

Sultan Mansa Sulayman was visited by a party of ...[non-Muslim] negro cannibals, including one of their [princes]. They have a custom of wearing in their ears large pendants, each pendant having an opening of half a span. They wrap themselves in silk mantles, and in their country there is a gold mine. The sultan received them with honour, and gave them as his hospitality-gift a servant, a [black woman]. They killed and ate her, and having smeared their faces and hands with her blood came to the sultan to thank him. I was informed that this is their regular custom whenever they visit his court. Someone told me about them that they say that the choicest parts of women's flesh are the palm of the hand and the breast. [Fordham University Medieval Sourcebook (<http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1354-ibnbattuta.asp>)]

Ibn Battuta did not claim to witness the shocking events he described here, and his story begs the question: Would he have been willing to believe and repeat this account if the sultan's visitors had been Muslims?

Ibn Battuta must have wanted to see the ruler quickly, but ten days after his arrival, he reported that he became seriously ill after eating some undercooked yams ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yam_\(vegetable\)#Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yam_(vegetable)#Africa)). One of his traveling companions died from the same food! Ibn Battuta remained ill for two months. After he finally recovered, he went to observe a public ceremony - an audience with the sultan Mansa Sulayman.

"[The sultan] has a lofty pavilion ... where he sits most of the time... There came forth from the gate of the palace about 300 slaves, some carrying in their hands bows and others having in their hands short lances and shields... Then two saddled and bridled horses are brought, with two rams which, they say, are effective against the evil eye... The interpreter stands at the gate of the council-place wearing fine garments of silk... and on his head a turban with fringes which they have a novel way of winding... The troops, governors, young men, slaves, ... and others sit outside the council-place in a broad street where there are trees... Anyone who wishes to address the sultan addresses the interpreter and the interpreter addresses a man standing [near the sultan] and that man standing addresses the sultan." [Dunn, p. 302]

He described those who came to the palace:

"Each commander has his followers before him with their spears, bows, drums and bugles made of elephant tusks. Their instruments of music are made of reeds and calabashes, and they beat them with sticks and produce a wonderful sound. Each commander has a quiver which he places between his shoulders. He holds his bow in his hand and is mounted on a mare. Some of his men are on foot and some on mounts." [Hamdun & King, pp. 47 - 48]

At another session (part of a festival) he describes:

"The men-at-arms come with wonderful weaponry: quivers of silver and gold, swords covered with gold... Four of the amirs stand behind him to drive off flies, with ornaments of silver in their hands... The Interpreter brings in his four wives and his concubines, who are about a hundred in number. On them are fine clothes and on their heads they have bands of silver and gold with silver and gold apples as pendants. ... A chair is there for the Interpreter and he beats on an instrument which is made of reeds with tiny calabashes below it [a "balophon"] praising the sultan, recalling in his song his expeditions and deeds. The wives and the concubines sing with him... about thirty of his pages... each has a drum tied to him and he beats it. Then ...[come acrobats and jugglers of swords]..." [Hamdun & King, pp. 52 - 53]

Ibn Battuta ended his eight-month stay in Mali with mixed feelings. On the one hand he respected the parents' strict teaching of the Qur'an to their children: "They place fetters [ropes or chains] on their children if there appears ... a failure to memorize the Qur'an, and they are not undone until they memorize it." He also admired the safety of the empire. "Neither traveler there nor dweller has anything to fear from thief or usurper."

On the other hand he criticized many local practices:

"Female slaves and servants who went stark naked into the court for all to see; subjects who groveled before the sultan, beating the ground with their elbows and throwing dust and ashes over their heads; royal poets who romped about in feathers and bird masks."

He also complained about the small gift of bread, meat and yogurt given to him by the king.

"When I saw it I laughed, and was long astonished at their feeble intellect and their respect for mean things."

Later he complained directly to the king:

"I have journeyed to the countries of the world and met their kings. I have been four months in your country without your giving me a reception gift or anything else. What shall I say of you in the presence of other sultans?"
[Dunn, p. 300, 303]

That evidently made a difference, though it is hard to know what the locals thought of their demanding guest.

"Then the sultan ordered a house for me in which I stayed and he fixed an allowance for me... He was gracious to me at my departure, to the extent of giving me one hundred mithqals of gold." [Hamdun and King, p. 46]

On his return trip, Ibn Battuta continued to explore parts of Mali. He went to Timbuktu, a town that was just beginning to flower as a center of Islamic scholarship and trade. Mansa Musa himself had a mosque built there. But Ibn Battuta was evidently not very impressed with Timbuktu - a city that would become great in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

To learn more of the fascinating story of Timbuktu, watch this BBC documentary, *The Lost Libraries of Timbuktu*, posted here by the film-maker.

His return journey was even more difficult. He had bought a riding camel and another to carry his supplies. But in the desert heat one camel died. Other travelers offered to help carry his supplies, but further on Ibn Battuta fell sick again. He recovered in a small town called Takadda. Here Ibn