

Not Quite White? The Lebanese of West Africa

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Why do people migrate? How can they live in several worlds and many nations at once? Tracing the history of the Lebanese migration to West Africa, Andrew Arsan offers a brilliant reappraisal of diaspora, nation and empire in the first half of the twentieth century.

Reviewed: Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire. The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa*, London, Hurst & Co., 2014. xviii + 341pp. ISBN: 978-1-84904-297-0.

‘Towards the end of his life, the anthropologist [Fuad I. Khuri](#) recalled being stopped by an immigration official at Kumasi airport in Ghana. On being asked his nationality, he answered, without a thought, “Lebanese”. The officer then, Khuri recounted, “tilted his head forward, and repeated slowly: ‘Na-tio-na-li-ty?’. When again being told ‘Yes! Le-ba-nese,’ he took a deep breath and said, with a touch of anger, “Sir, I am not asking about your profession!”’ (p. 156). As Andrew Arsan notes, with characteristic appreciation for ambivalent identities, Khuri’s exchange with the Ghanaian official was not a case of cross-cultural confusion, so much as a telling example of how the Lebanese of West Africa have long been ‘awkwardly incorporated into the body social’ (p. 156), intimately associated with trade such that they sometimes became synonymous with it. In his remarkable new book, Arsan sets out to disaggregate this picture and anatomize the lives of Lebanese migrants to French West Africa.

Borrowing significantly from anthropological approaches to diaspora, and from cultural history, with its sensitivity to the constitutive play of discourse, Arsan’s anti-teleological argument emphasizes indeterminacy, contingency and circumstance. His Lebanese migrants are ‘not just ... beings in the world, but also... textual tropes’ (p. 2) and he does them justice in a trampolining prose of sweetness and swank, drawing on multiple archives and on the Arabic-language memoirs and newspapers of West Africa. Tripartite, *Interlopers of Empire* first explores the forces that prompted many Lebanese to quit Ottoman Lebanon. It then places the routes they followed into French imperial context, teasing apart the legal, racial and political matrices that the migrants suffered and arbitrated, much as Eric Tagliacozzo has done for the Chinese of South-East Asia. The closing, strongest section dwells on varied aspects of diaspora life, mapping its associations, measuring its financial flows, and chronicling its social punctilio - the domestic spic and span of cramped kitchen or oiled Chrysler (p. 188). An essayistic coda finally covers the period from World War Two to the present day.

Though primarily concerned with the period from the 1890s to World War Two, Arsan is ceaselessly alive to the post-colonial history of the West African Lebanese, of whom some 300,000 remain spread across the region today, from Senegal to Angola, where they

play a major role in the economy and as political engineers of regional leaders' relationships with Paris. In a present moment marked by fraught debates about migration, identity and mobility, debates in which the analytical unit of the nation-state - ('France', 'Lebanon', 'Senegal') - conceals both the colonial legacies and the geopolitical realities that structure migration, Arsan's book arrives at the right time. It breaks open the tired metropole-colony binary typical of much colonial history and provides a sophisticated model for understanding why people migrate, how they live in several worlds and many nations at once, and why such lives are quintessentially modern.

Complex diaspora and networked nation

Reflecting the itinerant polyvalence of his subjects, Arsan's argument engages several literatures, but he is primarily concerned with revising the big ideas that have long organized histories of diaspora. The melancholic homelessness that Edward Said influentially attributed to diaspora, and the narrow dualism of 'homeland' and 'destination' visible in many of its sociological histories are his particular targets. Another is the standard characterization of the Lebanese in West Africa as brokers par excellence: the 'awkward third term' (p. 3) of African colonial life and business. Finally, Arsan insists that the focus on territorial nations and anti-colonial nationalism that still dominates much historiography on the Middle East must widen to include not just the insights of studies on long-distance nationalism, but also the reality of a diaspora for which the 'home' nation was only one colour in a bright palette of belonging.

Following his actors from the Lebanese mountains to the port cities of the Mediterranean, to the hubs and provinces of French West Africa, and then on further trips to Paris or Michigan and back to Beirut, Arsan instead attends to a dazzling range of scales even as he warns against the methodological consecration of any one of them. His subject, indeed, lends itself well to the constructive mitigation of the major interpretive structures that have long governed our understanding of modern imperial, regional and national histories. The deterministic truisms of modernization and core-periphery theories, as applied to West Africa in the 1970s, or the romantic anti-colonial genealogies of territorial nationalism, as still applied by historians of the Middle East, yield easily to Arsan's careful unpicking of the fabric of migrant lives. Social and confessional variety, plural and polyglot political participation, and unevenly rhythmic mobility and capital accumulation dapple Arsan's fresco of Lebanese life, in and beyond West Africa.

Circumstance and sentiment: the economics of migration revised

Throughout, Arsan threshes the existing literature, enriching the starchy meal of large-scale Middle Eastern and West African economic history. For instance, in the first section, he follows in the footsteps of [Akram Khater](#) by underlining how Ottoman Lebanese initially migrated not, as was long thought, in a context of anti-Christian persecution in the 1860s. Instead they set forth in the conjuncture of the 1880s, as the silk boom created the nest-eggs necessary to approach the *simsar* (migration agent) - even as the new army of mulberry trees rampant in Lebanon priced land ownership increasingly out of reach. Arsan also shows how durably important remittances from the diaspora quickly became to Lebanese life, fashioning the marriage market and the material world alike, paying for watch chains and the chic Provençal tiles on the roof. In a move indicative of his wider methodological approach, he is quick to note that such transfers represented not just cold economic calculation, but allowed proud lower-middle class migrants both to accumulate social capital by shaping Lebanese institutions, and to distribute affective concern for their distant communities (p. 61).

On another question long predominant in the history of Lebanon and its diaspora – confessional and religious politics – Arsan acknowledges its real force in the spatial segregation of diaspora life and migratory voyages (p. 69). But against the determinism of ‘chain migration’ models, he insists on contingency, fashioning a brilliant miniature portrait of Marseille’s coaxers, travel agents and hostels (p. 51). Mediterranean imperial port cities, Arsan thereby shows, in a contribution to a literature lately revived by E. Natalie Rothman’s work on Venice, were both a spatial pivot of diaspora journeys and a brokerage of hope and information about whether to head for Detroit’s production lines or towards the kola and peanut trades of West Africa.

In the centre of the book, Arsan tackles the French imperial force field across which diaspora routes stretched. He concentrates first on anti-*Syrien* pamphleteering in Guinea before 1914, before turning to the diplomatic and affective dynamics of French empire as it facilitated Lebanese access to West Africa, despite the frequent objections of local French officials. In the dense thicket of theory on colonial empire, one often characterized by an underspecified, prophylactic emphasis on the co-constitution of metropole and colony, Arsan provocatively underlines the diffusion of racialized metropolitan political culture outward to the colonies. He also stresses the real power of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris to impose its will on both its juniors at the Ministry of Colonies and on distant officials in coastal West Africa. *Contra* Frederick Cooper’s influential vision of empire - as an unevenly effective political system with powerful sinews but weak and imprecise peripheral control - this is a more traditional model, possessed of long arms *and* fairly strong fingers. But at the same time Arsan makes fine use of the post-colonial analytical toolkit, elaborated by the likes of Ann Stoler and Emmanuelle Saada, to deliver a convincing exegesis of the deeply gendered, classed and raced ‘reckonings of difference’ (p. 97) through which French polemicists, on the model of metropolitan anti-Semitic screeds, sought to cast the *Syriens* of West Africa as interlopers: parasitic, shifting, and shiftless intermediaries.

In places here Arsan leaves an analytical gap between the description of an imperial machine in which the causal motor is a classic model – macro-level rubber slumps or the ideological sympathies of senior officials (p. 82) – and the sophisticated exegesis of an exclusionary discourse designed to stoke the rage of the *petit colon* ‘*mange-mils*’ (the poorer European settlers in French West Africa, known condescendingly as ‘millet eaters’)(p. 152). But his focus on the fundamentally economic character of anti-*Syrien* writings is laudable, moving beyond the usual deployment of these theoretical tools on sexual and family politics, while also helping revivify the study of colonial *mise en valeur* (economic development) pioneered by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch. Even in the belaboured files of the *Quai d’Orsay* (French Ministry for Foreign Affairs), Arsan finds fresh angles, re-enlisting Stoler to emphasize how the emotive and visceral discourse connecting France to the Eastern Mediterranean ceaselessly subtended diplomatic calculations, and opened up lobbying spaces for Christian Lebanese notables (p. 107, 119).

Beyond Brokerage: Everyday Life in Diaspora

Zooming in to French West Africa, Arsan closes with a hat-trick of chapters on commerce, the anxieties and emulation of social life in the interwar Lebanese *jaliyyat* (colonies), and finally on political culture amongst Christians and Shi‘a alike. On the first topic he again agrees initially with established scholarship that many Lebanese indeed engaged in trade and intermediation. But he also goes much further, through a splendid

account of the cascade of credit that flowed down from major French companies and Lebanese ‘big men’ in Paris or Dakar, through a pyramid of shopkeepers and traveling agents to African rural producers. Though these last are not within the book’s purview, Arsan establishes both that the Lebanese were far from the only ‘middlemen’ in West Africa’s complex economic landscape, and also that their practices were neither unique or unchanging, but instead constituted a shifting synthesis of borrowed modes of negotiation, deception and courtesy, alongside techniques of trust rooted in the Eastern Mediterranean. With anthropological care, he traces the flow of cash, seed and jewels across the planting and harvest seasons, attending closely to bodily gesture and performance (p. 137). This was a highly monetized economy, far from the traditional-or-modern binary of modernization theory, but one also reliant on an idea of ‘personhood as a weave of broader relations’ with the family or village (p. 140).

The profits of these activities partly returned to Lebanon to buy houses, sponsor political parties or subsidize schools. But this surplus also supported the construction of familial, domestic and cultural lives organized around social ascent in West Africa itself. This meant houses in the right neighbourhoods of Dakar and other cities, and an *embourgeoisement* (gentrification) tinged both with emulation of Parisian style and the constant search for *bada’i baladiyya* (products of the homeland), such as the comforting ballast of bulgur wheat (p. 179). Arsan, stepping away from the more diffusionist interpretation of the chapters on the imperial framework, characterizes the resulting form of diaspora modernity as dialogical and networked, a version of the ‘growing interconnectedness and growing uniformity’ influentially identified in the long nineteenth century by C.A. Bayly.¹ Their pomaded hair carefully parted and strolling in espadrilles, Arsan argues that, like the interwar [Modern Girls](#) historians have lately uncovered all over the planet, the Lebanese of West Africa ‘could have been ... anywhere in the world on a sunny day’ (p. 187), even as they appropriated racial hierarchies and internalized ‘highly derogatory notions of African inferiority’ (p. 160).

In the joists of Lebanese homes in the Gambetta quarter of Dakar, however, the rot of anxiety always lurked, worsening especially when Depression or wartime raised the political temperature. Targeted by the *Maurrassien*² magazine *France Afrique Noire* (French Black Africa) in the late 1930s, the diaspora prepared its exit strategies and diversified its portfolios, even as its representatives, such as Habib Aziz in the Dakar paper *Périscope Africain* (African Periscope), invoked economic theory in their defence: “‘the Syrians are not the cause of your travails...The ineluctable law of supply and demand is in play’” (p. 175). Arsan does not tell us where this liberal vulgate was learned, or provide a deeper picture of the appropriation of economic, social and psychological science into the ‘networks and nodes’ (p. 204) of Arabic intellectual culture, in the way Omnia El-Shakry or Sara Pursley have lately done for Egypt and Iraq. Instead he concentrates on the rituals, spaces and vocabularies through which such ideas were exercised in ‘the rich loam of everyday experience’ (p. 239).

¹ C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 2.

² Charles Maurras (1868-1952) was a French writer and the intellectual centre of the right wing Catholic and monarchist movement *Action Française*. His influential nationalist writings were characterized by a xenophobic and anti-Semitic nationalism.

Watan as Polis: Political Culture

In a summative analysis of the diaspora's political culture, therefore, Arsan draws on newspapers and on French police archives to spelunk the twisting galleries of Christian and Shi'a political culture in French West Africa, exploring a trans-regional Arabic public sphere that snaked under the Mediterranean and Atlantic, following the routes of diaspora, never coterminous with the nation but constantly more and less than it.

Whether in the necrological politics of funeral gatherings for the death of Iraq's King Faisal in 1933 - a royal passing marked in Dakar by the gathering of 700 mainly 'Amili mourners at the *Cinéma Sandaga* - or in the largesse showered on touring nationalist notables from Mandate Syria, the Lebanese of West Africa, according to Arsan, articulated an idea of *watan* not as homeland or *patrie* (fatherland), but as polis: 'the lush, overlapping networks of horizontal and vertical ties between the members of a political community bound together by common [if often frustrated] affection for the land of their birth.' (p. 215). Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism, nationalism and more parochial iterations of belonging could co-exist in these networks. And the vast sums in remittances that flowed back to the Eastern Mediterranean did so, in Arsan's interpretation, not just as the tribute of long-distance nationalists submitting to the primacy of their national homeland on the eve of independence, but also as the benevolent alms of a vanguard population, enriched and invested elsewhere, but willing to concede a pension to the old country as to a half-forgotten but noble relative.

Arsan's story is thus a bravura reappraisal of diaspora, nation and empire in the first half of the twentieth century. But it is also a book that merits a sequel. For though its coda reaches forward, from the 1950s to the present day, giving an efficient panorama of the continuing Lebanese presence in West Africa and beyond, this is a book concerned above all with the time of late colonial empire, and with the peculiarly wide margins and particularly ambiguous political forms the Lebanese diaspora occupied within it. As Arsan acknowledges (p. 254-255) the years after 1945, despite various experiments with Pan-Arab and federalist alternatives, did see the unequivocal and rapid triumph of the nation-state political model around the world. Perhaps Lebanon, with its highly specific post-independence political economy, remained a 'hollow centre' to its networked diaspora in this context (p. 202). Or perhaps, for instance in the case of refugees from the Lebanese civil war, let alone the Syrian refugees presently drowned in terrible numbers crossing the Mediterranean, a newer and less affordable diaspora marginality has supplanted the old.

Further reading

Dominique Chevallier, « Lyon et la Syrie en 1919 : les bases d'une intervention », *Revue historique*, 1960/1, p. 275-320.

Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton; NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

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James L. Gelvin and Nile Green eds., *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley; CA: University of California Press, 2013).

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Sara Pursley, *Familiar Futures: Time, Selfhood, and Sovereignty in Iraq, 1932-63* (Palo Alto; CA: Stanford University Press, Forthcoming).

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Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London: Granta, 1999).

Ann Laura Stoler "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, 1 (1989): 134-61; "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race and Morality in Colonial Asia" in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, ed. Micaela di Leonardo (Berkeley; CA: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 155-201; "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, 3 (1992): 514-51.

Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*(New Haven; CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

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