

A marriage custom in Tibet

This desolate country, infested by dangerous and wild beasts, extends for twenty days' journey, without shelter or food except perhaps every third or fourth day, when the traveller may find some habitation where he can renew his stock of provisions. Then he reaches a region with villages and hamlets in plenty and a few towns perched on precipitous crags. Here there prevails a marriage custom of which I will tell you. It is such that no man would ever on any account take a virgin to wife. For they say that a woman is worthless unless she has knowledge of many men. They argue that she must have displeased the gods, because if she enjoyed the favour of their idols then men would desire her and consort with her. So they deal with their womenfolk in this way. When it happens that men from a foreign land are passing through this country and have pitched their tents and made a camp, the matrons from neighbouring villages and hamlets bring their daughters to these camps, to the number of twenty or forty, and beg the travellers to take them and lie with them. So they choose the girls who please them best, and the others return home disconsolate. So long as they remain, the visitors are free to take their pleasure with the women and use them as they will, but they are not allowed to carry them off anywhere else. When the men have worked their will and are ready to be gone, then it is the custom for every man to give to the woman with whom he has lain some trinket or token so that she can show, when she comes to marry, that she has had a lover. In this way custom requires every girl to wear more than a score of such tokens hung round her neck to show that she has had lovers in plenty and plenty of men have lain with her. And she who has most tokens and can show that she has had most lovers and that most men have lain with her is the most highly esteemed and the most acceptable as a wife; for they say that she is the most favoured by the gods. And when they have taken a wife in this way they prize her highly; and they account it a grave offence for any man to touch another's wife, and they all strictly abstain from such an act. So much, then, for this marriage custom, which fully merits a description. Obviously the country is a fine one to visit for a lad from sixteen to twenty-four.

The Travels of Marco Polo (1938 edn)

IBN BATTUTA

1304-77

A remarkable thing which I saw in this country was the respect shown to women by the Turks, for they hold a more dignified position than the men.

Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan berber, is commonly referred to as the greatest Muslim traveller – and even simply the greatest traveller – of all time. He managed 75,000 miles, in an age when pestilence, robbers and violence threatened all progress.

At the age of twenty-one Ibn Battuta (whose name means 'duckling's son') set out from Tangiers intending to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, but developed an insatiable taste for travel. He did not return home for another twenty-four years. During this time he visited Egypt, Shiraz, Aden, East Africa, Syria – where he narrowly escaped the Black Death – Siberia, Constantinople, and Delhi, where the Sultan commissioned him as an envoy and sent him on into China.

When he returned to Morocco in 1349, the Sultan provided him with a secretary to

record an account of his travels. Two years later he travelled again, this time over the Atlas Mountains to the Niger – which he believed to be the Nile – via major trading centres for gold and salt. He returned to settle in Fez and finish his book, the convincing, vivid and amusing *Rihlah* (now evolved into *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*), which became an invaluable source of reference on the geography of Muslim countries. It's a mark of how limited travel in his day – even among the great traders of the time, the Arabs – that he described the wonders of the coconut.

Ibn Battuta, whose principle was never to follow the same road twice, was perhaps the only medieval traveller to visit the lands of every Muslim ruler. He had seen more of the known world than any man before him.

Visiting the Sultan of Turkistan

*A remarkable thing which I saw in this country was the respect shown to women by the Turks, for they hold a more dignified position than the men. The first time that I saw a princess was when, on leaving Qiram, I saw the wife of the amir in her waggon. The entire waggon was covered with rich blue woollen cloth, and the windows and doors of the tent were open. With the princess were four maidens, exquisitely beautiful and richly dressed, and behind her were a number of waggons with maidens belonging to her suite. When she came near the amir's camp she alighted with about thirty of the maidens who carried her train. On her garments there were loops, of which each maiden took one, and lifted her train clear of the ground on all sides, and she walked in this stately manner. When she reached the amir he rose before her and greeted her and sat her beside him, with the maidens standing round her. Skins of *qumizz* were brought and she, pouring some into a cup, knelt before him and gave it to him, afterwards pouring out a cup for his brother.*

Then the amír poured out a cup for her and food was brought in and she ate with him. He then gave her a robe and she withdrew . . .

We then prepared for the journey to the sultan's camp, which was four days' march from Májár in a place called Bishdagh, which means 'Five mountains.' In these mountains there is a hot spring in which the Turks bathe, claiming that it prevents illness. We arrived at the camp on the first day of Ramadán and found that it was moving to the neighbourhood from which we had just come, so we returned thither. I set up my tent on a hill there, fixing a standard in the ground in front of it, and drew up the horses and waggons behind. Thereupon the *mahalla* approached (the name they give to it is the *ordu*) and we saw a vast town on the move with all its inhabitants, containing mosques and bazaars, the smoke from the kitchens rising in the air (for they cook while on the march), and horse-drawn waggons transporting them. On reaching the encampment they took the tents off the waggons and set them upon the ground, for they were very light, and they did the same with the mosques and shops. The sultan's khátúns passed by us, each separately with her own retinue. The fourth of them, as she passed, saw the tent on top of the hill with the standard in front of it, which is the mark of a new arrival, and sent pages and maidens to greet me and convey her salutations, herself halting to wait for them. I sent her a gift by one of my companions and the chamberlain of the amír Tuluktumúr. She accepted it as a blessing and gave orders that I should be taken under her protection, then went on. Afterwards the sultan arrived and camped with his *mahalla* separately.

The illustrious Sultan Muhammad Uzbeg Khán is the ruler of a vast kingdom and a most powerful sovereign, victor over the enemies of God, the people of Constantinople the Great, and diligent in warring against them. He is one of the seven mighty kings of the world, to wit: our master the Commander of the Faithful, may God strengthen his might and magnify his victory! [the sultan of Morocco], the sultan of Egypt and Syria, the sultan of the Two 'Iráqs, this Sultan Uzbeg, the sultan of Turkistán and the lands beyond the Oxus, the sultan of India, and the sultan of China. The day after my arrival I visited him in the afternoon at a ceremonial audience; a great banquet was prepared and we broke our fast in his presence. These Turks do not follow the custom of assigning a lodging to visitors and giving them money for their expenses, but they send him sheep and horses for slaughtering and skins of *qumizz*, which is their form of benefaction. Every Friday, after the midday prayer, the sultan holds an audience in a pavilion called the Golden Pavilion, which is richly decorated. In the centre there is a wooden throne covered with silver-gilt plates, the legs being of pure silver set with jewels at the top. The

sultan sits on the throne, having on his right the khátún Taytughli with the khátún Kebek on her right, and on his left the khátún Bayalún with the khátún Urdujá on her left. Below the throne stand the sultan's sons, the elder on the right and the younger on the left, and his daughter sits in front of him. He rises to meet each khátún as she arrives and takes her by the hand until she mounts to the throne. All this takes place in view of the whole people, without any screening.

On the morrow of my interview with the sultan I visited the principal khátún Taytughl, who is the queen and the mother of the sultan's two sons. She was sitting in the midst of ten aged women, who appeared to be servants of hers, and had in front of her about fifty young maidens with gold and silver salvers filled with cherries which they were cleaning. The khátún also had a golden tray filled with cherries in front of her and was cleaning them. She ordered *qumizz* to be brought and with her own hand poured out a cupful and gave it to me, which is the highest of honours in their estimation. I had never drunk *qumizz* before, but there was nothing for me but to accept it. I tasted it, but found it disagreeable and passed it on to one of my companions. The following day we visited the second khátún Kebek and found her sitting on a divan reading the holy Koran. She also served me with *qumizz*. The third khátún Bayalún is the daughter of the Emperor of Constantinople the Great. On visiting her we found her sitting on a throne set with jewels, with about a hundred maidens, Greek, Turkish and Nubian, standing or sitting in front of her. Behind her were eunuchs and in front of her Greek chamberlains. She asked how we were and about our journey and the distance of our native lands, and wept, in pity and compassion, wiping her face with a handkerchief that lay before her. She ordered food to be served and we ate in her presence, and when we desired to leave she said, 'Do not sever relations with us, but come often to us and inform us of your needs.' She showed great kindness to us and after we had gone sent us food, a great quantity of bread, butter, sheep, money, a magnificent robe and thirteen horses, three good ones and ten of the ordinary sort.

Bulghár, on the River Volga

I had heard of the city of Bulghár and desired to visit it, in order to see for myself what they tell of the extreme shortness of the night there and also the shortness of the day in the opposite season. It was ten nights' journey from the sultan's camp, so I requested that he would give me a guide to take me to it, and he did so. We reached it in the month of Ramadán, and when we had

breakfasted after the sunset prayer we had just sufficient time for the night prayers before dawn. I stayed there three days. I had intended to visit the Land of Darkness [northern Siberia], which is reached from Bulghár after a journey of forty days, but I renounced the project in view of the difficulty of the journey and the small profit to be got out of it. The only way of reaching it is to travel on sledges drawn by dogs, for the desert being covered with ice, neither man nor beast can walk on it without slipping, whereas the dogs have claws that grip the ice. The journey is made only by rich merchants who have a hundred sledges or thereabouts, loaded with food, drink, and firewood, for there are neither trees, stones nor habitation in it. The guide in this country is the dog which has made the journey many times, and the value of one of these reaches a thousand dinars. The sledge is tied to its neck and three other dogs are yoked with it; it is the leader, the other dogs following it with the sledges, and where it stops they stop. Its owner never beats or chides it, and when food is made the dogs are served first before the men; otherwise the [lead] dog is angered and escapes, leaving its owner to perish. When the travellers have completed forty stages they alight at the Darkness. Each one of them leaves the goods he has brought there and they return to their usual camping-ground. Next day they go back to seek their goods, and find opposite them skins of sable, minever, and ermine. If the merchant is satisfied with the exchange he takes them, but if not he leaves them. The inhabitants then add more skins, but sometimes they take away their goods and leave the merchant's. This is their method of commerce. Those who go there do not know whom they are trading with or whether they be jinn or men, for they never see anyone.

Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354