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# MUSLIM VOYAGEURS' REPRESENTATIONS OF THE WORLD. AN ARCHEOLOGY OF REPRESENTATIONS IN IBN FAḌLĀN'S AND IBN BAṬṬŪṬA'S *RIḤLAS*

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**Abstract.** Two texts belonging to the “travel accounts” series analyzed from the methodological perspective given by identity studies area offer the researcher two distinct views over the Islamic world during different moments in its evolution, the X and XIV centuries. The former, coming from the *adab al-mamālik wa l-masālik* genre, and the latter from the *adab ar-riḥla* category of geographical literature, the two texts in question testify to different identity approaches developed and expended within Arab Islamic culture. There is on the one hand a high standing cultural and identity approach that the culture of *markaz* (high culture) is upkeeping towards the multiple and extremely various identity levels of which the Abbasid Caliphate is made (Ibn Faḏlān's travel accounts), and on the other hand the attempt to be assimilated with the most prestigious version of the Islamic culture which at the time of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Riḥla*, our second author, is represented by the Eastern parts of the Islamic state, *al-Mašriq*.

**Keywords:** *adab al-masālik wa l-mamālik*, *adab ar-riḥla*, Muslim voyageurs, identity, high culture, peripheral culture, self perception, otherness

For years now, the history of mentality along with the study of different societies' *imaginaire* represents the key to the true understanding of the human race's way of thinking, argues the historian Lucian Boia (Boia, 2000:7). Undoubtedly, journey is a form of identification at the encounter with another civilization's space, while the traveler represents a cultural product of the world he belongs to. The current analysis places itself in this general framework, of axioms of studies on the *imaginaire*. “Le voyage peut être considéré, avant la guerre ou le commerce, comme l'une des formes les plus élémentaires du *croisement des cultures*” (Roussillon, 2005: 25).

The Arabs, more than other people, because their basic nomadic character, have been great voyageurs, argues Paule Charles-Dominique in “Voyageurs arabes” (Charles-Dominique, 1995: XI). Researchers place the beginnings of the Arab concern about the way the world looks like in close relation to the emergence of Islam, and, in particular, with the formation and expansion of the Islamic state. Thus, the early concern for geography has

derived from the need to know the increasingly vast territories of the caliphate, being an approach as pragmatic and politically coordinated as possible (Chebel, 2002: 178). “La volonté des Arabes a été de vouloir s’annexer imaginativement le monde et le formaliser – poser des notions sur les distances, sur les lieux, y inscrire des dates” (Chebel, 2002: 178). It is, therefore, an interest triggered by the need to control both the administrative and imaginary level of a world turned to Islam or a world of Islam. In this respect, most of those who study the phenomenon believe that the interest in areas beyond the *dār al-Islām* appears only late in modernity<sup>1</sup>, when the center – *markaz* - physically and geographically transfers to other identity areas. In the spirit of Edward Said, we should emphasize the fact that interest in other cultural areas has always been encouraged, beyond the intrinsic curiosity of the West, by the way some historians<sup>2</sup> talk and manifest their availability to confer unconditionally. We believe that the *savoir pour agir*<sup>3</sup> type of justification for discovering the other has proven itself historically more powerful and more stimulating than *savoir pour savoir*. However, solving this dilemma does not represent the purpose of this paper.

The two travelers this survey refers to, Ibn Faḍlān and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa represent a type of identity attitude developed during the classical period of the Islamic civilization, when Islam used to assume an evaluative cultural role, a pattern these two authors refer to when reaching verdicts or issuing labels. This is certainly the dominant feature of the travel stories of this historical period which, in terms of identity reference, are totally different from the writings of the Nineteenth century, when the travelers from the Islamic space, even though tacitly, accept the idea of decline in Islamic society, and subsequently, the possible transfer of the center –*markaz*- to Europe, to West. Until the Nineteenth century travel stories are placed in the classical dichotomy of Islamic perception of the world; thus, we can easily distinguish the relation between the inside and the outside, i. e. between *dār al-islām* and *dār al-ḥarb*. For the classical period, Alain Roussillon notes a keen interest that Islam manifests in its border areas, in the sense of Francois Hartog’s *récit sur la frontière* (Roussillon, 2005: 27), an interest

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<sup>1</sup> “Prior to Nineteenth century, Arab interest in the West was almost non-existent. As far as can be determined, between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries only one work appeared in Arabic which depicted the continent of Europe and that book was rather general and vague” (Abu-Lughod, 2011: 79). See also B. Lewis, 1984: 282-283: “(...) toute cette recherche (européenne) formait un contraste frappant avec le manque quasi-total de curiosité des peuples du Moyen Orient pour les langues, cultures et religion de l’Europe. Seul l’Etat ottoman, responsable des problèmes de défense et de diplomatie et, par conséquent des relations avec les Etats d’Europe, jugea de temps en temps nécessaire de ressembler des informations les concernant”.

<sup>2</sup>Bernard Lewis is just the most relevant example.

<sup>3</sup> The two expressions belong to Malek Chebel (Chebel, 2002: 180).

culturally and politically motivated, so as to ensure cultural domination; moreover the possibility of extending borders has always been alluring for expansive nations.

The distinction experts in the analysis of travel literature in Arab space identify between the Mašriq specific *adab al-masālik wa l-mamālik* genre, which implies a cognitive approach towards *dār al-islām*, and the Maghreb specific *adab ar-riḥla* genre, often perceived in terms of religious geography, given that its main objective is the fulfillment of pilgrimage and not a fundamental aspect for the approach we intend to address the travel accounts of the two authors Ibn Faḍlān and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. Although we might call them separate genres for distinct motivations<sup>4</sup>, both of them are part of the broad range of human geography, which is a representative product of the Arab literary culture<sup>5</sup>. In fact, travel stories are filled with geographic information<sup>6</sup>, all other historical and cultural details seem to be put forward only to complement the frame of the place described. Thus, people, traditions, histories and stories come to only add to a geographical description which requires particularization.

Undoubtedly, there are common features of the two types of writing, such as, for instance, the taste for fantastic *adab al-<sup>c</sup>aḡā'ib*, the element that alters the veracity, or the constant tendency in both types of writings to valorize Islam<sup>7</sup>, to the detriment of the „reviewed” cultures. Moreover, for both types of „travel accounts”, there is a lot to debate about the authenticity of the facts reported. Also, due to the fact that in Islamic tradition works and authors accept each other’s account without quotation<sup>8</sup>, they blend pure information and a certain personal way of interpreting reality. In both texts analyzed in the

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<sup>4</sup>“Although the books had in common a preoccupation with geographical description of the places visited by the authors, there the resemblance ends. The difference between the books (travel accounts) must be explained in terms of both the date when they were written and the interests and predilections of the individual authors” (Abu-Lughod, 2011: 88).

<sup>5</sup> Alain Roussillon refers to the travel accounts genre in the following terms: *genre consubstantiel à la tradition arabo-musulmane* (Roussillon, 2005: 23)

<sup>6</sup> Un récit de voyage est un type de récit où l’histoire bascule dans la géographie, où la ligne successive qui est la trame formelle du récit ne relit point, les uns aux autres, des événements, des accidents, des acteurs narratifs, mais des lieux dont le parcours et la traversée constituent la narration elle-même” (cf. Louis Marin apud. Ouasti, 2006: 111).

<sup>7</sup> “Les excursions hors du *dār al-islām* exposaient le voyageur à des expériences inédites, hors normes précisément, mais celles-ci étaient vécues et narrées à travers une grille de déchiffrement qui postulait la supériorité du propre système des valeurs et de son être-au-monde” (Roussillon, 2005: 19).

<sup>8</sup> Yet some authors refer to the quoted sources by using the Arabic letter *sīn* at the beginning of each paragraph (Ferré, 1986: 186).

current paper we will be able to notice a series of clichés, common to travel literature that Paule Charles-Dominique identified: explicit preference for urban areas rather than desert and Bedouin areas<sup>9</sup>; attention to unprecedented, spontaneous parts of description and not to everyday, ordinary things; in the same sense, declared concern and curiosity for the upper class<sup>10</sup>, *al-ḥāṣṣa*, composed of scholars, emirs, literati rather than common people, *al-ʿāmma*, generally ignored; applying the hierarchy of classical cultural Islamic and Arabic values as foreground, along with the affirmation of the cult of difference by exacerbating cultural and religious superiority of the traveler-writer (Charles-Dominique, 1995: XXVII-XXX).

Studying the “travel accounts” literature highlights the existence of a commonly accepted and expected framework of writing. The distinction between *kitāb/risāla* literary genre, on the one hand, and *riḥla*, on the other, seems obvious in both literary frame and content, as well as in the identity approach manner. Thus, *kitāb* or *risāla* represents a *markaziyya* type of writing, a product of identity considered dominant and upper class, such as *Kitāb Ibn Faḍlān*, while *riḥla*, which invariably implies a pilgrimage leitmotif towards a *markaz*, a religious one this time, representing the product of the *dār al-islām* peripherals<sup>11</sup> who clearly take up Islamic identity, I would say even “flaunt” it. This distinction is crucial in understanding the different approaches the discussed authors pursue. Ibn Faḍlān (tenth century) and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (fourteenth century) represent two identity approaches that, despite their common cultural and religious background, reference it differently.

*Not only the content of the volumes but also the principles which guided the selection of items for inclusion are indicative of the level of cultural perception. The latter is often a sensitive indirect index to the travelers’ values and capacities to comprehend (...). It may also indicate a prior sensitivity to certain phenomena with intrinsic interest, even in the absence of utilitarian purpose (Abu-Lughod, 2011: 97).*

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<sup>9</sup> The cliché is found in Ibn Ḥaldūn’s interpretations, who states that Bedouins are progress hostile, especially after the North-African venture of the Banū Hilāl tribe (Charles-Dominique, 1995: XXIX).

<sup>10</sup> Both Ibn Faḍlān and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa generously describe receptions offered at various courts, and other festivities they were honored with, wasting uselessly numerous details on clothing, food, gestures, gifts and honors they have received.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Chebel, 2002 : 185

## Ibn Faḍlān's voyage and the *adab al masālik wa l-mamālik*'s genre

Descriptive “masālik” and “mamālik” literature is chronologically prior to the *riḥla* genre. Detailed knowledge of Islamic or newly Islamized territories becomes a priority and a necessity for an increasingly broad empire, leading to the emergence of geographical science in the Arab world. *Savoir, pouvoir, voir – connaître pour connaître et connaître pour agir* are the attitudes in approaching the world that Malek Chebel identifies in the early centuries of Islamic state (Chebel, 2002: 180). Ibn Faḍlān's accounts, in their capacity of relevant product of central Arab culture – *markaz* – seems to belong to the category previously described by Chebel as *connaître pour agir*. Journeys that begin from the center, in this case from the Abbasid capital Baghdad and target the borders of the Islamic world represent the *adab al masālik wa l-mamālik* genre. Beyond the physical movement that the journey itself implies, the category of *adab al masālik wa l-mamālik* literature also contains a cultural dynamic which flows from the center to the edge, followed by all the consequential implications of this trajectory.

In Ibn Faḍlān's accounts, more than a pure statement of facts, or a description of events, places and people encountered, we detect the conscious affirmation of the *markaz* culture opposite to its peripheral configuration – undoubtedly a condescending and tolerant approach. In Ibn Faḍlān's case, I wouldn't go as far as to speak of *cultural chauvinism* (Montgomery, 2000: 3), particularly because his attitude cannot be separated from the social level he belongs to. We can talk about the historically confirmed proof of a stratified Islamic society, where both socio-economic and religious differences are realities of Islamic space. Unlike Ibn Baṭṭūta's obvious attempts to correct social and religious deviations, *our peripheral traveler*, Ibn Faḍlān, who was entrusted an official mission by Caliph al-Muqtadir (908-929) to an area of recent or ongoing Islamization process, observes<sup>12</sup> things from the perspective given by the

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<sup>12</sup> However, Paul Charles-Dominique's careful observation doesn't miss the nuance of contempt and pity for a part of population called *ar-rūs*: (Charles-Dominique, 1995: 1077). *Every day the slave-girl arrives in the morning with a large basin containing water, which she hands to her owner. He washes his hands and his face and his hair in the water, then he dips his comb in the water and brushes his hair, blows his nose and spits in the basin. There is no filthy impurity which he will not do in this water. When he no longer requires it, the slave-girl takes the basin to the man beside him and he goes through the same routine as his friend. She continues to carry it from one man to the next until she has gone round everyone in the house, with each of them blowing his nose and spitting, washing his face and hair in the basin. (...) They are the filthiest of all Allah's creatures: they do not clean themselves after excreting or urinating or wash themselves when in a state of ritual impurity after coitus*

official position held at the Abbasid court. In 921 Ibn Faḍlān is given by Caliph al-Muqtadir a mission with specific objectives, which he accepts and assumes from the very beginning. The islamized Bulgarians on Volga complain to have been frequently attacked by their Khazar neighbors, as well as by other nations which easily went down the Volga River, and ask the Caliph to help them build a fortified citadel to protect them from enemy attacks.

However, the taste for preserving and underlining differences is obvious to Ibn Faḍlān, and the criteria he uses to set limits between the socio-cultural categories seem to be, in order of importance, language, religion and social *impersonation*, along with climatic and geographical features of described area. Ibn Faḍlān's accounts put us in front of a screen through which *Arabic high culture* sees and understands the world. This is a fundamental remark because it customizes Ibn Faḍlān's accounts, and, generally, the *abad al-mamālik wa l-masālik* genre. Thus, the direction of Ibn Faḍlān's journey represents, at the same time, the decreasing circles defining the complex game between identity and otherness (from the Abbasid capital Baghdad to the *ʿaḡam*'s *atrāk*'s *ṣaqāliba*'s, and *rūsiyya*'s territories). Barely arrived in Khawarizm region, where he is warmly welcomed as the envoy of the caliph, Ibn Faḍlān notices and emphasizes the linguistic differences which particularize al-*ʿaḡam*<sup>13</sup>:

(...) *wa hum awḥaṣu n-nāsi kalām<sup>an</sup> wa kalāmu-hum ašbahu šay<sup>in</sup> bi šiyāḥi z-zarāzīri wa bi-hā qariyat<sup>un</sup> yuqālu la-hā Ardakū ahlu-hā yuqālu la-hum al-kardaliyyati kalāmu-hum ašbahu šay<sup>in</sup> bi naqīqi d-daṭāḍi.* (They have the most savage way of speaking; their language is more as the chirp of the starlings than the human voice. There is also a village they are calling *Ardakū* inhabited by *al-kardaliyya* people whose way to talk is very similar to the croak of the frogs); (Ibn Faḍlān: 5).

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*and do not even wash their hands after food. Indeed they are like asses that roam in the fields* (the translation from Arabic belongs to James E. Montgomery; cf. Montgomery, 2000: 7-11).

13 *ʿaḡam* used to be understood in the Arabic common classical knowledge as non Arabic speaker: “while we know that *ʿarabī* signifies a relationship with the Arabic language, we do not know for certain the language or languages signified by *ʿajamī*, although Persian may be the primary language in this category. If so, *ʿarabī* must be treated as a term of positive and specific inclusion, while, in contrast, *ʿajamī* must be viewed as a term of exclusion, residual inclusion or inclusion by default. Looked at from a different angle, *ʿarabī* is a term of in-groupness, while *ʿajamī* is a term of out-groupness. The fact that language is treated as the classificatory principle which makes possible the above distinctions shows powerfully the importance attached to language in the Arabic intellectual tradition as a symbol of ethno-cultural identity and as a boundary-setting device (Suleiman, 2003: 57)”.

From the very beginning, Ibn Faḍlān states that the Abbasid mission relies on an interpreter whom we see often doing his job in territories inhabited by *atrāk*, *ṣaqāliba* and *rūsiyya*<sup>14</sup>: *at-tarḡumānu yutarḡimu la-nā ḥarf<sup>an</sup> ḥarf<sup>an</sup>*, notes Ibn Faḍlān received at the court of Bulgarian king (Ibn Faḍlān: 11). Besides the linguistic considerations that he formulates in Khawarizm, which should be understood in the key of interpretation proposed by Yasir Suleiman<sup>15</sup>, Ibn Faḍlān no longer explicitly refers to such features of the nations he encounters, which may symbolize a lack of interest in communities the author places on a lower scale of civilization. In this context, it is important to note the lack of interest that the *markaziyya* type of Islamic culture manifested in relation to ethnic and linguistic details<sup>16</sup> of the nations placed at the borders of the empire.

The linguistic impediment – lack of knowledge of Arabic – is doubled by the existence of bizarre social customs and increasingly harsh climatic conditions. These only increase the feeling of alienation and foreignness, so that, as the mission heads to the north, cold and frost become more present. North of al-Ġurḡāniyya the landscape changes both at human and geographic levels, with languages, customs and climate growing more foreign. Arriving in the land of Turks, Ibn Faḍlān notices with obvious disdain the precarious social organization, and, especially, the deplorable hygienic condition of the populations he encounters: *'afḍaynā 'ilā qabīlat<sup>in</sup> mina l-'atrāki yu'rafūna bi l-ḡuziyya (...) wa hum ka-l ḥamīri d-dāllati lā yaḍnūna li-llāhi bi ḍn<sup>in</sup> wa lā yarḡfūna 'ilā 'aq<sup>in</sup> wa lā ya'budūna ṣay<sup>an</sup>*. (We arrived to a tribe of Turks known as al-Ġuziyya (...) and we found them as the lost donkeys, they do not worship God or anything else, and they do not believe in reason either); (Ibn Faḍlān: 6).

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<sup>14</sup> I chose to keep the original forms used by Ibn Faḍlān for the nations he visited, given the disputes on the translation and, especially the ethnic identification of groups of population included in *Kitāb Ibn Faḍlān* (see Montgomery, 2000)

<sup>15</sup> Suleiman, 2003: 55-63

<sup>16</sup> “In the perception of the Arabs, ‘the Turks’ existed as a more or less constant and homogeneous ethnic group through the centuries, in whatever different roles and under whatever different names they appeared in their own lands. The terms ‘Turk’ and ‘Turkish’ seem to have evoked similar associations among the Arabs – at least those of the Mashriq – through the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Quite naturally, they tended to neglect or belittle the geographical and linguistic differentiations within the Turkic peoples whom they encountered as strangers in their own Arab environment; the farther away from Turkish lands they were, the more they were ignored. Conversely, non-Turkish ethnic entities that were assimilated to a Turkish life-style and came from regions inhabited predominantly by Turks (e. g. , the Circassians and Abkhaz in the Mamluk period) were all lumped together under the term *Turk* / *'Atrāk*. We know of a similar extension of the notion ‘Turk’ to denote Muslims in general from Hindu India and the Christian Balkans” (Haarmann, 1988: 177).

The lack of hygiene is the most striking aspect for Ibn Faḍlān, as it almost obsessively returns in the remarks he makes about Turkish and Slavic populations: *laysa bayna-hum wa bayna l-mā'i ʿamal<sup>un</sup> ḥāṣṣat<sup>an</sup> fī š-šitā'i* (There is no connection between them and water, especially during the winter season); (Ibn Faḍlān: 6). The comparison with the donkey is also relevant to the symbolism of Arab-Islamic culture, to which Ibn Faḍlān adds, in the case of *ṣaqāliba*, the fact that they worship the dog, the barking of this animal was believed to be auspicious: *ra'aytu-hum yatabarrakūna bi ʿuwā'i l-kilābi wa yafraḥūna bi-hi wa yaqūlūna: sanatu ḥiṣb<sup>in</sup> wa barakat<sup>in</sup> wa salāmat<sup>in</sup>*. (I saw them asking the blessing from the barking of the dogs, and being extremely happy for this, and saying that the year to come will be full of fertility, benediction and welfare); (Ibn Faḍlān: 13).

Women`s nudity and their libertine behavior is also observed and equally sanctioned, be it in the case of Turkish people, *ṣaqāliba* or *rūsiyya*: *lā yastatiru nisā'u-hum min riḡāli-him wa lā min ḡayri-him kaḍālika lā tasturu l-mar'atu šay<sup>an</sup> min badani-hā ʿan ʿaḥad<sup>n</sup> mina n-nāsi* (Their women do not cover themselves in front of their men and the strangers, they do not cover any part of their body from anyone; (Ibn Faḍlān: 6). Also:

*yaḡtami<sup>c</sup>u fī l-bayti wa ma<sup>c</sup>a-hum al-ḡawārī r-rūqati li t-tiḡḡāri wa yankaḥu al-wāḥidu ḡāriyata-hu wa rafīqu-hu yanzuru ʿilay-hi wa rubammā ḡtama<sup>c</sup>ati l-ḡama<sup>c</sup>atu min-hum ʿalā ḥāḍihi l-ḥāli ba<sup>c</sup>ḍu-hum bi ḥidā'i ba<sup>c</sup>ḍ<sup>in</sup> wa rubbamā yadḥulu t-tāḡiru ʿalay-him li-yāštariya min ba<sup>c</sup>ḍi-him ḡāriyat<sup>an</sup> fa yuṣādifu-hu yankaḥu-hā wa lā yazūlu ʿan-hā ḥattā yufaḍḍi ʿaraba-hu.* (They are accompanied by beautiful slave girls for trading. One man will have intercourse with his slave-girl while his companion looks on. Sometimes a group of them comes together to do this, each one in front of the other. Sometimes indeed the merchant will come in to buy a slave-girl from one of them and he will chance upon him having intercourse with her, but the *Rūsiyya* will not leave her alone until he has satisfied his urge<sup>17</sup>).

As Ibn Baṭṭūta did few centuries later, Ibn Faḍlān notices the scarce practice of Islamic religion of the Northern populations. In the eyes of the Abbasid traveler, primitive strange tribal practices mix with the Islamic ritual in a symbiosis that creates repulsion rather than appreciation. Ibn Faḍlān finds that Turkish nations are not sincere in adopting Islamic religion and declare themselves Muslims depending on the circumstances. Ibn Faḍlān states that even

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<sup>17</sup> The translation from Arabic to English of this fragment belongs to James E. Montgomery, cf. Montgomery, 2000:

Bulgarians converted to Islam for some time fail to fulfill the prayer ritual at the expected time, due to climatic peculiarities. In fact, this is the only time when we find Ibn Faḍlān trying to correct the way *aṣ-ṣaqāliba* assumed Islamic practices, whether we refer to the rules of determining the inheritance, to social separation on gender criteria or to prayer ritual. The explanation resides in Ibn Faḍlān's very concern for success of the mission entrusted by al-Muqtadir. At the same time, it is the only moment which proves Ibn Faḍlān's deep involvement and his subjective presence in the story: *mā ziltu 'aḡtahidu 'an yastatira n-nisā'u mina r-riḡāli fī s-sibāḡati fa mā stawā lī dālīka* (Ibn Faḍlān: 14). (I was doing everything in my power to convince the women to stay separated from the men when washing themselves, but I had no success).

### **Islamic geography or geo-theology: *riḡla*'s genre**

Initially perceived as the need to search for new fertile territories and new trades, after the emergence of Islam, journey has gained an obvious religious significance, as well as a legal and cultural incentive. In search of knowledge, Muslims travel, according to prophet Muhammad's urge, "up to China"<sup>18</sup> (*Uṭlubū l-ʿilma ḡattā fī ṣ-ṣīn*) which offers the voyageurs a meaning and an additional justification for their acts. At the same time, *Riḡla* represents a Qur'anic reality, which enhances its legitimacy base. Thus, first soldiers of Islam involved in the mission of spreading the new religion are called *ahlu r-riḡāl* or *ibnu/'abnā'u s-sabīli* (Chebel, 2002: 193).

The central axis of the journey Ibn Baṭṭūṭa conducted for more than two decades<sup>19</sup> is the pilgrimage to the holy places of Islam, first of all Makka and Ka'ba, and then the cultural "stops" of secondary importance. It is both interesting and relevant to note that every part of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's journey leaves from and returns to the Islamic holy places, fact which proves a remarkable sense of cyclicity and extols the unconditional adherence of the traveler to the Islamic identity. The other cultural "stations" acquire meaning only in the light of the return to Makka, six times in nearly twenty-five years of travel, constantly reminding the reader the

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<sup>18</sup> "La Chine est apparue comme un lieu familier, la nation ou la science est vénérée et développée, une terre amie: on connaît l'exhortation prophétique qui incite allégoriquement les musulmans à s'approprier les connaissances de ce monde même s'il fallait les quérir en Chine"(Chebel, 2002: 207).

<sup>19</sup> Between 1325 and 1353

basic identity reference and, thereby, placing itself in the sequence of a prestigious identity heritage, in fact, the only prestigious one.

Malek Chebel suggests that *rihla*, which he often refers to in terms of “sacred geography”<sup>20</sup> is the product of an identity complex the inhabitants from Maghreb deeply acknowledge in relation to the Islamic East, perceived as the cradle of spirituality of this world, a place towards which they head and tend to assimilate with its identity marks.

*Les érudits maghrébins et andalous ont tôt fait de rejoindre en sagacité et en créativité leurs prédécesseurs du Machreq. Ils développèrent une sorte d'antidote qui leur permettait de relier cette excroissance occidentale au corps de l'Empire, les territoires marginaux de l'Ouest au foyer de l'Œkoumène, à savoir les Lieux Saints. Prétextant le pèlerinage à La Mecque, les Maghrébins allaient ainsi donner naissance au courant de la Rihla (Chebel, 2002: 185).*

Ibn Baṭṭūta is a traveler who assumes an obvious moralizing task of straightening the worlds he visits by using rules and principles which govern his own existence. He is an egocentric traveler, always ready to give lessons of good behavior in the sense Islam draws (Charles-Dominique, 1995: 1136-1139). Ibn Baṭṭūta is a “Muslim traveler” par excellence, who wants to depict the world he comes from the way this world should look like, he tries to make the reader believe he is witnessing a unitary civilization, gathered together by a set of common religious and social practices (Yérasimos, 1982: 5-6). Ibn Baṭṭūta is a defender of unaltered Islam, which is, beyond doubt, his own form of Islam; he has derogatory approaches on other “Islams” he encounters during his journey, and he proves himself harsher<sup>21</sup> towards deviations inside Islam than towards infidels (*al-kuffār*). Ibn Baṭṭūta's approach on Shia Islam is characterized by hostility and rage, the *Hikāyatu ar-rāfiḍati* chapter from *Rihla* depicts the Shiites in the darkest colors: *ittafaqū 'alā l-fasādi wa qaṭ'ī t-turuqi wa salbi l-'amwāli (...) fa*

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<sup>20</sup> “(...) dans ces cercles concentriques (identitaires) qui se superposent, le voyage du curieux, qu'il soit mené au nome de la sainte science, ou pour des préoccupations sociales de prestige ou même de dilettantisme, s'inscrit dans un cadre plus large, celui de la géographie sacrée. C'est d'elle que procède le voyage du profane, car est profane celui qui physiquement ou mentalement se trouve à l'extérieur du périmètre des Lieux saints” (Chebel, 2002 : 245).

<sup>21</sup> In this respect, the episode where Ibn Baṭṭūta recalls the incident of the year 930 when Karma sect, following an attack on Mecca, resulted in the massacre of Mecca pilgrims who steal the Black Stone from the Ka'ba is noteworthy. The pious traveler remembers the episode with indignation and anger (Yérasimos, 1982: 13).

*kānū yakmanūna bi n-nahāri wa yaḥruḡūna bi l-layli fa yaḍrubūna ʿalā l-qurā*<sup>22</sup> (they have agreed to ruin, to go on the road and steal .... they were hiding during the day and came out at night to attack settlements). The term chosen to define them *ar-rāfiḍa* (those who refuse the lawful Islam, schismatics, heretics by extension) leaves no room for interpretation about Ibn Baṭṭūta's attitude or of the Maleki Muslim rite towards Shi'ite Islam. *Fa kaṭura ʿadadu-hum wa ṭamahū ʿilā stīṭāni ʿahli s-sunnati*<sup>23</sup>, Ibn Baṭṭūta is frankly worried for *they became increasingly numerous and aspire to conquer the Sunni nation*.

As far as African Islam is concerned, these opinions fall into a pattern that Orthodox Islam applies to its borders and marginals. Africa is frequently defined as *bilād as-sudān* (the country of Black people), which doesn't conceal at all the attitude of the Muslim majority (of Arab origins and Sunni Islam, it goes without saying) towards the rest of Islamic area. Moreover, it is a land of wilderness, of misery, and, therefore, of incomplete Islam. From this point, it is only a step to the stories about cannibal habits, one of the leitmotifs, as Malek Chebel notes, in Arab Muslims writing about Africa (Chebel, 2002:210-211). We find, along with historian Lucian Boia, that anthropophagy "has long ago become one of the most striking signs of otherness which supplies a very attractive old myth (...) anthropophagy often goes hand in hand with incest and nudity and embodies total mess, the ultimate step to moral alteration" (Boia, 2003: 19).

Along with other habits that cause the revolt of Ibn Baṭṭūta, nude African women and the social *mélange* seem to be unacceptable:

*ša'nu hā'ulā'i l-qawmi ʿaḡīb<sup>un</sup> wa ʿamru-hum ḡarīb<sup>un</sup> (...) fa ʿammā riḡālu-hum fa lā ḡayrata laday-him, wa lā yantasibu ʿaḡadu-hum ʿilā ʿabī-hi, bal yantasibu li-ḡāli-hi, wa lā yariṭu r-raḡula ʿillā ʿabnā'u ʿuḡti-hi dūna banī-ni. wa dālika ṣay<sup>un</sup> mā ra'aytu-hu fi d-dunya ʿillā ʿinda kuffāri bilādi l-malībāri mina l-hunūdi. ʿammā hā'ulā'i fa hum muslimūna muḡāfiṣūna ʿalā ṣ-ṣalawāti wa taʿallumi l-fiḡhi wa ḡifzi l-qurʿāni. ʿammā nisā'u-hum fa lā yaḡtašimna mina r-riḡāli wa lā yaḡtaḡibna min muwāḡabati-hinna ʿalā ṣ-ṣalawāti. an-nisā'u hunālika yakūnu la-hunna l-ʿaṣdiqā'u wa l-ʿaṣḡābu mina ri-riḡāli l-*

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ibn Baṭṭūta, 1992: p. 207-210

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem

*'aḡānibi, wa kaḏālika li r-riḡāli ṣawāhibu mina n-nisā' i l-'aḡnabiyyāti. wa yadḥulu 'aḡadu-hum dāra-hu fa yaḡidu mra'ata-hu wa ma'a-hā ṣāhibu-hā fa lā yankaru ḏālika*<sup>24</sup>.

Thus, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa cannot be accused of radical views, it wouldn't be historically appropriate, he is only echoing the views of his time. Some historians, looking to establish historical truths, attribute a series of mistakes to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, which are, in fact, precious fragments from an imaginary of his time, common errors of the age he lived in, and their causes, be it out of ignorance or neglect, it is of secondary importance.

Likewise, the appreciation Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's accounts show for Indian and Chinese cultures must be interpreted in the key of a common perception of the time which speaks of a positive approach to spiritual values represented by the two systems of civilization, even though they at least partially surpass the scheme of classical Islamic thought. It is just the fact that the fourteenth century is an era of profound spiritual expression in the politically fallen Islamic space, and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa is being the witness and confessor of this trend. Malek Chebel perfectly summarizes the cultural feelings of the era: “[...] *en restituant le sens de la grandeur islamique, la Rihla permet d'ouvrir plusieurs portes simultanément. Si certaines laissent entrevoir la grandeur de l'Empire, d'autres – plus exiguës, à peine entrebâillées – permettent de relativiser et d'atténuer l'apport magnifique des Arabes*” (Chebel, 2002: 246).

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<sup>24</sup> Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, 1992: 254-271. The translation of this fragment is due to C. Defremery and B. R. Sanguinetti (1858) republished by Stéphanes Yérasimos within Francois Maspero collection at La Découverte in Paris, 1982, the 3<sup>rd</sup> volume, p. 340: *La condition de ce peuple est étonnante, et ses mœurs sont bizarres. Quant aux hommes, ils ne sont nullement jaloux de leurs épouses ; aucun d'eux ne se nomme d'après son père ; mais chacun rattache sa généalogie à son oncle maternel. L'héritage est recueilli par les fils de la soeur du décédé, à l'exclusion de ses propres enfants. Je n'ai vu pratiquer cette dernière chose dans aucun autre pays du monde, si ce n'est chez les Indiens infidèles de la contrée du Malabar. Cependant, ces Messoûfites sont musulmans ; ils font avec exactitude les prières prescrites par la loi religieuse, étudient la jurisprudence, la théologie, et apprennent le Coran par cœur. Les femmes des Messoûfites n'éprouvent nul sentiment de pudeur en présence des hommes et ne se voilent pas le visage ; malgré cela, elles ne manquent point d'accomplir ponctuellement les prières. Dans ce pays, les femmes ont des amis et des camarades pris parmi les hommes étrangers ou non parents. Les hommes, de leur côté, ont des compagnes qu'ils prennent parmi les femmes étrangères à leur famille. Il arrive souvent qu'un individu entre chez lui et qu'il trouve sa femme avec son compagnon; il ne désapprouve pas cette conduite, et ne s'en formalise pas.*

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