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Co-production through Comparison: Muslims and Christians in Ibn Jubayr's Rihla



Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio (XII century), Piazza Bellini, Palermo (Public Domain: Wikimedia Commons)

The *Rihla* by Ibn Jubayr is an account of the pilgrimage to Mecca, which this Cordoban writer undertook between 1183 and 1185. This text holds significant interest for several reasons: the author meticulously details the places he visits, the personalities he encounters, his experiences, and misadventures. Ibn Jubayr also delves into religious dynamics, particularly highlighting interactions between Muslims and Christians observed during his pilgrimage. Indeed, the author is familiar with the interplay between these two groups, since he comes from *al-Andalus*, a region where Christians, Muslims, and Jews have been coexisting for many centuries. However, what is intriguing is how the author strategically employs intergroup interactions within his work. The *Rihla* is not merely a travel story, but a sophisticated literary composition, through which Ibn Jubayr reflects the distinct characteristics of Muslims and Christians. Recounting two peculiar episodes on the return from Mecca, Ibn Jubayr compares Christians and Muslims across physical, behavioural, and even moral dimensions. Through these comparisons, the author delves into a process of assimilation/differentiation: the comparison between Christians and Muslims serves as a tool in the "co-production" of the two groups.

In the first episode, the ship carrying Ibn Jubayr along with other Muslim and Christian pilgrims encounters a storm in the Strait of Messina. Amid this peril, the author underscores the distinctions among the various travellers aboard the vessel:

> *The Christians gave themselves over to grief, and the Muslims submitted themselves to the decree of their Lord […]. When we were sure that (our time) had come, we braced ourselves to meet death, and, summoning our resolution to show goodly patience, awaited the morn or the time of destiny. Cries and shrieks arose from the woman and the infants of the Rum.*
>
> *(Trans. Broadhurst 2019, pp. 336-337)*

This is not the first instance where Ibn Jubayr's ship encounters difficulties. In previous storms, Christians occasionally displayed concern, while Muslims constantly remained composed. On several occasions, however, Christian pilgrims, according to the author, attempted to emulate the calm shown by their Muslims counterparts. However, it is precisely during the severe storm near the Sicilian coast that the contrast between the two groups becomes noticeable: Christians pray to their God in desperation, whereas Muslims maintain their composure, placing their trust in the divine will. In this passage, Ibn Jubayr contrasts the behaviours of the two groups on the ship to underscore what he perceives as a profound difference between them. This process of comparison and differentiation not only aims to highlight the Muslims' superior response to the storm: it also allows the author to argue, from his polemical standpoint, that in other situations during the journey Christians merely attempted to imitate the commendable calm of the Muslims. The storm in the Strait of Messina is the moment revealing the failure of Christians' attempts to assimilate that shows their true behaviour; by contrast, the author emphasizes the ideal conduct of his coreligionist in sorrow.

The Christian effort to emulate and assimilate Muslims takes centre stage in the second passage of the *Rihla* that I discuss here. Following his survival of the shipwreck, Ibn Jubayr arrives in Sicily and explores several cities on the island, including Palermo. In the capital of the Norman kingdom, on Christmas Day, he observes a group of Christian women entering the churches:

> *The Christian women of this city follow the fashion of Muslim women, are fluent of speech, wrap their cloaks about them, and are veiled. They go forth on this Feast Day dressed in robes of gold-embroidered silk, wrapped in elegant cloaks, concealed by coloured veils, and shot with gilt slippers. Thus the parade in their churches, or (rather) their dens, bearing all the adornments of Muslim women, including jewellery, henna on the fingers, and perfumes. […] We invoke God's protection for this description which enters the gates of absurdity and leads to the vanities of indulgence…*
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> *(Trans. Broadhurst 2019, pp. 349-350)*

In Ibn Jubayr's view, the Christian women of Palermo closely resemble Muslim women in every aspect: their manner of speech, clothing, veiling, and even their preparations for celebrating their feast with jewellery, henna, and perfumes. From the author's perspective, this assimilation by Christians on a physical level appears extreme and exaggerated, prompting him to invoke God while denouncing the absurdity and vanity of the scene he witnesses.

Ibn Jubayr's strategies of assimilation and differentiation in depicting Muslims and Christians become clearer when considered within a certain Islamic tradition of "self-definition" through the contrast of Christians and Jews. The comparison with the members of other religions particularly addresses aspects such as physical appearance, hairstyles, clothing, and behaviour. In the early centuries of Islam's expansion and its

interactions with other religious traditions, Muslim authors often identify elements of Christians and Jews from which to differentiate themselves. This theme emerges clearly in some messages attributed to the Prophet. For example, in one of the hadiths collected by the Islamic scholar al-Bukhari (9th century), it is written: "The messenger of God said: 'The Jews and Christians do not dye [their hair/beard], so be different from them'" (*Kitâb ahadîth al-anbiyâ'* 2, p. 405; *ḥadīṯ* n°3462). The absence of the practice of dyeing hair and beards among Christians and Jews provides Muslims with a means to distinguish themselves from their opponents. Thus, the comparison with the "Others" permits the choosing and establishing of some practices so as to create a religious distinction. This discourse applies not only to physical appearance but also to behaviour. For example, in a hadith collected by al-Tirmidhi in the *Kitab al-Isti'dhan*, Muhammad says:

> *He is not one of us who resembles [those who are] other than us, nor [he] who resembles the Jews or the Christians. For indeed greeting of the Jews is pointing the finger, and the greeting of the Christians is waving with the hand.*
>
> *(ed. Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, p. 607, ḥadīṯ n°2695)*

Central to the discussion is the manner in which greetings are conducted across various religious groups: even the slightest variation, such as the way one moves his hand, can be important in this perspective. Such traditions clarify why Ibn Jubayr highlights the contrast between Christians and Muslims in how they confront storms and why he expresses such surprise at Christian women who resemble Muslim women. As noted earlier, this author perceives Christians' efforts at assimilation as conflicting with his own emphasis on differentiation, rooted in a tradition that distinguishes physical, moral, and behavioural characteristics among Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

This way of comparing Muslims and Christians is a form of co-production, as the constant comparison between the two groups aims to mark boundaries, constructing elements that characterize "Others" and, by reflection, also themselves. This is perhaps the "paradox" that emerges from Ibn Jubayr's pages: in the act of comparing to differentiate, the author cannot help but "co-produce" and somehow link the two different traditions.

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