

Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa. By Andrew Arsan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 341 pp.

Interlopers of Empire is one of those dense and sophisticated scholarly works where theory and empirical data coalesce in a compelling fashion. Written in a rich style, often punctuated with metaphoric, poetic expressions and vocabulary, this book guides its reader down a long but agreeable path into the lives of Lebanese migrants in French West Africa, Afrique occidentale française (AOF), and delves into their ties to their homelands and global networks. *Interlopers of Empire* has something to offer for both for lay readers and experts. Breaking away from a historical focus on grand narratives and a structural approach, Andrew Arsan invites an exploration of the affective sides of Lebanese migrants' history, or histories, in their mobile worlds.

The book studies Lebanese traders, brokers, and suppliers in Senegal, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, from the 19th century through independence. Reconstructing the lives and experiences of eastern Mediterranean migrants, the book highlights their economic, political, and social activities, showing how French colonialists and local inhabitants perceived and responded to their settlement. One of the strengths of the book is how it efficaciously revises our understanding of diaspora studies by displaying its complexities and, more importantly, its plurality. Rather than one diaspora, the book argues for a multiplicity of diasporas, even within a single community.

Another highlight of the work lies in the way Arsan builds on previous studies on eastern Mediterranean migration and diasporic life, while departing from their shortcomings. Arsan, in this book, transcends binaries dividing colonizer and colonized, migrants and local residents.

Rather, he examines the webs of social relations, intimate ties, and sentimental or affective dimensions that interconnect Lebanese migrants, colonial authorities, and native Africans and their political leaders. This is not to say that the author fails to explore contested contact zones, especially French colonial reticence in respect to the economic emergence of “Syriens,” eastern Mediterranean traders and business people, due to their quick expansion and increased influence in key commercial sectors in Guinea.

Of key importance is Arsan’s emphasis on mobility and the circulation of humans, goods, and information. Debunking the isomorphism between place and identity in current diasporic literature, the author highlights, instead, the fluidity of identity markers, such as space and territory, and how they are subject to revision. He demonstrates the multi-scalar and multidirectional circulation of Lebanese migrants within the AOF zone and how, despite their restlessness, they maintained their ties to their homeland while creating new mobile spaces in the diaspora. From their roots to their routes, the author shows how Lebanese migrants succeeded in altering their world for their benefit by producing liminal spaces in foreign lands.

Richly documented with archival materials from Dakar, the former capital of AOF, and Paris, the book is divided into three parts. Part one is devoted to the historical factors and context that prompted eastern Mediterranean people to migrate to colonial French West Africa: the evasion of oppressive sociopolitical conditions and the quest for dramatic social mobility. This section also explains other factors that contributed to the expansion of Lebanese migrants in AOF; among which familial reformation is a crucial element. The author further tackles Lebanese migrants’ modes of settlement, which followed religious and regional affinities, and concludes by calling attention to the unpredictable character of migrants’ settlement patterns due to their restlessness and constant quest for potential economic niches.

Part two discusses the racial tensions that undercut the relations between *Syriens*, French colonial staff, and native Africans and the racial stereotyping and profiling that took place on all sides. Citing newspapers and archives, Arsan references the types of vituperative tirades and moral reckonings employed by colonial staff to curb the expansion of eastern Mediterranean merchants and traders who threatened their economic monopoly. Among other measures, colonialists utilized border controls and screening to “stem the tide” of the influx of *Syriens*. A point to be hailed in this section is Arsan’s unprecedented critique of the homogenization of the colonial administration. Here, the author attends to internal power dynamics within the colonial bureaucracy and how the emotive dealings affected legal implementations of immigration measures with regard to Lebanese migrants.

Part three, which is arguably the backbone of the book, substantially details the quotidian lives of migrants, marked essentially by a synthesis of differing lifestyles at the confluence of European, eastern Mediterranean, and West African cultures. Their coexistence was achieved through a mixture of racial contempt, economic interdependence, and social negotiation. These ambiguities and asymmetrical juxtapositions played out and determined the relations between Lebanese migrants, Europeans, and Africans, both in rural and urban settings across Senegalese, Guinean, and Ivorian territories. The author reviews hostile discourses against eastern Mediterranean expansion in Africa, arguing for their positive contribution to the development of these West African cities and the region’s economic growth.

In the coda, Arsan discusses and problematizes diasporic assumptions dominant in scholarship by attending to their multifaceted aspects. Here, the author draws attention to the fact that diasporic experiences are not simply confined to melancholic yearnings for an individual’s return home. Through the ability to travel and circulate funds and information, diasporic

communities maintain a strong foothold in their respective homelands, where they still exert influence. Arsan emphasizes how the Lebanese dissolved binaries and spatial distances through their actions, both in their current countries and their homeland.

Despite the archival limitations Arsan faced, this book stands as a major contribution to our understanding of the affective dimensions from the early 19th century to current global mobility and migration. It revises entrenched claims by other scholars by attending to diasporic communities' ability to wield their agency and impact both their current countries and their homelands, thereby shaping global and local histories.

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