



Blunt Wilfrid.- *Black Sunrise: The Life and Times of Mulai Ismail, Emperor of Morocco (1646-1727)* (London-New York: Routledge Revivals, 2022), 294p.

Africa remains a riveting site of different colonial and cultural encounters, making it both a rich and topical study terrain. However, unlike other area studies, Africa has received relatively modest research interest. This being the case, many researchers have started to invest serious efforts in dusting off a number of aspects of this history with regards to sundry countries and areas. Focusing on North Africa, particularly Morocco, Blunt Wilfrid's *Black Sunrise: The Life and Times of Mulai Ismail, Emperor of Morocco (1646-1727)* is first published in 1951. The current edition is published in 2022 as part of a series of Routledge Revivals. The book provides a stimulating contribution to the examination of one of Morocco's significant emperors, Mulai Ismail. The latter marked Moroccan history as his reign was longer than any other Moroccan potentate. Throughout more than twenty chapters, Wilfrid spotlights the life and times of Mulai Ismail by deploying narratives and testimonies of various ambassadors, captives, missionaries, and Moorish historians.

The opening chapters of Wilfrid's work outline the context of Mulai Ismail's succession to the throne. In doing so, allusions are made to al-Rashid, Mulai Ismail's brother and founder of the Alawi dynasty. Monarchical rituals and practices of al-Rashid are highlighted to underline how they were preserved by his successor during his rule. Apparently, Mulai Ismail's 'fateful hour came' after the death of his brother. However, his claim to the throne was not easy, for he was challenged by brothers and nephews and other rivals. Therefore, he had to engage in different fierce attacks, particularly in the North and the Gharb. In this respect, Wilfrid draws astute comparisons between al-Rashid and Mulai Ismail, as the first served as the model of the latter when it comes to their acts of brutality and cruelty. Here, the author gives details about Mulai Ismail's traits in character and appearance as a fierce Emperor. Aspects of his leadership and 'presence of mind in moments of crisis' are foregrounded, especially in dealing with rivals, recruiting slaves, and lodging infidels.

As stated earlier, Mulai Ismail's succession to power was not without impediments. Indeed, the empire that was united by al-Rashid started to fall apart after his death. Other brothers than Ismail also had ambitions for the throne. This state of being initiated what is termed 'the civil war of succession,' which took place between Mulai Ismail, his nephew, Ahmed, and his brother, Mulai Taleb. Armies were engaged, and Ismail had recourse to Christian slaves. After numerous battles,

the troops of Mulai Ismail's rivals surrendered, paving the path for the Emperor to reunite the empire again. Albeit with this new situation, there could be other moments of quarrels, hence a lack of peace for Ismail. In truth, turmoil came back again to add to his misfortunes. Because his troops did not get paid and did not receive any awards, doubt started to be the main feature of the relationships between everybody. What exacerbated the problem was that the inhabitants of Fez and Taza revolted against the Emperor, making so many soldiers desert his troops. Also, the return of Ghailan, a leader from northern Morocco, from his exile in Algeria made Mulai Ismail's position critical. After many tactical battles, however, both rivals, Ghailan and Ahmed, met their death.

Following the same train of thought, Blunt Wilfrid provides further aspects of the life of Mulai Ismail. In this, he looks at 'Ismail as the builder' of Meknes. The latter is selected for his capital. It is thanks to him that the city enjoyed the same fame as Fez and Marrakesh. All the more, he invested efforts in constructing a 'second Versailles' following the steps of King Louis, who was also passionate about building and conquest. Ismail thus started building palaces that resembled those of Versailles in terms of their glorious architecture and amazing structure. Yet, the city was subject to so much destruction, making the Emperor's investment in building the capital of no avail. Natural disasters contributed to the damage of the city as well. It is still important to note how Wilfrid emphasizes the despotic nature of the Sultan in running the empire. Foregrounding the issue of pirates and slaves, especially the blacks, the author indicates how they were fiercely dealt with and instrumentalized in a number of fields. Different chapters dwell on slaves-related topics. These include 'the pirates and the slaves,' 'the bid for freedom,' and 'by the waters of Babylon.' Reacting to operations of captivity and slavery, many European missionaries, particularly the French, visited Morocco to redeem these captives. However, because of Mulai Ismail's skepticism and betrayal, these missionaries' jobs were not easy. Wilfrid gives instances of French missionaries who were refused by *Kaids* to go to Meknes. They were even asked to pay taxes and ransoms. Interestingly, missionaries gave up on many occasions and left for France. It is worthy of notice how the Emperor was always proud to receive and deal with missionaries and ambassadors. Interesting details in this regard are extensively dwelt on in a chapter titled 'four ambassadors.'

Another event that characterized the reign of Mulai Ismail was the war with Spain. Enmity is at the heart of the relationship between the Spaniards and the Moors. In fact, the Moorish empire was subject to many attacks by the Spaniards, making it feeble. In waging many attacks against the 'infidels,' Mulai Ismail could regain many cities, including Mamora- Mehdiya- Larache, wherein harsh battles took place. However, there were other places that Mulai Ismail could not reclaim, including Ceuta, whose state was complexified by getting involved in trouble with the Turks and declaring war against Holland. Because of further conflicts at the Algerian frontier and in the Sus, Mulai Ismail abandoned the town after failed negotiations and treaties with the Spaniards. Failures of negotiations also included visits of other

ambassadors and missionaries. ‘The failure of Saint-Olon’ that Wilfrid refers to is a telltale example.

History has always shown how wars and famine worsen situations in many empires. In 1678, the plague hit Tetuan and later disseminated to other places. It is in this regard that Mulai Ismail left the infected town with his troops. After the fall of Marrakesh in 1677, Ismail’s elder brother, Al-Harrani, was sent to Tafilalt as a governor after he had been well-treated by the Emperor. Yet, the revolt of the Ait Atta Berbers made him initiate attacks on them and drove his brothers towards Tlemsen. Because Tafilalt was not infected by the plague, Mulai Ismail made his sojourn there, and he received a lot of Sharifs to do him tribute. But his relationships with the Berbers were unstable, and he was, in fact, attacked, and his situation was complicated by bad weather many times. After a number of battles, Ismail’s troops were moved to Tadla. Sometime later, Ismail went back to Meknes to take part in a rebuilding process. Other salient events that followed included campaigns on the Algerian frontier in 1680 and the capture of Tarudant. Later in his book, Wilfrid turns back to the year 1661 when Tangier was occupied by the English.

After dwelling on various aspects of Mulai Ismail’s life and times, including his personal traits, religious beliefs, and practices, his relationships with others, and his encounters in different places, Wilfrid closes his book with a chapter on ‘the of Mulai Ismail.’ ‘Gone are the days when he rode at the head of his victorious army’ is a statement outlined by the author to show the ‘end of the Emperor.’ The latter was ill, and his days were numbered. He recommended that his death should be declared after his son, al-Dahebi, had taken over Meknes. Certainly, clashes were about to break out between al-Dahebi and his brother Mulai Abd Allah as the latter realized that he was betrayed. Later, the death of Mulai Ismail was announced after attempts of creating such rumors that he began to recover. He was buried in his palace. In spite of being a cruel and brutal Emperor, Mulai Ismail, writes Blunt Wilfrid, ‘is more deeply inscribed in the memory of the Moors today.’

Dilating upon the life and times of one of Morocco’s greatest emperors is undoubtedly an onerous task. This is mainly because of the many events and encounters that typified his reign. Yet, drawing on different sources of testimonies has enabled Blunt Wilfrid to expatiate on the salient aspects of Mulai Ismail’s time in power from the succession of his brother Al-Rashid, the founder of the Alawi dynasty, till his death. In fact, combining oral and written forms of narratives serves efficaciously in providing first-hand evidence about Mulai Ismail’s government. The rich bibliography, indexes, and detailed cartographies reflect the author’s apparent efforts in researching the fascinating figure of Ismail as the second ruler of the Alawi dynasty. However, although *Black Sunrise: The Life and Times of Mulai Ismail, Emperor of Morocco (1646-1727)* remains an important contribution to the study of a critical chapter in Moroccan history, it has still to be read with a critical eye/mind. The reason is that on so many occasions, the author reproduces, obviously

or otherwise, Orientalist stereotypical labels and images about North African inhabitants in general and Moroccans in particular. Thus, the portrait of Mulai Ismail is loaded as it is drawn from Western eyes. All the more, Wilfrid's production still needs to be consulted for its soulful insights into history on and/or from the margins.

Ait Idir Lahcen
Hassan II University
Mohammedia