The Arabic Medieval Travel Narrative and the Discourse of Alterity

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to explore the image of the cultural Other and the manifestations of alterity in The Arabic Medieval Travel Narrative. It seeks to identify the patterns of cultural centralism through which the image of the Other was formed during the medieval Arab-Islamic era. The study examines the dimensions of this image and the forms of centralism by adopting a cultural reading open to the concept of alterity. It focuses on the cultural patterns and narrative strategies that shape the image of the Other in the Arabic medieval travel and their emergence from cultural centrality. The journey becomes an act of recognition that takes multiple forms, beginning with the self and returning to it through the discovery of the Other, making the travel narrative a text of dual discovery. The importance of this study lies in the fact that the relationships arising from the desire for recognition still, to varying degrees, shape the perception of the Other today. What we uncover through our exploration of ancient texts largely retains its cognitive value in defining the current boundaries of the relationship between the Self and the Other.
KEYWORDS: cultural centralization, alterity, travel, islamic middle age, the other, otherness.

TITLU: „Narațiunea de călătorie arabă medievală și discursul alterității"
REZUMAT: Acest articol își propune să exploreze imaginea Celuilalt cultural și manifestările alterității în Narațiunea de Călătorie Arabă Medievală. El urmărește să identifice tiparele de centralism cultural prin care imaginea Celuilalt a fost constituită în epoca medievală arab-islamică. Studiul examinează dimensiunile acestei imagini și formele de centralizare, adoptând o lectură culturală deschisă conceptului de alteritate. Se axează pe tiparele culturale și strategiile narative care modelează imaginea Celuilalt în literatura de călătorie arabă medievală și pe modul în care acestea decurg din centralitatea culturală. Călătoria devine un act de recunoaștere ce ia multiple forme, începând de la sine și întorcându-se la sine prin descoperirea Celuilalt, făcând din narațiunea de călătorie un text al dublei descoperiri. Importanța acestui studiu constă în faptul că relațiile care decurg din dorința de recunoaștere încă modelează, în diferite moduri, percepția asupra Celuilalt și în prezent. Ceea ce descoperim prin explorarea textelor vechi își păstrează, în mare măsură, valoarea cognitivă în definirea frontierelor actuale ale relației dintre Sine și Celălalt.
CUVINTE-CHEIE: centralizare culturală, alteritate, călătorie, evul mediu islamic, celălalt, alteritate.

Introduction

The travel represents a movement from the place of familiarity to an unknown place beyond national and cultural borders. It is thus a transition from a familiar cultural scene to another geographical and cultural domain that appears foreign. The purpose of travel is to explore a place, strip it of its strangeness, and transform it into a known and familiar space. Travel became remarkably prominent during the medieval Arab-Islamic era, due to the Arabs' well-known desire to explore other parts of the world and learn about their societies. Since travel necessarily involves crossing borders, it constitutes a key element in the formation of the idea of community, as it separates the known from the unknown[1]. Arab and Muslim travelers were among the most eager to visit different worlds, to reside in them, and then to document their experiences in written accounts. These records eventually developed into a distinct literary genre, unlike any previous form of Arabic literary writing. Such texts exerted a notable influence on literary consciousness.

Many Arab and Muslim travelers journeyed across the world in their voyages, and these experiences enabled them to perceive the relativity of values and the inevitability of cultural difference without this difference becoming a source of coercion toward the other. Travelers would depart from

[1] F Fiona Moolla, "Border Crossings in the African Travel Narratives of Ibn Battuta, Richard Burton and Paul Theroux," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 49, no. 4 (2013): 381.

home, encounter "others", and return with a heightened awareness of both difference and similarity[1]. However, Arab and Muslim travelers and geographers in the medieval period were not a unified group, nor did they adopt a single attitude toward the foreigner. Some of them reflected a xenophobic image of the Other, particularly in regions beyond the Islamic world. For example, Al-Mas'udi* described the northern peoples, such as the Slavs and Franks, as follows: "Their bodies are large, their temperaments coarse, their manners rough, their understanding dull, and their tongues heavy. The further one goes toward the north, the more stupidity, rudeness, and animality prevail"[2]. This depiction reveals clear contempt toward the Other. It is likely that Al-Mas'udi contemplated these groups and compared them consciously or unconsciously to what belonged within his own anthropological and cultural world. The narrative of the world through which the traveler moves is shaped by interpretive frameworks that guide how he translates and understands what he sees[3]. What led some Arab and Muslim travelers to deprive non-Islamic peoples of their humanity was the unfamiliarity of their lifestyles, temperaments, and cultural customs, which they were unable to comprehend. These foreign peoples appeared to them as radically different. The perspective of these Arab travelers closely mirrors that of their Western counterparts, who held similar views toward Arabs and the Orient in general[4]. It is a parallel stance born of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the Other. The same applies to the descriptions some Arab travelers provided of other peoples, which stemmed from ignorance of their culture and the inability to view them through their own local perspective. What appeared strange to the Arab-Muslim traveler was, in fact, ordinary and rational to the Other.

1. The Other in the Medieval Islamic Era

Discussion of the Middle Ages is often accompanied by reference to the golden age of the Islamic world, which extended over vast territories spanning three continents: Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe. During this period, Arabs and Muslims engaged in intense movement and mobility that took many forms, including travel. Among the main purposes of travel for early Arabs and Muslims were religious motives related to pilgrimage, as well as the pursuit of knowledge, curiosity, communication with the Other, and trade[5]. Their desire to experience cultural difference was considerable. For Muslim travelers of the medieval era, travel served as a means of exchanging experiences with the various components of the ummah (the Islamic community). At the same time, it allowed them to understand their own distinctiveness through engaging in numerous comparative experiences[6].

To study the concept of alterity within Arab and Islamic culture during the medieval period, it is first necessary to understand the nature of Islamic society itself. The Islamic world constituted a broad framework encompassing numerous peoples, ethnicities, and, at times, distinct cultures. This new society displayed a remarkable degree of flexibility and tolerance, along with a strong capacity to absorb diverse cultural elements[7]. The Arab-Islamic society functioned through a high level of interaction, and Islamic culture in the medieval centuries emerged precisely from this dynamic process of exchange;

[1] Abderrahmane El Moudden, "The Ambivalence of Rihla: Community Integration and Self-Definition in Moroccan Travel Accounts, 1300–1800," in *Muslim Travellers* (Routledge, 2013), 45–46.

* "al-Masʿūdī (born before 893, Baghdad, Iraq—died September 956, Al-Fusṭāṭ, Egypt [now part of Cairo]) was a historian and traveler, known as the "Herodotus of the Arabs." He was the first Arab to combine history and scientific geography in a large-scale work, Murūj al-dhahab wa maʿādin al-jawāhir ("The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems"), a world history. Haywood, J.A. "al-Masʿūdī." Encyclopedia Britannica, August 28, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Masudi.

[2] Abu al-Hasan Ali Al-Mas'udi, *Al-Tanbih Wa al-Ishraf* (Islamic Eastern Library, 1938), 22.

[3] Roxanne L Euben, "Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge," in *Journeys to the Other Shore* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 49.

[4] Edward w Said, *L'orientalisme: L'Orient Créé Par l'Occident* (Seuil, 2005), 184–185.

[5] Ross E Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century* (Univ of California Press, 2012), 9–10.

[6] El Moudden, "The Ambivalence of Rihla: Community Integration and Self-Definition in Moroccan Travel Accounts, 1300–1800", 145.

[7] Abdullah Ibrahim, *The World of the Middle Ages in the Eyes of Muslims* (Arab Foundation for Studies and Publishing, 2007), 13–14.

indeed, it was almost a direct result of it[1]. All of this influenced the formation of the image of the non-Muslim Other within the symbolic imagination of Muslims in the Middle Ages. It is therefore crucial to emphasize the diversity that existed within the unity of the Islamic world, as all Islamic territories were viewed as parts of a single whole known as Dar El Salam[2]. The concept of Dar El Salam itself was open to terminological plurality depending on the field of study: originally a juridical notion, it expanded into various intellectual disciplines such as geography and history. Hence, expressions like "Bilad El Islam" (the lands of Islam), "Mamlaket El Islam" (the kingdom of Islam), or "Ard El Islam" (the land of Islam) were used interchangeably to convey the same meaning[3]. The term "Dar El Islam" referred to an all-encompassing cultural system: ethical, ontological, and epistemological that reflected the nature of medieval Islamic society, characterized by a certain homogeneity. It was a religious society unified by a common language, shared literature and laws, and a collective social organization in which everyone participated. Each Muslim perceived themselves as an integral part of this shared brotherhood[4]. All elements worked together to form a universal self that transcended all biases and an intellectual and doctrinal fraternity in which every individual shared common beliefs, religious rituals, moral values, social ideals, and cultural sensitivities[5]. Islam benefited from linguistic, ethnic, and national diversity. The Islamic community accommodated this plurality and demonstrated a notable openness to the philosophies and worldviews of surrounding civilizations. This was partly due to the willingness to allow newly converted peoples to preserve their own traditions, as the territories governed by Muslims throughout history were highly diverse[6]. Thus, Arabs and Muslims spread across most continents did not perceive themselves as strangers outside what was called "Dar El Islam". This universal civilizational climate was clearly reflected in the writings of Arab and Muslim travelers, who succeeded in understanding and embracing the Other within the framework of cultural difference.

2. The Characteristics of Islamic Arabic Travel Narratives

The Islamic worldview during the classical era was accompanied by narrative accounts, including travel writings that frequently positioned the Other within a context of apprehension or even fear. In such narratives, the Islamic self was often defined as a transcendent identity, immune to criticism and possessing absolute truth. The self was portrayed as inherently positive and essentialized, while the Other was represented as its inverted reflection, an essentialized image as well. Ethnocentric bias directed the traveler's attention not so much toward what he actually saw, but rather toward what he expected to see, based on what he had already heard within his own cultural framework[7]. This tendency is clearly reflected in the Arab travel narrative, which encapsulates the idea of venturing beyond the boundaries of the Islamic world while maintaining a distinctly Islamic centrality. This centrality manifests through three interrelated patterns of cultural orientation:

1- The Pattern of Belonging and Communal Identity This form of centralism defines alterity through the lens of collective affiliation. The Other is recognized whenever the traveler encounters something unfamiliar or departs from the norms of his own community.

2- The Doctrinal Centralism This framework establishes religion as the primary reference for distinguishing binary oppositions along the axis of Islam versus disbelief "kufr". Space itself is divided into two domains: the Space of Islam "dar el islam" and the Space of unbelief "dar El Kufr". As one scholar notes, one of the underlying assumptions of medieval geographical and travel writings in general

[1] Ibrahim, *The World of the Middle Ages in the Eyes of Muslims*, 14.
[2] Ann KS Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (Routledge, 2013), 211.
[3] Giovanna Calasso, "Constructing and Deconstructing the Dār Al-Islām/Dār al-Ḥarb Opposition: Between Sources and Studies," in *Dār Al-Islām/Dār al-Ḥarb* (Brill, 2017), 24–26.
[4] Marlène Barsoum, "The Traveller and His Scribe: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta and Their Rendering by Ibn Juzayy," *Journal of North African Studies* 11, no. 2 (2006): 198.
[5] Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century*, 7.
[6] Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Harvard University Press, 2017), 16.
[7] Caroline B Brettell, "Introduction: Travel Literature, Ethnography, and Ethnohistory," *Ethnohistory* 33, no. 2 (1986): 128.

was the focus on the Islamic world and the avoidance of non-Islamic lands. This focus reflects the dominance of religion as the organizing principle of the narrative[1].

3- The Pattern of Utility and Self-Centered Knowledge This form of centralism is tied to the Islamic self's belief in the universality and superiority of its own knowledge and usefulness. The notion of benefit "Faida" is thus defined according to a fixed order that refers to specific values. Ibn Battuta, in his travels, did not consider himself merely a citizen of a country called Morocco, but rather a member of the broader realm known as "Dar El Islam", to whose spiritual, moral, and universal social values he remained deeply loyal above any other form of allegiance[2].

The act of travel is performed by a historically situated self, while the narrative describing the journey may either be produced by the traveler himself or entrusted to another person who rephrases and records it in written form. In other words, the narration can be undertaken by a different subject who is assigned the task of writing and presenting the journey in a narrative structure. Thus, the act of travel is carried out by a historical self imbued with particular emotions, impressions, and perspectives, whereas the discourse of travel is produced by a narrator who constructs utterances according to specific conventions and limited purposes, determined in relation to the intended audience[3]. Applying this to Ibn Battuta's journey* "Tuhfat al-Nuzar fi Gharā'ib al-Amsar wa 'Ajā'ib al-Asfār", which stands as one of the most significant works of classical Arabic travel literature, we find that the journey itself, as a spatial experience, lasted for about thirty years. During this time, Ibn Battuta visited numerous countries across three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe, and did not return to his homeland in Morocco until the apparent end of his travels. His observations and accounts were then written down and shaped into a narrative form by the author of the text, Ibn Juzayy. down and narrated its events. This situation raises a complex issue, as it renders the relationship between Ibn Battuta's actual travels and their written account by Ibn Juzei problematic one. The reader is thus left to imagine the gap that exists between Ibn Battuta's lived experiences and their presentation by Ibn Juzayy, and to speculate about what lies within the spaces separating these two entirely different acts[4].

What the narrator performs in the travel text is essentially an act of documentation closer to historical recording and the accurate registration of observations. It represents a hybrid process that combines historical writing with literary expression, framed as testimonial accounts of experiences. Through the discourse of the text by which the journey is fixed and rendered into language the act of travel becomes known to us. One can easily imagine how many individuals have traveled across spaces without their journeys ever being transformed into discourse[5]. This implies that there are generic conventions and defining features that determine the nature of travel writing and give it its literary form. Foremost among these features are culturally embedded indicators that bring this genre close to the fields of anthropology and ethnography. Travel writing spanning various forms of literature that take travel as a fundamental condition of production is in many of its manifestations closely related to ethnographic study[6]. This connection is evident through elements that involve the representation of human beings within specific communities and geographical-cultural contexts.

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[1] Nina Berman, "Questions of Context: Ibn Battuta and EW Bovill on Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 2 (2003): 199.

[2] Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century*, 12.

[3] Saïd Yaqtin, *Arab Narrative: Concepts and Manifestations, Al-Ikhtilaf Publications* (Al-Ikhtilaf Publications, 2012), 175.

* "Ibn Battuta (born February 24, 1304, Tangier, Morocco—died 1368/69 or 1377, Morocco) was the greatest medieval Muslim traveler and the author of one of the most famous travel books, the Riḥlah (Travels). His great work describes his extensive travels covering some 75,000 miles (120,000 km) in trips to almost all of the Muslim countries and as far as China and Sumatra (now part of Indonesia)". Hrbek, I. "Ibn Battuta." Encyclopedia Britannica, September 26, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ibn-Battuta.

[4] Barsoum, "The Traveller and His Scribe: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta and Their Rendering by Ibn Juzayy", 200.

[5] Yaqtin, *Arab Narrative: Concepts and Manifestations, Al-Ikhtilaf Publications*, 175.

[6] Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel Writing and Ethnography* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 244.

3. The System of Contrast and Forms of Centralization

The travel narrative is characterized by a set of thematic features that manifest in different ways to shape its narrative form. Some of these features are linked to the cultural frameworks that underlie the specificity of the Arab-Islamic travel narrative, and these frameworks are interconnected and sequentially dependent upon one another. They can be identified in three main components, all inseparable from an initial conception of the culture of the Self:

A. Culture / Reference: Travel in classical Arabic literature took various forms, but travel narratives in this tradition can generally be divided into two main directions. The first involves travel and movement within familiar spaces, internal travel, while the second concerns alienation and movement toward an external or foreign place[1]. The first type refers to journeys within the same country or, on a broader scale, within the boundaries of "Dar El Islam" (the Islamic world). The second, however, involves crossing beyond those boundaries into lands outside the Islamic domain. In general, travel provides an opportunity to observe how critical thinking and narrow perception alike emerge from encounters with multiple "Others". The Other is defined through and against differences that are regional, ethnic, religious, linguistic, or even gender-based differences that, to some extent, remain proximate to the traveler's homeland[2]. According to this binary classification, comparison in the first type of travel (within the Islamic world) is horizontal: it is based on the notion that difference manifests in degrees of variation within the same cultural group, as the traveler compares the presence of certain traits or practices in one space to their presence in another. By contrast, when the traveler departs from the homeland the space of familiarity and cultural reference into the realm of difference, comparison becomes a vertical process, functioning as a factor of distinction and hierarchy. In such cases, difference is established on a principle of gradation, especially when the encounter involves the completely foreign or the external Other.

B. Culture / Center: The travel narrative is, by its very nature, a text of openness toward the Other. Travel takes place for discovery, which assumes multiple forms beginning with the Self and ultimately returning to it through the encounter with the Other. This makes the travel narrative a text of dual discovery: the discovery of the Self and the recognition of the Other, structured in a relation of contrast. Crossing borders is often associated with everything unfamiliar and carries a kind of sacred or magical-religious dimension, whereby one moves from the known sphere of social norms and customs into the territories of the unknown[3]. This discovery, born of the act of travel, is grounded in the idea of recognizing the boundaries that define the traits of each side. It involves the ability to internalize that knowledge and translate it into conceptual and cultural frameworks that become the basis for all relationships shaped by alterity, or for any vision capable of constituting otherness itself. Travel has long been regarded as a quest for the Other and, ultimately, a means of redefining and rediscovering the Self[4]. In this sense, the act of discovery that motivates travel transforms into an instrument of cognitive construction and symbolic formation, one that helps create a framework governing the relationship between the Self and the Other. In travel narratives, the image of the Other is consistently linked to the centrality of the Self. As the traveler moves through space and later recounts his observations or as another author narrates them on his behalf, he seeks to shape an awareness of his own cultural distinctiveness in contrast to that of the Other. In other words, he acquires a heightened consciousness of his difference, reinforcing a form of self-centeredness or self-centrality. This phenomenon is evident within the narratives themselves, as knowledge of other cultures becomes inscribed in the text, establishing the rules that govern its production, circulation, and reception[5]. The Self is thus represented as stable and ordered, while the Other appears as unstable and disordered.

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[1] Walled A Al-Monaes, "Muslim Contributions to Geography until the End of the 12th Century AD," *GeoJournal* 25, no. 4 (1991): 39.

[2] Euben, "Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge," 88.

[3] Fiona Moolla, "Border Crossings in the African Travel Narratives of Ibn Battuta, Richard Burton and Paul Theroux," 381.

[4] Aglaia Iankovskaia, "At the Edge of the World of Islam: Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in the Malay Archipelago," *Entangled Religions* 11, no. 5 (2020).

[5] Justin Stagl and Christopher Pinney, *Introduction: From Travel Writing to Ethnography*, Taylor & Francis, 1996, 121.

C. Culture / System: This contrast is most evident in travel literature through the marvelous depiction of the "other," their space, and beliefs. The sense of wonder begins in classical Arabic travel texts, much like in travel writings of other cultures, with the departure from one's homeland. Those who judge things as strange are often the most traveled, constantly encountering the new and breaking the familiarity of place and culture[1]. Thus, strangeness is realized in journeys to the worlds of the "other", which are often presented as spaces of the unfamiliar and disorder, portraying what belongs to the other in a way that is marvelous and irrational. This difference is primarily symbolic, affecting the way things are perceived and understood, and operates at the level of imagination, where the contrast between the familiar Islamic world and the foreign space appears as a depiction of strangeness. All of this appears as a form of elevated imagination that confines itself to a predetermined perspective, approaching things only through it, and using all available data to confirm the validity of its assumptions[2]. The marvelous construction of the "other" stems from an idealized view of the self and the confinement within a cultural system that seems harmonious to the traveler, transforming everything different into something strange. On the other hand, travelers also recorded what was unusual, strange, exciting, frightening, or simply what they believed would interest their readers[3]. The search for the unusual resembled what the audience might demand; in other words, travel fundamentally carries its driving motivation linked to the pursuit of dual strangeness both in the traveler themselves and in the audience anticipating the travel narrative.

Centralities often base their claim of superiority on narrating the world and presenting it according to their own perspective, usually by creating stereotypical images of the "other." This was not limited to one centrality; a clear similarity can be observed between the representations of otherness in Islamic writings about Christians and Hindus, and what Christians wrote about Muslims, or how the British reused terms of denigration applied to Native Americans, or the accusations of barbarism used to describe Muslims they encountered in North Africa and South Asia[4].

Conclusion

The Classical Arabic travel literature is fundamentally cultural, reflecting a centered perspective; this is evident in Ibn Battuta's journey, which relies on cultural patterns to construct an image of the other that often appears inverted. Accordingly, the travel narrative is formed as a response to a pre-existing symbolic imagination of the other, rooted in the depth of the originating culture, rather than solely emerging from immediate observations.

The ego-centric lens and its associated symbolic imagination continue to shape the narrator's articulation of alterity. The narrator in travel texts in general, and Ibn Battuta in particular, approaches the depiction of the other through a framework of contrasting pairs: culture/non-culture, order/disorder, Islam/disbelief, knowledge/ignorance, and others. Consequently, Travel narratives link the image of the other to the centrality of the self, wherein the self is portrayed as stable and orderly, while the other is depicted as lacking order.

This dynamic produces a central feature of these narratives: The travel account reflects the logic of this centrality, where all that is different is marked as strange, and the other is presented in terms of the marvelous and the inconceivable.

[1] Khaled Touzani, *The Travel and the Allure of the Marvelous Between Writing and Reception* (Arab Foundation for Studies and Publishing, 2017), 16.
[2] Abdullah Ibrahim, *Similarity and Difference* (Mu'minun Bil Hudud Foundation, 2018), 2:13.
[3] Claire Taylor, "The Production of Knowledge and Preservation of Self-Identity: William of Rubruck and Ibn Battuta in Contact with Mongols," in *Travel Writings on Asia: Curiosity, Identities, and Knowledge Across the East, c. 1200 to the Present* (Springer Nature Singapore, 2022), 32.
[4] Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*, 28.

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