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

This important study of a modern and commercially-oriented diaspora beginning in the late nineteenth century consists of eight chapters divided into three parts: “Roots and Routes,” “Words and Laws,” and “Days, Thoughts and Things.” “Roots and Routes” provides the eastern Mediterranean background to the migration of Lebanese, a topic which has not been detailed extensively in previous works on this diaspora community in Africa. It also provides the push and pull factors that have motivated their migrations. For example, except for scholars and other experts in the history of the region, the centrality of the silk industry to the homeland areas of the migrants, and the effects of its decline is an important factor that has contributed to this migration. Also of note are the events that led many to settle in *Afrique Occidentale Française* or AOF, as France’s West African possessions came to be known in the early twentieth century. The author looks at the French responses to the Lebanese in AOF, also presenting the importance of the Lebanese Mandate status following World War I and the quasi-protected status of the Maronite Christian population to the free migration of the Lebanese throughout the French colonies. Part Three, “Days, Thoughts and Things,” considers the daily lives of the migrants (Chapter 6) and attempts to look at their political lives--both in AOF and in the Lebanese homeland (Chapter 7).

Andrew Arsan, is a Lecturer in Middle Eastern History at the University of Cambridge, and this, it would seem, makes Africa, despite the title of the work, peripheral to his study. Arsan’s research concentrates on the first half of the twentieth century, though parts of the introduction and the last chapter, termed “Coda: The Making of Postcolonial Selves” give significant details about the current situation of the Lebanese in the former AOF. Arsan bases his work entirely on archival and published primary sources and a rich bibliography of secondary sources. A note at the beginning of the study, “Of Names and Words” (xvii-xviii), presents the thorny issues of transliteration and nomenclature for these residents in French West Africa” on the margins of whiteness” (xvii).

The author presents his goals in the study as “reconstructing the social, economic and political lives” of the migrants in order to better understand diasporic experience and to “examine the fraught responses this unsettling presence [of the Lebanese] prompted in French functionaries”(2). He succeeds quite well in the second of his goals, with an in-depth examination of the conclusions and misunderstandings of this group exemplified in various colonial archive reports and contemporary newspaper articles in France,

Lebanon, and West Africa. He also introduces much information on the roles of the non-functionary French merchants in their frequently successful attempts to direct colonial government responses to the Eastern Mediterranean migrant community. As to the first goal, he has certainly attempted to flesh out the lives of the migrants, dealing more extensively than previous studies on confessional separations, specific village origins, and class differentials among the migrants. The study concentrates throughout on the role of their places of origin in the lives of these migrants, giving telling details in the last chapter on how their lives in AOF brought change and wealth through large remittances back to the homeland. But the study is curiously lacking in African content, because it is curiously lacking in a consideration of the African peoples among whom these migrants settled.

The index is quite brief (331-341) for such a richly detailed work. The end notes (257-304) are detailed, for the most part, giving source citations only and very little parenthetical rumination. The book definitely needs a glossary of terms, particularly for the numerous non-English terms that are used frequently. The bibliography is full (305-330), giving credit to the depth of research in secondary and archival sources pursued by the author.

Throughout the work, however, I saw many instances where author-collected oral sources would have added much to the familial details of this diaspora. These are details that could have presented more on Afro-Lebanese relations in everyday life, for instance, as well as highlighted the roles of women. The author recognizes the lack of oral sources by stating this would have “required another work, quite different to that I have undertaken” (2). However, without considering the African people among whom these Eastern Mediterranean migrants settled, how well can one fully discuss and understand this diaspora in AOF? Though the author tries mightily to present the important roles of Lebano-Syrian women in this diaspora, they still seem to be tropes, rather than fully fleshed out actors. This, again, is due to the reliance on archival and published sources.

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