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INTRODUCTION
Plate 1. The Prologue of the manuscript.
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Sometime in the spring of 1846, with the fresh and heady scent of orange blossoms filling the gardens surrounding his native Tetuan, Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣaffār, newly returned from travels in France, took up his pen and began to write. Before him was the thick bundle of notes reminding him of the people, places, and marvels seen and heard during his voyage. After invoking the blessings of God, he patiently set to work, recording his impressions in a careful, fluid hand steadied by years of practice.

At the beginning of September, when the blossoms of spring were ripening into golden orbs, aṣ-Ṣaffār wrote the closing lines of his manuscript, giving expression to the relief that often comes with finishing an arduous task: “This is all that it is possible for this poor insignificant self to do, given his muddled brain and the pressures of other work. Were it not for the sake of helping him whose request is hereby answered—for obedience to him is an obligation—I would not have completed it.”1 These words, and indeed the evident haste in which they were written, suggest that the request to which aṣ-Ṣaffār was responding came from the Sultan himself.

Why was Mulay ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, Commander of the Faithful, descendent of the Prophet Muḥammad, head of a dynasty that had ruled Morocco for more than two hundred years, so eager to read Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣaffār’s account? One reason may have been the expectation that its densely filled pages would contain answers to some troubling questions: What is the secret of French power? How

1. See page 220.
can it be acquired? How have they achieved mastery over nature in ways as yet unknown to us? How do they lead their daily lives, educate their children, treat their women and servants? What is the status of their learning, how do they amuse themselves, what do they eat? In short, what is the condition of their civilization, and how does it differ from ours?

The significance of Muhammad aš-Ṣaffār’s riḥla, or travel account, arises from the author’s ability to offer answers to these questions and to capture his experience in finely drawn images that are profoundly human. He had the aptitude for opening a window on a world remote from his own and transmitting what he saw to others. Through his minute descriptions of the new (and almost everything is new), we feel the texture of the cultural encounter: in reading his travel account, we have the rare opportunity to “get inside the skin” of a literate Moroccan at a critical moment that tested his beliefs, sensibilities, and bearings.

Aš-Ṣaffār’s “rendezvous” with the new, to borrow Barthes’s phrase, evokes a far greater confrontation, in which his experience was magnified many times. In the background to his journey were events which had profoundly upset the Moroccan ruling elite’s perception of its own power vis-à-vis the West. Indeed, aš-Ṣaffār’s journey was part of an effort to try to correct the imbalance, and to gain insight into what had gone wrong. The age in which he lived was one of anxiety about Moroccan abilities against a militant West, and of fears about the impact of external affairs on a fragile domestic order. These larger issues are the antecedents to the voyage, casting it onto a higher plane of historical significance. In order to understand the riḥla, we must first see it within the setting of its times.

Morocco, France, Algeria

The watershed event of aš-Ṣaffār’s generation was the French landing in Algiers in 1830. As the French coastal enclave grew into a full-scale occupation, the geographical continuum of Muslim states
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stretching from Egypt to Morocco, established in the first centuries of Islam, was abruptly broken. For Morocco, the French penetration meant that a Christian power now shared a long, exposed border of open plains and deserts, offering an open way into the Moroccan heartland. It was an unprecedented turn of events, and its effect was traumatic.

It was not the first time that invaders from Europe had threatened Morocco, but this was a threat of a new and different order. Iberian marauders in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had made inroads into the coast, but these occupations were for the most part transitory. By the seventeenth century, a static tension had developed between Morocco and Europe whose fault line was the sea; Moroccan and European-based corsairs would raid each other’s shipping, enriching their respective coffers under the guise of religious faith.² By the middle of the eighteenth century piracy had slackened off, giving way to less violent forms of exchange. Occasional warfare was one feature of the Moroccan-European relationship; active trade and diplomacy was another. Under Sultan Muhammad III (1757–90) a new port was built at Mogador (aš-Šawīra) on the Atlantic coast, in order to attract foreign merchants and to generate customs revenues for the treasury of the Makhzan.³ Then came the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, and a decisive break in relations with the West. Moreover, the death of Sultan Muḥammad III initiated a struggle for succession that unleashed countrywide spasms of warfare. Political life entered a period of excess that was unusual even in the weary eyes of the Moroccan chroniclers.⁴

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It was not until the 1820s that both Morocco and Europe emerged from the time of troubles. On the continent, Europeans celebrated peace with a burst of growth and an assertive search for overseas markets and sources of supply. While Europe entered a new age, Morocco drew inward, and under Sultan Mulay Sulaymān (1793–1822) broke most of her European ties. In 1817 the Sultan disbanded what was left of the Moroccan fleet, and put an end to all maritime trade on Moroccan ships.5 Ports were closed to foreign trade, and Moroccans were forbidden to travel abroad without permission of the Sultan.6 His successor, Mulay ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān (1822–59), tried to redress the imbalance but failed, and Morocco returned to self-imposed isolation.7 The near-total break in Morocco’s relations with the West lasted more than a generation. During the interval, Western Europe metamorphosed in ways most Moroccans could not imagine.8

The French conquest of Algeria abruptly ended this phase and thrust Morocco once again onto the European stage. Against his will, the Sultan was drawn into the affairs of his Algerian neighbor. Morocco’s involvement began with the Amir ‘Abd al-Qādir, an Algerian leader who in 1832 organized local resistance to the French. The Sultan helped him with arms and supplies, fulfilling his religious duty to respond to the Christian threat. But at the same time the


6. An example is the ẓahīr, or proclamation, from Mulay Sulaymān to the Ḥājj ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Ashāsh, dated 28 Shawwāl 1221/8 January 1807, granting him permission to travel abroad. TT 3:236.


Sultan was wary of the Amir’s undisciplined army and charismatic appeal, and feared he would arouse France to attack Morocco.9

This friendly, if uneasy, relationship continued as long as the war was confined to Algeria. But in 1841 the conflict suddenly entered a new phase. General Bugeaud, recently appointed chief of the French army, swore that “the Arabs will neither sow, reap, nor pasture without our permission,” and pursued 'Abd al-Qâdir relentlessly, finally forcing him across the border into Morocco.10 On 6 August 1844, without warning, a French fleet bombarded Tangier, and a few days later reduced Mogador to ruins. In one week the French had damaged the Sultan’s two chief ports and severely impaired his customs revenues.11 Meanwhile, General Bugeaud crossed the border and destroyed a Moroccan army at the River Isly. On land and sea, the Moroccans were in defeat.

Now France sought to make peace. “Now we can be generous without being weak,” Bugeaud wrote, “because we have hit them hard.”12 The Treaty of Tangier of September 1844, and the Treaty of Lalla Maghnia the following March, solidified the French success while exacting a heavy price from the Sultan.13 He had to agree to

11. An eyewitness account of these events is A.-H. Warnier, Campagne du Maroc, 1844 (Paris, 1899).
cooperate in the capture of 'Abd al-Qādir, as well as to negotiate new border demarcations. In one fell swoop he was forced to aban-
don his opposition to the French, and to concede their presence in
Algeria a de facto recognition it had never before had.

Meanwhile, the Makhzan tried to come to terms with the disas-
ter. Moroccan writings of the time demonstrate, according to the
Moroccan historian Muhammad al-Manūnī, the “confusion of
spirit” and the “muddled thinking” of the men of the court and the
ulema. 14 Two motifs emerge: the first, a call to holy war; the sec-
ond, a searching through the classical texts to find explanations for
the catastrophe. 15 Both suggest that, at least initially, some mem-
bers of the elite looked inward for guidance on how to react to the
French threat in Algeria. But for others in the ruling circle, it was
clear that inherited wisdom was inadequate, and that new informa-
tion was needed. The doors of the Makhzan were far from hermet-
ically sealed, and novel concepts were beginning to filter in. By the
mid-1840s, curiosity about Europe had taken root in a small yet
influential circle of men who became partisans, not exactly of re-
form, but rather of “inquiry” and of “seeing and hearing” (as a-
Ṣaffār put it) what the West had to offer. 16 Perhaps this curiosity was
stirred by reports from travelers—Europeans, Moroccans, other
Muslims—who brought news of the great scientific and technolog-

15. The first trend is exemplified by an exhortatory poem (qāṣīda) of the
Minister Ibn Idris that begins: “Oh people of our Maghrib, it is time to
sound the alarm! / To the jihad, to right what is wrong.” Al-Manūnī, Ma-
ẓāḥir 1:20. Also M. Lakhdar, La vie littéraire au Maroc sous la dynastie ʿAla-
wide (Rabat, 1971), pp. 316–17, 327–35. The second trend is seen in the
work of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Kilānī, known as al-Kardūdī, an
ʿālim of Fes, who wrote Kashf al-ghumma bi-bayān anna ḥarb an-nizām (“Un-
veiling the Sorrow, An Explanation of the War of Order”), BGR MS# D1281;
quoted in al-Manūnī, Maẓāḥir 1:13–15, and A. Larouij, Les origines sociales et
276–78.
ical changes taking place in Europe; perhaps it was stimulated by the appearance of travel books such as the Egyptian at-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s voyage to Paris, which found its way into the library of the Sultan’s First Minister Ibn Idrīs;17 most certainly, it arose as a consequence of military defeat. Drawing on these sources, the idea of a mission to witness European civilization at first hand seems to have taken hold. It was a controversial idea, fraught with misgivings; nevertheless, it was an idea whose moment had come.

The Embassy of Ashʿāsh

The idea of a Moroccan embassy was first raised during negotiations over the Treaty of Lalla Maghnia, when the French suggested that the Sultan send an envoy to France to implement “the modifications and changes that the new situation demanded.”18 These overtures were greeted with reserve by the Makhzan. Months passed with no answer, while factions within the court debated the idea. The Sultan’s representative to the foreign consuls, Bū Silhām b. ʿAlī Azṭūṭ, told a French intermediary that he favored conciliation with France but his views were not yet accepted at the court: “An alliance with France suits us,” he is reported to have said. “This idea is not yet completely accepted by the Emperor . . . but it is germinating in his spirit; I will nurture it with all the means in my power.”19 Encouraged by this news, the French assigned Léon

17. For mention of Ibn Idrīs’s library see ibid., p. 215 n. 63. On aṭ-Ṭaḥṭāwī, see note 132 below.
18. AAE/MDM 9/370, de La Rue to Ibn Idrīs, 22 March 1845.
19. AAE/CPM 14/119–22, Roches to Guizot, 24 August 1845. Abū Silhām b. ʿAlī Azṭūṭ, governor of Tangier and Larache (popularly known as Bū Silhām), was the Sultan’s representative to the European consuls resident in Tangier. Foreign relations were conducted through Makhzan officials residing in the North, who acted as go-betweens to shield the Sultan and the court from excessive contact with foreigners.
Roches, one of their most gifted and tenacious agents, to organize the mission.²⁰ Roches was in steady contact with Bū Silhām in Larache and with First Minister Muḥammad Ibn Idrīs at the court.²¹

Meanwhile, the French government’s enthusiasm for a Moroccan embassy grew, especially as its political advantages became clear. The ambassador would be tangible proof to a divided French public that the goals of the long and costly Algerian war had finally been achieved: “The Emperor of Morocco must give our King a powerful weapon to withstand the opinion of his subjects,” wrote Roches. “That weapon is the ambassador.”²² Also in the back of Roches’s mind was another vision, of a Morocco tamed and chastened, and joining the ranks of Muslim states that had already submitted to the will of France. The Sultan would someday conclude an alliance like “that which exists between us and the Sultan of Constantinople, the Pasha of Egypt, and the Bey of Tunis. . . . You should come to our country to seek the instructors who will furnish magnificent battalions to Turkey, Egypt, and Tunis, and to study our science and industry.”²³


²³ AAE/CPM 14/182, Roches to Ibn Idrīs, 12 September 1845.
Compelling reasons led the Moroccans to negotiations at this time. First of all, there was the situation with 'Abd al-Qādir; the French were pressing for his expulsion, but the Sultan needed more time. Roches argued that direct appeal for patience made in Paris would be more persuasive than indirect diplomacy in Morocco. Then, there was the advantage of seeing France at first hand; some of the inspiration behind the embassy must have been the chance to gather intelligence directly, and through a trusted envoy, rather than through intermediaries whose loyalties were in doubt. Finally, the Sultan may have reasoned, negotiation in this case was the proper course. While holy war was one aspect of the relationship with the non-Muslim world, compromise and conciliation, šulḥ and hudna, were another, employed by Muslim rulers since the earliest times. As long as there was a consensus that it served the interests of the community, and as long as the agreements reached were seen as temporary and short-term, diplomacy with non-Muslims was an approved instrument of policy.

24. AAE/CPM 14/152-53, Roches to Gen. de La Morcière, 3 September 1845. The Sultan wrote to Bū Silhām that the purpose of the embassy was “to demonstrate far and wide that [our] differences were over and we have returned to our former situation.” He also wanted to “cancel the clause regarding 'Abd al-Qādir,” and “most important, obtain the release of Muslim captives in the hands of the enemy.” This last objective is not mentioned in the French sources. DAR 17561, 22 Jumādā ath-Thānī 1261/28 June 1845.

25. The conditions under which travel to the non-Muslim world should take place were a matter of concern to devout Muslims. Islamic doctrine taught that travel should be toward the community of believers, not away from it. The essential meaning of hijra, “migration,” was movement away from dār al-kufr, the territory of the disbelievers, to dār al-islām, the house of Islam. Thus travel to the West was inherently problematic, and a point of discussion among the ulema. See Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, eds., Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), and especially the essay by Muhammad Khalid Masud, “The Obligation to Migrate: The Doctrine of Hijra in Islamic Law,” pp. 29-49. In the same volume, Moroccan travel is treated by
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Precedent also dictated the conventions of Muslim diplomacy. Unlike European states, who watched over their foreign interests through resident consuls, most Muslim states in premodern times, including Morocco, had no corps of “professional” diplomats and no permanent embassies abroad. Negotiations were usually carried out by special envoys chosen by the ruler: they went abroad, performed their duties, and returned home as soon as the mission was completed. Nevertheless, to be chosen as an envoy was a mark of distinction, and diplomatic appointments were eagerly sought. So when the Sultan’s intention of sending an ambassador to France became known, his choice became a subject of intense speculation.

Friends at the court told Roches how the topic of the embassy was on everyone’s lips. Each faction had its own candidate; the French Consul at Tangier, Edme de Chasteloup, reported that “Ibn Idriš has come forth with one, Bū Silhām with another, and the Emperor is inclined toward a rich merchant of Fes.”26 Hoping to


26. AAE/CPM 14/83–84, de Chasteau to Guizot, 3 August 1845. Initially Muṣṭafā Ǧukkālī and Aḥmad Timsimānī, both merchants with extensive foreign connections, were mentioned by the French as candidates. However, this was not the Sultan’s intention. According to a letter in the Royal Archives, he preferred an envoy who was “knowledgable about
influence the choice, Roches invoked the days of Mulay Ismā'il and Louis XIV, when relations between the two nations were marked by "pomp, magnificence, and happy results," and urged the Moroccans to appoint "a man who combines all the advantages of an imposing exterior, an intelligent spirit, a noble origin, and an elevated rank in his government." 27

Word finally came that the Sultan had reached a decision. Roches heard from "a friend at the court in Fes" that 'Abd al-Qādir Ash'āsh, the governor of Tetuan, had been selected. Roches immediately wrote a flattering description of Ash'āsh to Foreign Minister Guizot that made up in enthusiasm what it lacked in accuracy:

His ancestors were among the Moors chased out of Spain in the fifteenth century who settled where the city of Tetuan is now; that is to say, they were its founders. Since that time, the position of Pasha [governor] has fallen to the eldest of the family. This hereditary pashalik [governorship] . . . is without parallel in Morocco. Ash'āsh is thus among the men of good breeding and distinction. Barely thirty-five years old, he is learned and has much worldly experience. He possesses all the confidence and friendship of the Emperor, has a considerable fortune, and has been to Mecca . . . It would be quite impossible to find in Morocco a man more suitable than he. 28

Ash'āsh was the eldest son of a rich and powerful Tetuan family that had ruled the city for three generations. His grandfather, 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Ash'āsh, the first of his family to gain political prominence, had been governor of Tetuan at three different times; his father, Muḥammad Ash'āsh, also a governor, was known as a man

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Makhzan affairs and not a merchant." DAR 17571, Ibn Idrīs to Bū Silhām, 14 Rajab 1261/19 July 1845.

27. AAE/CPM 14/106–7, Roches to Bū Silhām, 10 August 1845.

28. AAE/CPM 14/253–54, Roches to Guizot, 20 October 1845. The Sultan chose Ash'āsh because of his "polish, his good sense, and his excellent family." Sultan to Bū Silhām, #18 Shawwāl 1261/20 October 1845.
of powerful and autocratic personality. Greatly feared and respected, he was said to have ruled Tetuan with an iron hand. “In his day,” says his biographer Muḥammad Dāwud, “it was safe for womenfolk to walk the streets day and night,” in the classic metaphor for peace and security. His ruthlessness and loyalty to the Sultan allowed him to consolidate the hold of his clan over Tetuan, and at his death in 1845 the governorship passed directly to his eldest son, 'Abd al-Qādir.29

'Abd al-Qādir Ash‘āsh had held office for only a few months when the prize of the ambassadorship was awarded to him. Moreover, he was younger than Roches estimated, probably twenty-eight years old. One wonders how a man of so little experience was chosen for such a demanding task. It was true that Ash‘āsh was no newcomer to public life; he had spent his formative years at his father’s side, apprenticing in the subtle politics of town and court.30 But more important than his background and capabilities was his enormous wealth, which allowed him to assume the expenses of the embassy himself. This seems to have been the deciding factor, and Ash‘āsh was regarded as a fortunate choice: dignified, skilled in public affairs, and endowed with a private fortune that would relieve the Makhzān of much of the heavy costs of the mission.31

The letter from the Sultan appointing 'Abd al-Qādir Ash‘āsh also instructed him on how to prepare for the journey:

29. TT 3:276–94 describes the rule of Muḥammad Ash‘āsh over Tetuan.
30. He was not highly literate, however, corroborating Laroui’s claim that Moroccan ambassadors sent abroad were often “uncultivated.” Origines, p. 215. An undated note in his awkward hand is found in AAE/ADM/ “Voyage de Sidi Aschasch, Pacha de Tetouan, 1845” (noted hereafter as AAE/ADM/Voyage).
31. AAE/CPM 14/253–54, Roches to Guizot, 20 October 1845. Roches wrote: “The proposal that he made to bear all the expenses of the embassy decided the Sultan in his favor.” His father had already promised the Sultan that if he were chosen as ambassador, he would bear all the costs of the embassy. DAR 10794, Mulay 'Abd ar-Raḥmān to 'Abd al-Qādir Ash‘āsh, 18 Ramadān 1261/20 September 1845.
Our most excellent servant, Ḥājj Abd al-Qādir Asẖāsh, may God grant you success, may peace be upon you along with the blessings and mercy of the Most High. The request has been made repeatedly that we send an ambassador to the land of the French as a demonstration of the truce between us. We asked your father, God have mercy upon him, when he

32. Ḥājj is the title given to someone who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.