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LCB-5

Morocco: The End of an Era

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
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New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

On February 26 King Muhammad V, twentieth ruler of the Alawite dynasty founded in 1666, died unexpectedly of a heart attack following minor nose surgery. To the over ten million Moroccans there was a sense of personal loss difficult to convey to a world that has long since rejected the monarchical principle in favor of regimes which if not always more democratic are more impersonal.

To all others directly concerned with North African affairs -- the Tunisia of Bourguiba; Algeria's rebel government under Ferhat Abbas; the roughly one million European settlers in Algeria with their growing sense that time is running out; France, which once exercised political control over the whole area and whose influence is still so strongly marked; Spain, Morocco's neighbor to the north; and the former French colonies of Africa, especially Mauritania whose three-month-old independence remains exposed to rather shaky Moroccan claims of sovereignty -- there was the awareness that a leading actor in their arena had left the scene. The measure of his greatness was the spontaneous feeling of a void, this awareness that an era had ended, the attempt to predict "what now?"

To me, living now in Tunisia, but hoping to move on to Morocco in the coming months, this idea of the end of an era was dominant. If I would never know now the day-to-day Morocco of Muhammad V, perhaps I could still get some firm impression of this important period by witnessing its end. Thus, my first visit to Morocco.

This was also to be for me the end of an odyssey. After eight years of interest in the Arab World, after visiting most of the Eastern Arab World, I was at last to see the Western limit of Dar al Islam and of Arabic civilization. Not even the effortless flight from Paris in Royal Air Maroc's new Caravelle jet could erase this feeling of adventure. This feeling of excitement and adventure remained with me during the whole week of my stay. Even to one who might have thought himself somewhat jaded on things Arabic, Morocco proved a fascinating country. Before turning to the late king and his funeral, it might be well to set the stage with a brief account of Morocco based on my first impressions, arriving as I did with certain pre-conceptions formed in the Middle East.

Morocco gives an impression of bigness. We are far from the crowded living along the valley of the Nile, the small-scale apple orchard carved out of a hill slope in Lebanon, the pin-points of oasis civilization almost lost in the vast desert of Arabia. Everything seems to come in larger doses -- a huge cork-oak forest only a few miles inland from Rabat, a vast, beautifully and consistently green farming area stretching from Casablanca up to the beginning of of the Rif, and then the majestic grandeur of the Rif (home of Abdel Krim, leader of the famous Rif revolt in the 1920's) made even more imposing by being so verdant for a mountainous region yet seemingly so empty.

Even the streets of Rabat's old medina (still preserving part of the original 12th Century wall as well as the early 17th Century wall built by Moriscos fleeing Spain) seem wider than their Middle Eastern counter-parts. (Fes, which I did not see, would apparently be an exception to this rule.)

Then, of course, this spirit of bigness, of elbow room, was well captured by Marshall Lyautey's modern section of Rabat (which became the capital only after the establishment of the French Protectorate) with its wide boulevards and plazas. My first impression was that of seeing a city which did not quite grow to its planners' expectations (much like Mussolini's Asmara in Eritrea), but after seeing the old city and the surrounding countryside, I realized that compactness would have been out of place.

Also, according to which Morocco one is seeing at any moment, it can be the most traditional or the most modern of Arab countries. Only in Saudi Arabia have I seen women more heavily veiled. Moroccan handicraft seems to have survived better than that of other Arab countries. Examples of popular folklore and magic abound -- from the blue windows and doors to keep out the evil eye, to the story tellers, itinerant preachers and purveyors of medicine and magic potions seen at a rural market day gathering only a few miles outside of Rabat. Here, too, the tribes of the hinterland still revolt (as late as 1959 Hasan, then Crown Prince, put down an uprising in the Rif), thus recalling vividly the centuries-old Moroccan antithesis between the Bled el Makhzen (the land under the sultan's control) and the Bled el Siba ("the land of dissidence").

Yet, on the other hand, Morocco has a first-rate network of roads, one of Africa's most modern cities in Casablanca, a trade union movement claiming a membership of over 300,000, an industrial complex which accounts for 16.5% of the gross national product (as compared with 10% for Tunisia), and a higher level of urbanization than in most so-called under-developed countries -- 25% of the population is urban, and there are six cities with a population of over 100,000 (Casablanca, Fes, Tangier, Rabat, Marrakesh, and Meknes).

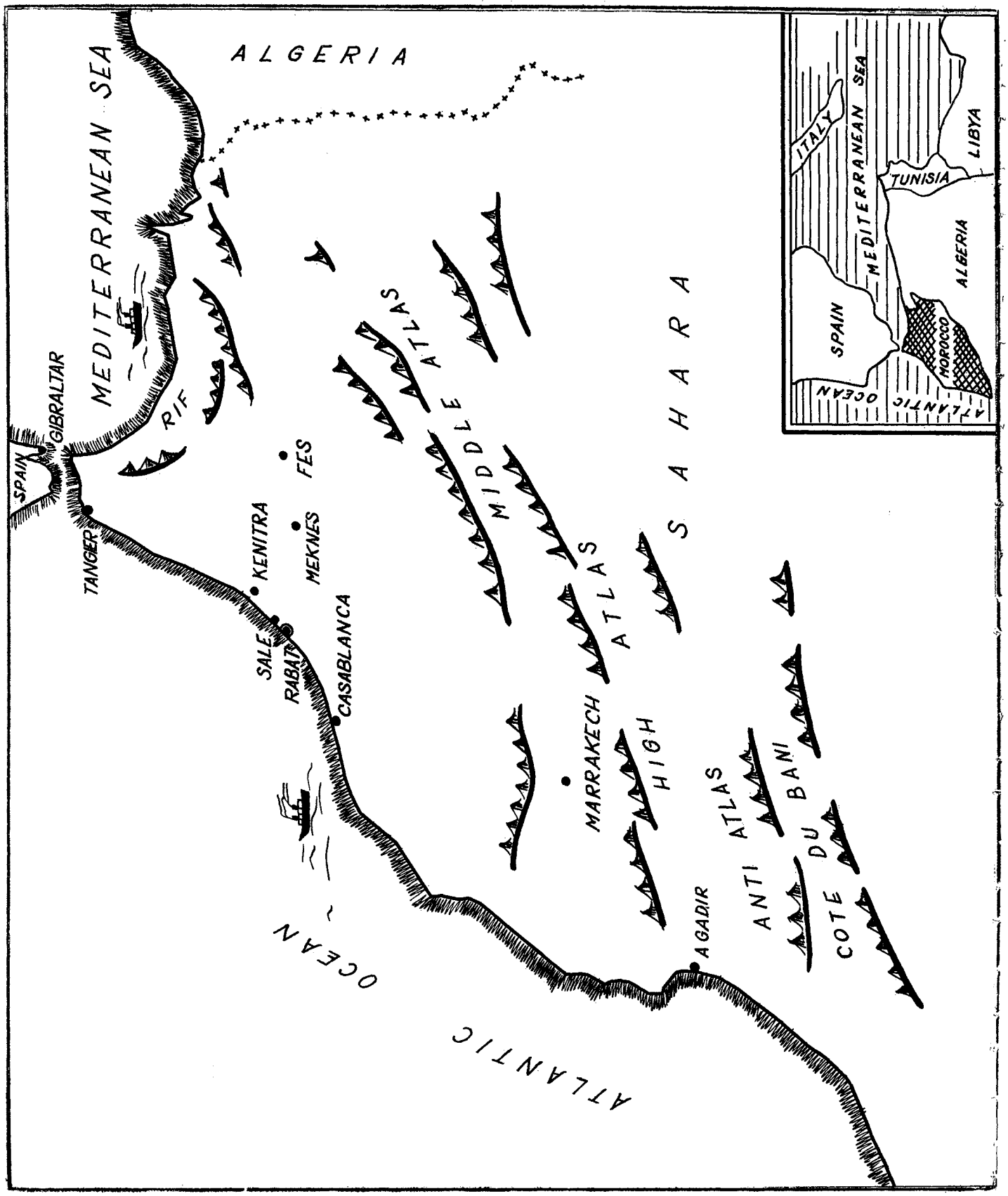
In short, Morocco is a land of variety and sharp contrast. Inadvertently, I had chosen the ideal way to see this fact clearly by coming to Morocco from Tunisia. Tunisia is small and uniform. The capital, Tunis, dominates the country as much as Paris rules France. With one genuinely popular leader, one political party, one trade union movement, the lack of marked class differences or regional variation (excepting parts of Southern Tunisia) Tunisia is as consistent as its orderly rows of olive trees. Not so Morocco.

Once having grasped this fundamental point of variety and contrast, one can then see that Morocco has certain points in common with Iraq, which appropriately provides the eastern border for the Arab World just as Morocco provides the western. Both are countries with an extremely low per capita income, but with the apparent prospects of considerable economic growth. Both have great cultural variations (Iraq with its Sunni-Shi'ite split and its Kurdish population, Morocco with its 35-45% Berbers). In each the great mass of the society remains veiled, traditional and concommitantly somewhat xenophobic. In each society violence and petty warfare are more in the accepted nature of things. In each there is a great gap between the way of life of the urban and the non-urban, the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate.

Still, the comparison must not be overemphasized. It should only be used as an aid to understanding Morocco which remains sui generis. For Iraq has always been at the center of civilizations, but Morocco has lived in splendid isolation on the wings. Geography explains a lot about Morocco. High mountains on the north and east, the Sahara to the southeast and south, and no really good natural harbor on the Atlantic coast to the west insured a physical isolation which went far in shaping the Moroccan personality. Only in understanding the geography can one explain how a green, relatively rich Morocco, only 32 miles from Europe at the Strait of Gibraltar, remained secure against European expansion (except for a few ports held with difficulty) until 1912. Even this date is misleading for French "pacification" of Morocco was completed only in 1934. One generation and two years later Morocco became independent.

Again, the motif of contrast. Morocco, the closest non-European country to Western Europe, has received less Western influence than India or Japan. Yet, on the other hand, French penetration when it finally broke through came like the whirlwind, leaving even today — five years after independence — some 500,000 European residents (about one-half of whom are French and 120,000 Spanish) and several pockets of modern industrial society such as Casablanca which will most likely serve as the seedbeds for tomorrow's Moroccan leadership.

The same rapid collision of old and new is seen in education. French educational policy in Morocco did not aim at the masses, and as a result a handful of university graduates must try to rule a largely unschooled nation. Still, having given the example to this small group, French colonial policy achieved more than was either expected or intended by the policy makers of the mid 1920's. Today, modern mass education, inspired more by French than by Arabic-Islamic methods, is the goal — a goal that may well be reached in the lifetime of those born before the French Protectorate. Primary school attendance which stood at a derisory 4% of the total number of school-age children in 1945 has already soared to about 35%. Further, after early post-independence dreams of complete arabization of education, the Moroccan authorities have found it a practical necessity to opt for educational bilingualism — 15 hours per week education in French, the same number in Arabic. (Comparable to the Tunisian pattern. See LCB-1, "Tunisia: Education, 'Cultural Unity' and the Future." Nor should the large number of French teachers in each country be overlooked — 3,000 in Tunisia, 6,000 in Morocco.)



Geography explains a lot about Morocco.

Morocco, then, is rife with contradictions, conflicts and varying levels of acceptance of the 20th Century which could cause at almost any time a social breakdown.

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For the last two decades the linchpin holding together this Morocco was Muhammad V. His was never the method of an Ataturk, a Bourguiba or an Abd al Nasir. He ruled more by just being there, usually uncommitted or in any case never completely committed, but ready at the last minute to make minor changes in structure or personnel that might seem required to keep the machinery of government on the rails. In the latter years his dilatoriness chafed the left-wing who wanted to get on with a social revolution. Perhaps they were right to see Morocco's chief problem as a race against the clock, but it seems more likely they were forgetting the long road from Casablanca to the High Atlas.

King Muhammad V was a curious blend of 18th Century enlightened despot (his interest in machines and modern science, his stand on female emancipation, and his support for mass education), modern constitutional monarch (choosing as ministers those who seemed most able to command public support at any time, accepting at least in principle the idea of representative government), and Arab tribal shaykh (accessible to all classes, working — or often just waiting — to get a consensus before acting, taking a practical view toward power in bowing before superior force when necessary — thus the many examples of his knuckling under to the French before independence — and then returning to the fight when circumstances permitted).

Sidi Muhammad bin Yusif was hardly all that when he assumed the throne at the age of 17 in 1927. His choice as sultan (he took the title of king after independence) was made possible by French belief that he might be more compliant, and there was little to indicate in the early years that they had been mistaken. The celebrated Berber dahir (decree) of 1930, a scarcely-veiled French attempt to foster a kind of Berber separatism which more than any single event sparked the nationalist movement, was signed by Sidi Muhammad without apparent resistance.

Nor was there any significant change in his attitude toward French rule during the 1930's, although many have emphasized that the manifestation in his name by young nationalists as early as 1934 impressed (and pleased) the king, thus possibly sowing the seeds for a later alliance.

The overt change came only with the Second World War. Though loyal to France both before and after her defeat by the Germans, he nevertheless welcomed the American landing in North Africa, and was quite impressed by his 1943 interview with President Roosevelt following the wartime Casablanca Conference. (This was the king's first interview with a foreign head of state without the restraining presence of the French Resident.) The year 1943 also marked the birth of the Istiqlal (Independence) party, founded by the leaders of the first nationalist party which had been dissolved six years earlier by the French Resident. This time, however, there was a

different alignment of forces, for relations between the Palace and the Istiqlal, if discreet, were close and well-known.

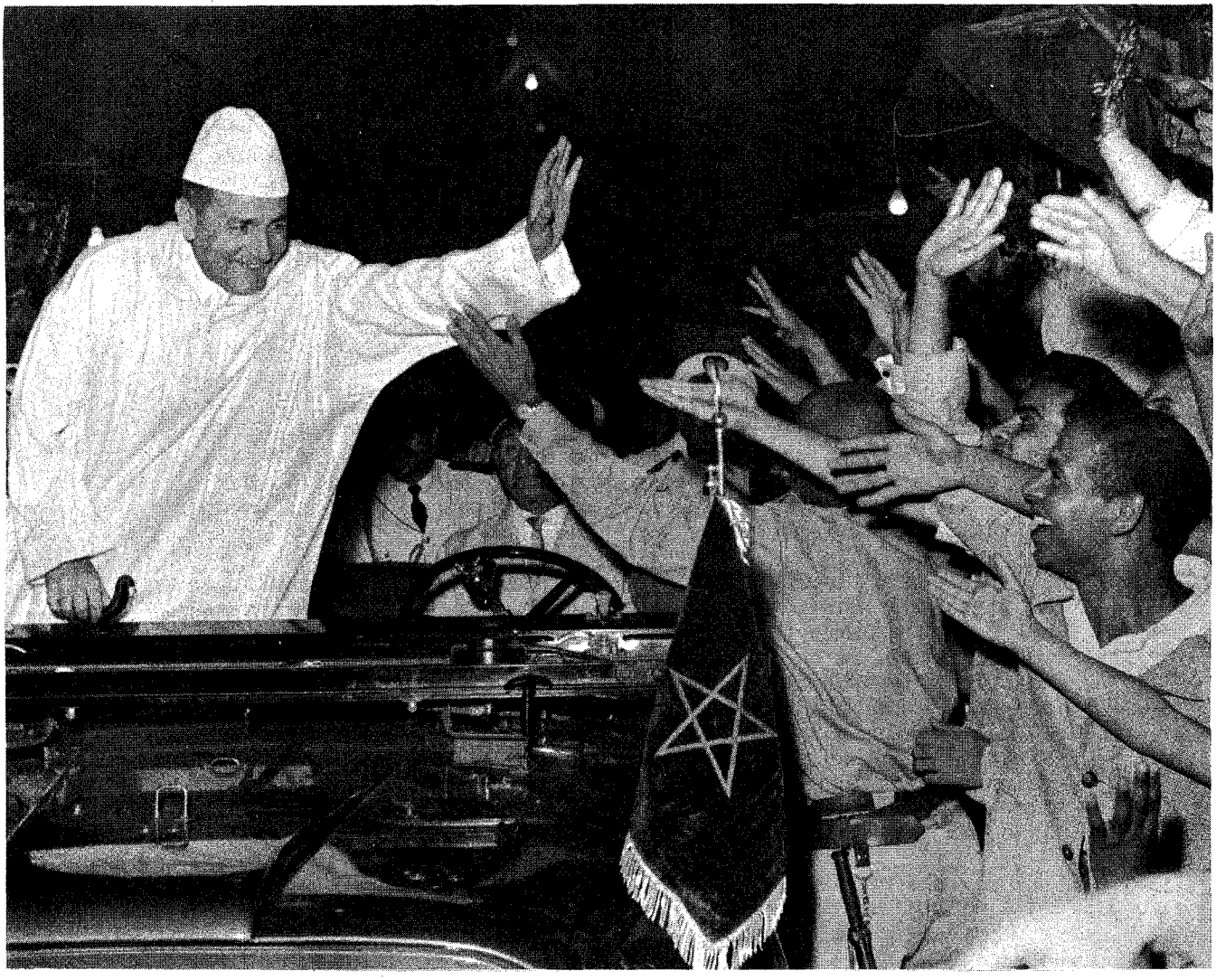
From this date began the cautious and tentative thrusting and retreating which resulted in the King's temporary exile in 1953, then his return just over two years later, and the final achievement of independence in March 1956. There is no need to review the details of this 13 year struggle. More important in trying to understand the late king are two considerations.

King Muhammad V -- Enlightened Despot, Constitutional Monarch and Arab Shaykh

First, for those who insist that true leaders must "take their stand" there is much which seems unheroic, even rather falstaffian, about the king's record. Time and again Muhammad V would retreat from an overly vulnerable position. In 1951 he even signed a statement under French pressure repudiating the nationalists, and in August 1953 he agreed to go into exile without a fight rather than "be the cause of a civil war." The attempt to keep the door always open to negotiation with the French, to seek a modus vivendi, to settle for a solution by stages if necessary was always in evidence. Yet, when the dust cleared the most important consideration was the fact that this tactic had worked. Muhammad V was not only king of an independent Morocco, he was the "father of his country," and in a position to "represent" all its varying groups. No bridges had been burned in his struggle for independence. He remained free in the post-independence period to practice internally that same brand of advance and retreat,

watchful waiting and masterful noncommital — a brand, as suggested earlier of old-fashioned Arab siyasa (perhaps best translated as political know-how) which gave independent Morocco its strongest element of stability. There existed the belief that Sidna (literally: our master) would manage to get things straightened out, so there was no need to kick over the traces.

This popular belief regarding the king compares, rather ominously, with that of Russian peasants vis-a-vis the Tsar. In both cases if things went wrong it was because the Tsar (or Sidna) had not yet learned about them. As soon as he found out, things would be set right. Muhammad V's difficult decision to become his own prime minister in May of last year after a particularly confused period of political strife might well, had he lived long enough, have demolished this popular view of a king above politics and daily strife, but his untimely death cut short any such possibility.



King Muhammad V being received in Fes

A second consideration is the way in which the king's forced exile from 1953 to 1955 consolidated his popularity. If Muhammad V's political method was such as to avoid martyrdom, the wheel of fortune intervened to help. Suddenly, almost in spite of himself, the king became the sacrificial lamb for the whole Moroccan community. The The complete spectrum of confused emotion felt by colonized vis-a-vis the colonizer now found focus and personification in their exiled king. From that day in August 1953 when Muhammad V, surrounded by his wives and palace retinue, stepped meekly but with absolute dignity into the French plane bearing him to exile in Madagascar, he was Morocco.

Soon stories and legends spread among the people. Sidna's face had been seen in the moon. Sidna would return. When the king did, in fact, return in November 1955, the canonization was complete.

* * *

Now the crowd that had welcomed their returning king in a delirium of joy on November 16, 1955 reassembled on February 28, 1961 to bury him.

Journalists and photographers from the world's major newspapers and press services also appeared, for news was being made in many ways. What would be the political complexion of the new government? Would the late king's popularity be even in part transferable to Hasan II? Even more important for the world press, there was to be a "summit meeting" of Maghrib leaders as Bourguiba, arriving straight from talks with De Gaulle, and Algeria's Ferhat Abbas came to pay their respects to the late king and consult with the new one. Life must go on, and King Muhammad V of Morocco was now history.

It was not quite that simple, however, to the tens of thousands massed on Rabat's streets or jammed into the Mishwar (great open court) of the Royal Palace. I had come to Morocco at this time in the hope of getting some sort of idea about Muhammad V's impact on Morocco. I found my answer that day in the Palace Mishwar, and for the time concern with Morocco's future and the fate of the Maghrib must pale before that moving mass demonstration of affection and grief for their late king.

In the following days I carefully noted the various written accounts and photographs of the funeral, hoping that someone had managed to capture the spirit of this scene at the Mishwar. It is no reflection on the journalists and photographers present to state that I was invariably disappointed. Perhaps one needed to stand all day in the hot Rabat sun watching the slow rhythm of some 50,000 fasting mourners (for this was the month of Ramadan) in the Mishwar — all of whom had been there since daybreak. Then while maintaining as background that sea of faces and the constant low din and moan, the eye and ear needed to move quickly to catch some new detail:

> ...the women in the front rows with their faces unveiled in public for perhaps the first time in their lives, for what stronger show of grief than to announce that hishma (modesty) can have no meaning at such a time.
>
> ...the silent grief of that round, ruddy-faced Andalusian sitting in the inner court with other members of a visiting delegation of notables from some outlying city.

...the brief appearance of ghostly white figures in the top windows of the Palace overlooking the Mishwar. They must have been the king's wives and close female relatives.

...the personal guard or Bukhari lining the ways of the inner court. (Originally African slaves brought as a private guard by Sultan Mulay Ismail (1672-1727), their name stems from the fact that they swore personal loyalty on a copy of the hadith (Sayings of the Prophet) of Bukhari.)

...the universality of the grief -- now a peasant woman in traditional dress, now a member of the traditional Islamic bourgeoise from Fes or Sale, now a workman in French denim

Last Homage to Sidna

coveralls, now a Westernized evolue in coat and tie...

Then came the moment more packed with fundamental human drama than any I have ever witnessed. The coffin bearing the late king's body was brought out to lie in state in the middle of the Mishwar. This huge crowd in one magnified voice emitted a deep, visceral moan. In the instinctive move forward to approach the cortege police lines were broken and barely reformed in time to permit uninterrupted passage of the coffin to the raised platform.

Morocco's variety and contrast was for an instant overcome. The Arab peasants, the Berbers, the urban workers, the "old families," the evolues — all broke and cried unashamedly the loss of Sidna.

Sincerely,

Leon Carl Brown

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