IBN BATTUTA'S CONTRIBUTION TO GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The overall objective of this article has been based on reviewing and examining the contributory role of Ibn Battuta, the Arab and Muslim geographer of the 14th century, in the field of geography. Accordingly, the very extensive itineraries of Ibn Battuta's overland and sea travels including intra and inter-continental territories of that date's world (Africa, Asia, Europe) have been illustrated. Moreover, his thorough observations comprising the descriptions, analyses and comparisons of cultural and natural variations of different geographical regions as an evidental methodology have been discussed. It was found that the geographical contribution of Ibn Battuta has been stimulating and comprehensive in the world of Islamic domination.

Introduction

As Christian Europe met with Middle Ages between A. D. 800 and 1400, it lost its knowledge of Greek and Roman geographical work. Accordingly, Muslim scholars who retained that knowledge were involved to describe and analyze their known world in its physical, cultural, and regional variation (Fellmann, Getis, Getis, 1992. P. 4).

Taking Muslim contributions to geography as a whole, there could be found a fourfold division including the descriptive geography, the upgrading of geographical concepts and interpretations, cartography, and astronomical and mathematical geography (Ahmad, 1947, P. 9). Referring to that, there have been two groups of Arabic scholars who contributed significantly to the progress of geography through their travels and descriptive works and the astronomers (Schoy, 1924, P. 257). Therefore, Ibn Battuta should be credited for his role in geography as a traveller and descriptive geographer. Considering the point, Baker (1948, P. 61) has mentioned that Ibn Battuta is one of the best known figures in Arab geography and holds his reputation to the extent of his travels. Additionally, Martin and James (1993, P. 52) have held their view points of him as one of the great travellers of all time.

Mohammad Ibn Abdollah Ibn Battuta was born in 1304 at Tangier (Defremery & Sanguinetti, 1972, P. 1018). His family had apparently been settled in Tangier for some generations and belonged to the

Berber tribe of the Luwata, that first appears in history as a nomadic tribe living on a place of Egypt's borders (Gibb, 1963, P. 2). Since, the family members of Ibn Battuta had traditionally served as judges (Martin and James, 1993, P. 52), he was educated then scholastically to meet the same direction (Gibb, 1958, P. X). Later on, he found himself more fascinated about the peoples and lands in comparison with the law (Martin and James, 1993, P. 52). Consequently, Ibn Battuta developed his scholastic life mostly in the field of geography.

Travels and Observations of Ibn Battuta

Ibn Battuta as an Arab traveller has written the Rihlah which is based on his travels (1325-54) in Africa and Asia (Collins English Dictionary, 1980, P. 725). During some 30 years he covered a linear distance of about 75,000 miles, which in the fourteenth century has been holding a world record (Martin and James, 1993, P. 52). However, the overall standing and significance of Ibn Battuta's travels and observations at intra and inter-continental levels have been more known by the translation of his book (Trans: Derfremery and Sanguinetti, 1958). In order to visualize the extent and importance of Ibn Battuta's total itineraries, Figure 1 has been constructed by this author using the original data derived from several references of this article.

In a period of 1325-33, Ibn Battuta visited the northern parts of Africa along the Mediterranean Sea, Palestine, Syria (Damascus), Medina, Mecca, Mesopotamia, Persia, Baghdad, east of Africa; And concerning a change on his planning, he returned to the north. Accordingly, Ibn Battuta completed his travelling of this period via visiting Byzantium (a Greek city whose site is now occupied by Istanbul), Asia Minor, Southern Russia and Crimea, Coasts of the Black Sea, Mongolian Territory, Central Asian Steppes, Khorasan, and Afghanistan (Ahmad 1964., Martin and James 1993., Wickens, 1992, P. 691). Obviously, it could be considered as a great and impressive itinerary of Ibn Battuta's travels for making and developing his early field experiments.

Considering a duration of 1333-48, Ibn Battuta has extended his travelling and visiting experience as far as south, southeast, and east of Asia. Completing his

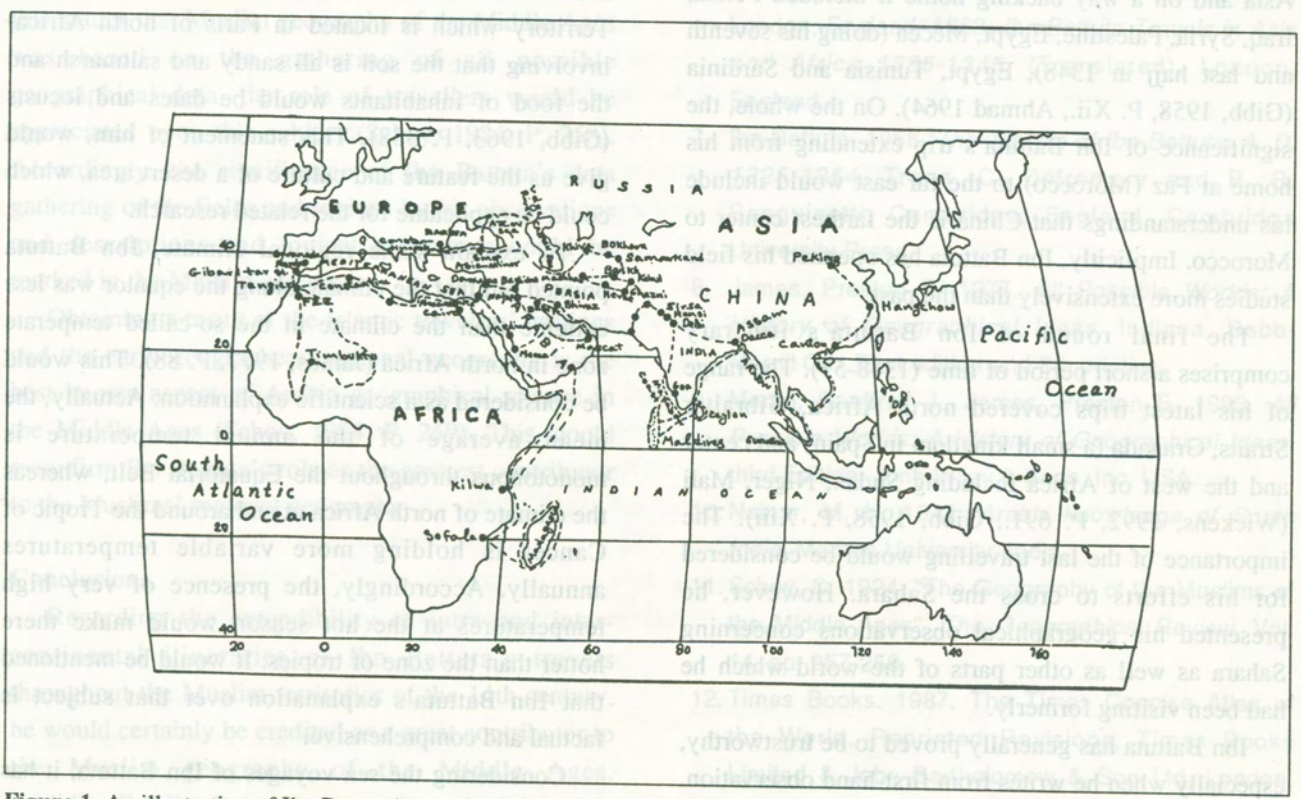

Figure 1. An illustration of Ibn Battuta's total itineraries (Constructed by this author).

later stay at Afghanistan (Ghazni and Kabul), Ibn Battuta entered the subcontinent of India and finally approached the city of Delhi (Ahmad 1964). Ibn Battuta, was appointed as an Islamic judge to serve the people of Delhi, India, and Maldive Islands (Wickens, 1992). In fact, for some years he was engaged to work in Delhi for Mongol emperor's will (Martin and James, 1993, P. 52) and consequently for a diplomatic mission he left the Delhi to China. Evidently, he has been able to gain new field observations of those Asian regions.

Referring to Figure 1, Ibn Battuta sailed along the seashores of Malabar, Maldives, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Arakan coasts to reach the Sumatra. Finally, his sailing around Malaya and Cambodia provided him to arrive at Canton for an overland travelling. Therefore, he got his job done via passing the Hangchow and going toward Peking. Ibn Battuta's successful effort to reach the China would be viewded preferably as a geographical endeavor.

It has been recorded that over the past four years (1344-48) of Ibn Battuta's travelling of this period has covered the visitations of south, southeast, and east of Asia and on a way backing home it included Persia, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mecca (doing his seventh and last hajj in 1348), Egypt, Tunisia and Sardinia (Gibb, 1958, P. Xii., Ahmad 1964). On the whole, the significance of Ibn Battuta's trip extending from his home at Faz (Morocco) to the far east would include his understandings that China is the farthest center to Morocco. Implicitly, Ibn Battuta has operated his field studies more extensively than the past.

The final round of Ibn Battuta's itinerary comprises a short period of time (1348-53). The range of his latest trips covered north Africa, Gibraltar Straits, Granada (a small kingdom in Spain) and center and the west of Africa including Sudan, Niger, Mali (Wickens, 1992, P. 691., Gibb, 1958, P. Xiii). The importance of the last travelling would be considered for his efforts to cross the Sahara. However, he presented his geographical observations concerning Sahara as well as other parts of the world which he had been visiting formerly.

Ibn Battuta has generally proved to be trustworthy, especially when he writes from first-hand observation. His markedly realistic and concrete reporting is virtually unique in medieval Arabic literature (Wickens, 1992, P. 691). Respectively, some of the observations and arguments relative to his travels noted before, will be discussed in the following parts. This might be added that Ibn Juzayy embellished the Ibn Battuta's narrative with quotations and interpretations, but it remained of literary as well as a document throwing light on the contemporary customs and manners (Defremery & Sanguinettie, 1972, P. 1019).

Concerning Ibn Battuta's observations of Volga region (Southwest of Russia), he corrected the ancient mistake that the Sea of Azov is connected with the Caspian, though, for all that, he argued that the Volga divides its waters, ending a branch to each sea (Schoy, 1924, P. 261). Moreover, he has presented an overall information of India's wealth and old culture (Nainar, 1942), and also described the agricultural economy operated in the Maldive Islands (Ahmad, 1947, P. 49). His writings give us natural and native images of those areas and their peoples. It would be considered of being applied in some of the geographical studies.

In describing a desert landscape, Ibn Battuta has mentioned about Tawat and its suburbs (Berber Territory which is located in Parts of north Africa) involving that the soil is all sandy and saltmarsh and the food of inhabitants would be dates and locusts (Gibb, 1963, P. 338). This statement of him, would give us the feature and culture of a desert area, which could be applicable for the related research.

To explain some regional climate, Ibn Battuta pointed out that the climate along the equator was less extreme than the climate in the so-called temperate zone in north Africa (James, 1977, P. 88). This would be considered as a scientific explanation. Actually, the mean average of the annual temperature is monotonous throughout the Equatorial Belt, whereas the climate of north Africa at and around the Tropic of Cancer is holding more variable temperatures annually. Accordingly, the presence of very high temperatures at the hot season would make there hotter than the zone of tropics. It would be mentioned that Ibn Battuta's explanation over that subject is factual and comprehensive.

Considering the sea voyages of Ibn Battuta, it has been comprehended that the Muslims' domination

existed widely and it was prevailing on the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Chinese waters (Ahmad, 1947, P. 49). To be sure, it should be appreciated for the contribution of Ibn Battuta to visualize the geographical extension of Islam all over the known world of his time.

Further About Ibn Battuta's Contribution

Ibn Battuta has been considered factually as the only medieval traveller who is known to have visited the lands of every Muslim ruler of his time including the inter continental ranges (Ahmad, 1947, PP. 45-46). It has been noted that his theological thoughts and interests have supported him to complete the travels (Gibb, 1963, P. 3). Furthermore, he studied about Islam's philosophy and theological ideas which have been so encouraging for his contribution in the history of geographical discoveries (Gibb, 1963, P. 3). Additionally, his geographical investigations and comparisons concerning the cultural and natural aspects and diversities of nations and places would be overcredited for his contribution in the field.

The contributions of Ibn Battuta to Muslim geography is also valuable of being noted. Regarding this matter that Muslim geography of the Middle Ages was based on the gathering of all possible geographical data, the role of travellers would be appreciated upon this subject (Schoy, 1924, P. 258). Accordingly, the significance of Ibn Battuta's data gathering of the fields and regions by his observations and descriptions and logical arguments could be marked in the Muslim geography.

Obtaining a result of the Islamic travelers' writings and the early geographers, regional geography is the best known aspect of Arabic geographical science in the Middle Ages (Schoy, 1924, P. 259). This would reconfirm Ibn Battuta's role as the greatest contributor to the Muslims' regional geography.

Conclusions

Regarding the extendibility of intra and inter-continental itineraries of Ibn Battuta's travels throughout the Muslim territories of the 14th century, he would certainly be credited as a great contributor to the Muslim geography of the Middle Ages. Additionally, Ibn Battuta's research methodology has retained the descriptions typically available at those dates' scholastic studies. Nevertheless, his work basically is holding an honesty and the analytical and scientific integrity. As a final point of view, it should be noted that the overall contribution of Ibn Battuta to the field of geography has been stimulating and comprehended respectively the later studies of regional geography of the Islamic territories.

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