, "In the name of Allah, let us go to greet the shaikh." And I said: "Who is the shaik?" He said, "The Sultan." And it is their custom to speak of the sultan as the shaikh. ...He said to me "It is the custom when a faqih or a sharif [descendent of 'Ali] or a man of piety comes, that he does not lodge till he has seen the sultan." ...

An Account of the Sultan of Mogadishu

...his name is Abu Bakr son of shaikh 'Umar. He is in origin from the Barbara, and his speech is Maqdishi [Somali?], but he knows the Arabic tongue. It is customary when a ship arrives for the sultan's sunbuq [official] to go out to it. Questions are then asked about the ship, whence it comes,
who is its owner ...its captain, what its cargo and who are merchants and others has come on it. All that is ascertained and made known to the sultan. Then he gives lodging to him that deserves it near his house. [A young man from the Sultan's house] returned bringing with him a dish with some betel leaves and areca nuts on it. He gave similarly to the qadi and what remained on the dish to my travelling companions and the students... And he brought a sprinkler of Damascene rose water which he sprinkled over me and the qadi. And he said, "Mawlana commands that he lodge in the Scholars' House." The qadi took my hand and we came to that house which is near the shaikh's house. And it was bedded out and set up with what is necessary. Then he came with food from teh shaikh's house. With him was one of his wazirs [state official] who was in charge of guests. ...Then he put down the food and we ate. Their food is rice cooked with ghee [version of butter] placed on a large wooden dish. They put on top dishes of kushan--that is the relish, of chicken and meat and fish and vegetables. They cook banana before it is ripe in fresh [coconut?] milk and they put it on a dish, and they put sour milk in a dish with pickled lemon on it and bunches of pickled chillies, vinegared and salted, and green ginger and mangoes. These are like apples but they have a stone and when they ripen they are very sweet and eaten like fruit. But before they ripen they are bitter like lemons and they pickle them in vinegar. When they eat a ball of rice, they eat after it something from these salted and vinegared foods. Now one of the people of Mogadishu habitually eats as much as a group of us would. They are extremely large and fat of body. ... We stayed three days and food was brought to us thrice a day, for that is their custom. When it was the fourth day, a Friday, the qadi and the students and one of the wazirs of the shaikh came to me. They brought me a suit of their clothing--a silk wrapper to tie around the middle instead of trousers (which they do not know), an upper garment of Egyptian linen with markings, a lined gown of Jerusalem material, and an Egyptian turban with embroideries. They also brought garments for my companions befitting their circumstances. We went to the grand mosque and prayed behind the [royal enclosure]. When the shaikh came out of the gate ... I greeted him.... He welcomed me and spoke in their language to the qadi. Then he said in the Arabic language, "You are most welcome. You have honored our country and given us pleasure." He came out of the courtyard of the mosque. He stopped at the grave of his father who was buried there. He read [from the Qur'an] and prayed. ... Their custom of greeting is like the custom of the people of the Yaman. A man puts his index finger on the ground, then raises it to his head, saying: "May God prolong your might." ... raised over his head [as he walked] four canopies of colored silk and on the top of each canopy was the figure of a bird in gold. His clothes that day were a robe of green Jerusalem stuff and underneath it fine loose robes of Egypt. ... Before him drums and trumpets and pipes were played, the amirs of the soldiers were before and behind him, and the qadi, the faqih, the sharifs were with him. He entered his council room; in that order, the wazirs, amirs and the commanders of the soldiers sat down there in the audience chamber. [praying continued] When it is Saturday the people come to the door of the shaikh and they sit in covered halls outside the house. ...[and a council session with all the aforementioned officials, religious leaders, and "men who have performed the pilgrimage (Hajj)" follows, these elites] hearing litigation between the members of the public and hearing the cases of people with complaints. In a matter connected with the rules of the shari'a [religious law] the qadipasses judgement; in a matter other than that, the members of the council pass judgement.... In a matter where there is need of
consultation with the sultan, they write about it to him and he sends out the reply to them immediately on the back of the note. ...

[At this point Battuta sailed south along the coast]

We arrived at the island of Mombasa .... a large island with two days' journey [this is mistaken, it's much closer] between it and the land of the Sawahil[Swahili, coast]. ... Its trees are the banana, the lemon, and the citron. ... There is no cultivation of grain among the people of this island: food is brought to them from the Sawahil. The greater part of their food is bananas and fish. They are [Sunni] by rite, they are a religious people, trustworthy and righteous. Their mosques are made of wood [not true, coral], expertly built. ...He who wants to enter the mosque washes his feet and enters. ... All the people walk barefoot.

We spent the night on this island and travelled by sea to the city of Kilwa, a great coastal city. Most of its people are Zunuj, extremely black. They have cuttings on their faces like those on the faces of the Limiyyin of Janada [West Africans??]. One of the merchants told me that the city of Sofala is half a month's journey from the city of Kilwa ... and YuFi ...is a month's journey and from YuFi gold dust is brought to Sofala. The city of Kilwa is among the most beautiful of cities and most elegantly built. All of it is wood [not quite], and the ceiling of its houses are of reeds. The rains there are great. They are a people devoted to the Holy War because they are on one continuous mainland with unbelieving Zunuj. Their uppermost virtue is religion and righteousness and they are Shafi'i [Sunni] in rite.

Description of the Sultan of Kilwa

Its sultan at the time of my entry ...was Abu al-Muzaffar Hasan whose [nickname was "father of gifts"] because of his many gifts and deeds of generosity. ...he raided [the coastland] and captured booty. He used to set aside one fifth of it, which he spent in the ways indicated in the book of God the Exalted. [and saved the loot for] The sharifs [who] used to come to him from Iraq and Hijaz and other places. I saw at his place a group of the sharifs of Hijaz, amongst them Muhammad bin Jammaz, [et al.] ... and I met at Mogadishu Tabl bin Kubaish bin Jammaz who was intending to come to him. This sultan is a very humble man. He sits with the poor people and eats with them, and gives respect to people of religion and of prophetic descent.

A Story Concerning the Sultan of Kilwa's Deeds of Generosity

I was present with him on a Friday when he came out from the prayer and was returning to his house. He was confronted on the road by one of the Yemeni faqirs. [The poor man asks the Sultan for his clothes, and he gives them to the poor man.] So the faqir tied them in a piece of cloth and put them on his head and went away. The gratitude of the people to the sultan increased at the evidence of his humility and graciousness. His son and heir apparent took the suit of clothes from the faqir and compensated him for it with ten slaves. When the news reached the sultan of the gratitude of the people to him for that deed he ordered the faqir to be given in addition ten head of fine slaves and two loads of ivory. (The greater part of their gifts are ivory and seldom do they give gold.) When this honorable and generous sultan was gathered to God, his brother Da'ud succeeded him. He was the opposite from him. ... visitors would stay at [Da'ud's] house many months and then he would give them a little, until visitors stopped coming to his door.