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ARTICLE

Frenchness, Exclusion, and Lebanese Agency in Postwar Colonial Senegal

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Abstract

During the colonial period, Lebanese migrants in Dakar played a significant role in the local economy, benefiting from a historical and evolving French imperial framework in the Levant. From the 1930s onwards, their presence was increasingly perceived as a threat by white settlers, culminating in the post-1945 period when Maurice Voisin articulated a rhetoric of “Frenchness” to exclude them from Senegalese colonial society. This rhetoric, invoking economic, cultural, and political arguments, sought to defend a supposed imperial community uniting French settlers and African subjects. Yet archival evidence reveals that Voisin’s vision was increasingly disconnected from French imperial strategic interests, which recognized the Lebanese as clients and valuable intermediaries. Drawing on colonial administrative archives and press sources, this article examines how Lebanese migrants navigated these challenges, asserting their agency and negotiating their position both within Dakar’s society and the broader imperial order. By highlighting the clash between settler rhetoric, imperial policy, and migrant strategies, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of Lebanese identification in French West Africa and the complex dynamics of colonial power, belonging, and transnational ties in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Keywords: Lebanon; Senegal; Empire; Colonialism; Agency

Introduction

“The Lebanese are the enemy.”¹ In a “General Appeal to the Africans” published on 23 November 1953 in his newspaper *Les Echos d’Afrique noire*, Dakar-based businessman and polemicist Maurice Voisin declared that the Lebanese migrants in French West Africa (*Afrique Occidentale Française, A.O.F.*) posed a threat to the French Empire. Just as Albert Sarraut denounced communist subversion in the colonies in his speech at Constantine on 22 April 1927, Voisin portrayed the Lebanese as enemies of the empire—accusing them not only of monopolizing its wealth but also of spreading nationalist ideologies that undermined French authority among Africans.² Beyond race cleavages, Maurice Voisin

¹ *Archives Nationales du Sénégal* (hereafter ANS), 17G530/144, Maurice Voisin, “Appel général aux Africains,” *Les Echos d’Afrique noire*, 23 November 1953.

² In Constantine, Algeria, Minister of the Interior Albert Sarraut lambasted the *Section française de l’internationale communiste*’s anti-colonial propaganda in North Africa with a famous formula inspired by Léon Gambetta: “*Le communisme voilà l’ennemi!*” On Albert Sarraut’s colonial policies and dogma, see Martin Thomas, “Albert Sarraut, French Colonial Development and the Communist Threat, 1919–1930,” *The Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 4 (December 2005): 917.

articulated a narrative of Frenchness to justify the expulsion of Lebanese migrants from the A.O.F and to position himself as the defender of a French imperial community uniting French settlers and African colonised people.³ In other words, the white settlers and the black subjects were bound by a common imperial pact that the greed of the Lebanese migrants would jeopardize. Maurice Voisin argued that Lebanese migrants in French West Africa failed to meet the standards of Frenchness—not only legally and politically, but also in terms of “civilization.” As a former small independent French trader, he drew on the rhetoric of the “civilizing mission” to assert the political and economic supremacy of the European settlers over Africa. At the same time, he challenged the French imperial state’s monopoly over defining who could be recognized as legitimate subjects of the empire. Indeed, Lebanon had been the target of French informal and then formal imperialism since at least the sixteenth century, underpinning the permanent French presence in Senegal after the Second World War. This article demonstrates how this narrative of Frenchness, based on economic, cultural and political aspects, became increasingly disconnected from French imperial interests after the Second World War and analyses how the agency of the Dakarais Lebanese responded to such vitriolic rhetoric. This also explains Voisin’s failed vision of a renewed imperial pact and favourable factors that led to the acceptance of the Dakarais Lebanese within Dakar’s African society on the eve of independence in 1960.

It is now well documented that the Lebanese community in Senegal consisted of thousands of people who had settled in French West Africa in two successive waves since the end of the nineteenth century. The first wave, until the 1920s, came mostly from Christian Maronite communities of Mount Lebanon, while the second originated from Shiite Muslim communities from southern Lebanon or Jabâl ‘Âmil.⁴ By 1945, Lebanese immigration to Senegal had turned predominantly Muslim. The Lebanese community in Dakar thus consisted of diverse groups whose self-identification varied according to geographical origin, religious affiliation—which could translate into political orientation—and social class. Recent studies have highlighted the ways in which migrants integrated into the Senegalese colonial society. In Dakar, in particular, Lebanese merchants became, as Rachel Petrocelli puts it, crucial actors in the Federation capital’s “transactional culture.”⁵ Indeed, during the interwar period, French trading companies focused primarily on the large-scale and profitable peanut trade while French colonial officials sought to build a capital that met European standards. Both failed to address the needs of the local African population. Thus, migrants from Lebanon quickly invested in the markets of the large urban centres like Dakar as well as in small towns in Senegal’s peanut basin, supplying the African population with commodities such as textiles or credit. Owing to their economic specialization and their trading relationship with houses importing goods into French West Africa, Dakarais Lebanese merchants can, from the interwar period onward, be regarded as a “middleman minority.”⁶ Senegal’s colonial government archives reveal that their presence came under attack after the outbreak of the Great Depression, which disrupted French colonial

³ According to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory on state power of identification. See Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, “Le Titre et le poste. Rapports entre le système de production et le système de reproduction,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no. 2 (March 1975): 95. And Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur l’Etat. Cours au Collège de France (1989-1992)* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2012).

⁴ For a comprehensive account on Lebanese migration in French West Africa until 1939, see Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire. The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French Africa* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2014).

⁵ Rachel Petrocelli, *Transactional Culture in Colonial Dakar, 1902-1944* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2024): 15; 194-215.

⁶ As Edna Bonachich put it, “A Theory of Middleman Minorities” in *American Sociological Review*, vol. 38, no. 5 (October 1973): 583. For a case study on current Lebanese traders in West Africa, see Marwa El Chab, “L’Economie de bazar en Afrique de l’Ouest. Les Entrepreneurs libanais à Abidjan, Dakar et Ouagadougou” (PhD diss., Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2019). Rachel Petrocelli highlights Dakarais Lebanese’s settlement agency that bypassed French colonial policies in Dakar. French colonial officials failed to properly understand it and

trade from 1931. This was largely the result of press campaigns led by representatives of French small businesses and by the *Chambre de Commerce de Dakar*, an elected professional organization of French independent businessmen. They advocated through petitions and official reports for strict immigration restrictions by the colonial administration. In addition to economic competition, the same actors invoked racist notions of civilization to dismiss the Lebanese economic presence in Dakar. Such arguments laid the foundation for a broader discourse that questioned the political and cultural legitimacy of the Lebanese in Senegal after 1945.

After 1945, Maurice Voisin added political arguments to this rhetoric, questioning the Dakarois Lebanese's allegiance to, and sense of belonging within, the French Empire. In doing so, he expanded his own definition of Frenchness. This underscored the ambiguous position of the Lebanese as nationals within French empire. From a legal and national perspective, the Lebanese had long benefited from a hybrid and evolving status as diplomatic "protégés" that was in line with French imperialist interests in the Middle East. This form of legal and diplomatic imperialism, which dated back to the Ottoman rule over Lebanon, contributed to the crystallisation of local political self-identification. As French diplomacy initially supported Christian communities, especially the Maronites, Maronite elites developed, for instance, a nationalist narrative known as "Lebanism."⁷ This narrative emphasized their cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis their Arab and predominantly Muslim surroundings to negotiate power in Lebanon under Ottoman rule since the early eighteenth century. After having benefited from French consular protection as Ottoman subjects, the mandate treaties between France and the Lebanese state, following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, provided them with a legal framework that ensured greater security for their status and career in French West Africa.⁸ The formal establishment of the Lebanese state on 1 September 1920, after France had received the mandate power over Syria and Lebanon in accordance with the San Remo Agreement of 25 April 1920, failed to unite the divided Lebanese self-identifications into a single national affiliation. In the face of successive waves of Arab nationalism, French diplomacy sought to integrate Lebanese communities, especially Shiite ones, into its patronage networks. Although the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which finalised the borders of the successor states of the Ottoman Empire, allowed the Lebanese to choose between Lebanese and Syrian citizenship, cultural and political ties to France remained a strong factor differentiating Lebanese communities.⁹ As nationals from a sovereign state, they could apply for French citizenship under the law of 10 August 1927, which was restored after the Vichy regime, although the French administration still retained considerable discretion in granting it. Maurice Voisin's campaigns to deny the Lebanese their position within the empire in Africa reflected a conflict between the French authorities, who pursued imperial interests and regarded the Lebanese as clients, and the migrants themselves. The latter were actively negotiating and asserting their special relationship with France. This conflicting dynamic reveals the evolution of power relations in the colonies among the French imperial state, the French settlers and the Lebanese migrants in Senegal.

labelled it as "intermediary" due to racial bias. They claimed that the living standards and culture of the Dakarois were intermediate between European and African standards.

⁷ Carol Hakim, *The Origins of the Lebanese National Idea 1840-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 59-83.

⁸ Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi, *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992). On the French mandates over Syria and Lebanon, see Andrew Arsan and Cyrus Schayegh, *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁹ Thibaut Jaulin, "La Restitution de la nationalité libanaise: Enjeux juridiques et politiques," in *Migration et politique au Moyen-Orient* ed. Françoise de Bel-Air (Beyrouth: Presses de l'IFPO, 2006): 163.

A substantial body of research has already demonstrated the favourable imperial configuration and the agency of Lebanese migrants regarding their integration into Senegalese society up to the close of the interwar period. Nevertheless, much remains to be known on this topic during the aftermath of the Second World War. While previous studies have focused on integration during the interwar period, this article examines post-1945 dynamics, revealing how Voisin's rhetoric and Lebanese agency interacted with broader imperial strategies. Indeed, from 1945, Maurice Voisin's anti-Lebanese press campaigns reflected his concerns regarding the evolution of the Empire and the further integration of the Lebanese community in Senegal. The situation of the Lebanese in Senegal crystallized a clash of representation and of interests regarding the Empire after 1945. In particular, the emergence of new revolutionary Arab nationalisms made French imperial authorities increasingly aware of the need to defend a substantial pro-French Lebanese opinion both in Lebanon and in Africa. New informal ways of imperialism had to be devised in response to Lebanese opinion on a global scale.¹⁰

The first part of this article shows how Maurice Voisin formulated an elaborate narrative on Frenchness to dismiss the presence of the Dakarois Lebanese in Senegalese colonial society. The subsequent section of this paper examines the progressive disconnection of this narrative from French imperial strategic interests regarding the Lebanese across French West Africa. To emphasize the latter's agenda in the face of Maurice Voisin's vitriolic press campaigns, the article eventually demonstrates how they asserted a legitimate position within the Empire and as actors within African local society. This contributes to the ongoing discussion of the historiography on Lebanese identification in Africa. Recent studies suggest that the opinion campaigns they endured in the A.O.F led Lebanese migrants to perceive themselves as a homogeneous national community.¹¹ This article argues that, rather than forming a homogenous identity, the Lebanese demonstrated diverse agendas regarding their presence within the Empire. Overall, these analyses reveal the complex and multifaceted ways in which Lebanese migrants navigated their position within the French Empire.

Elaborating an Anti-Lebanese Rhetoric for the Sake of a Weakened French Empire

As explained in the introduction, the anti-Lebanese rhetoric represented a strategy by French settlers to politically disqualify their competitors, a strategy that was inconsistent with French imperial interests concerning the Lebanese migrants and their diverse sense of belonging. These developments illustrate how Voisin's rhetoric increasingly diverged from the strategic interests of the French imperial authorities regarding the Lebanese community. As Rachel Petrocelli pointed out, the rise of the Dakarois Lebanese as pivotal actors within Dakar's transactional culture—effectively meeting the local population's basic needs—precipitated the initial anti-Lebanese campaigns spearheaded by French independent business representatives in the interwar period. When the Great Depression struck France and its Empire, several French merchant groups petitioned the colonial administration to expel their Lebanese competitors.¹² They accused them of failing to meet Senegal's material and cultural standards of civilization, making the competition especially unfair, as

¹⁰ As put by John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *The Economic History Review* 6, no. 1953: 1. For the nineteenth century French empire case, see David Todd, *A Velvet Empire. French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

¹¹ Especially from a cultural and social anthropology perspective. See Mara Leichtman, *Shi'i Cosmopolitanisms in Africa. Lebanese Migration and Religious Conversion in Senegal* (Bloomington, In: Indiana University Press, 2015): 58-61.

¹² Julien Charnay, "Les Syro-Libanais en Afrique Occidentale Française (A.O.F) des années 1880 à 1939," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 142, no. 1 (2017).

French settlers were required to maintain proper, settled and costlier infrastructure. More specifically, they emphasized that they violated French trade legislation in the colonies and that they tended to live according to African material standards in the cities and in rural areas.¹³ In doing so, the Lebanese were blamed for monopolizing African demand and harming French development efforts in Africa, taking advantage of a lax and powerless administration. Starting in February 1947, Maurice Voisin adopted these earlier arguments and established himself as an anti-Lebanese propagandist or, in his own words, the defender of the “French soul” in Senegal.¹⁴ It can be argued that his middle class background and his unprofitable career as a merchant in other parts of French West Africa led him to position himself as a representative of the independent French merchants.¹⁵ Maurice Voisin was born in 1917 in Mansigné, a small town in western France. In 1937, he settled in Guinea as a trader and planter, founding both a trade union, the “Fédération bananière,” and his first newspaper, *Les Echos guinéens*. He left the colony for Senegal under challenging circumstances, likely due to business failures, before the outbreak of the war.¹⁶ At the end of 1946, he shifted careers to become a journalist and founded the newspaper *Les Echos africains satiriques, humoristiques, documentaires et libres* newspaper modelled on Paris’s *Le Canard Enchaîné*.¹⁷ According to the Senegalese colonial security service, this title had very limited success before publishing its first openly anti-Lebanese articles.¹⁸ This enabled him to increase the circulation of his journal to almost 7,000 copies and to found a political association, *Les Amis du P’tit Jules*, named after the pseudonym with which he signed some of the newspaper’s short articles. Following his initial court convictions and his divorce from his partner Anne Voisin, who had previously headed the newspaper, he continued his activities with a new publication, *Les Echos d’Afrique noire*, and founded a political party, *Défense de l’Afrique française (D.A.F.)*, in 1950. During his first anti-Lebanese press campaign (1947–1949), Maurice Voisin articulated the sense of marginalization felt by French independent small traders, who had, since the 1930s Depression, consistently denounced competition from Lebanese traders both in the press and to colonial authorities.¹⁹ This feeling of devaluation reflected the constraints of the “white prestige” that the group was expected to uphold within the social and political order of the colonies. Using anti-capitalist rhetoric, Maurice Voisin also included the expansion of large trading houses and certain foreign “trusts,” which monopolized colonial trade, among the factors contributing to Lebanese immigration. His argument thus illustrated the “tensions of empire” in that French imperial dogma had made the white metropolitan colonists the true civilising agents and thus the guarantors of French rule over Africa.²⁰ Maurice Voisin’s “standpoint on the Lebanese problem,” as he formulated it in a letter of 8 August 1947 to the governor of Senegal, centred on

¹³ Julien Charnay, *L’Empire français face à ses migrants. Libanais en A.O.F jusqu’aux indépendances* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2024): 51–54.

¹⁴ *Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer* (hereafter ANOM), 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, “Deux mois de réflexion”, *Les Echos d’Afrique noire* 234, 5 October 1955.

¹⁵ Alexander Keese, “Colons français, politiciens africains et marchands libanais au Sénégal colonial (1945–1958),” *Africa: Rivista trimestriale di studi e documentazione dell’Istituto per l’Africa e l’Oriente* 60, no. 2 (2005): 201.

¹⁶ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Letter from Ivory Coast’s colonial intelligence services to Ministry of France d’Outre-Mer, 1951.

¹⁷ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Letter from Maurice Voisin to Governor of Senegal, 8 August 1947.

¹⁸ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Letter from General Governor of A.O.F to *ministère de la France d’Outre-Mer*, 13 August 1947.

¹⁹ Julien Charnay, “Les Syro-Libanais en Afrique Occidentale Française (A.O.F) des années 1880 à 1939,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 142, no. 1 (2017): 213.

²⁰ On this colonial dogma, see Frederick Cooper and Ann-Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

adjusting immigration according to social, economic, and demographic criteria.²¹ He distinguished between “bad Lebanese,” i.e. traders convicted of trade or customary law offences,²² “supernumerary Lebanese,” whose presence reduced the professional chances for potential applicants from mainland France who wanted to settle in the colonies, and “good Lebanese,” towards whom the administration was to show “correctness, courtesy and consideration.” More broadly, he advocated limiting the Lebanese population to 10% of the French population. In doing so, he called for the collaboration of Lebanese professional associations that gathered established merchants seeking to protect themselves from competition with newcomers. Some of them such as “Comité Syro-Libanais du Sine-Saloum” had made similar demands in the late 1930s,²³ thus revealing the long-standing socio-economic divisions in this community.²⁴

“I appeal to the Lebanese Committee to require its members to behave like guests and limit immigration to this country. Despite everything, we hope that the administration will be willing to help us. We no longer want 100 Lebanese for every 15 French, but 10 Lebanese for every 100 French.”²⁵

A close examination of Maurice Voisin’s argument reveals a persistent racist framework that drew parallels between the Dakarois Lebanese and Arab nationalist movements. After 1945, the crises in the French Empire provided new arguments for denying the Lebanese community in Senegal a legitimate position in the colony: in addition to their failure to meet social and economic standards associated with Frenchness, they were considered subversive due to their presumed political affiliation. Beyond these socio-economic and demographic considerations, which Voisin articulated through a racist discourse, he excluded the Lebanese from the imperial community by associating them with Arab nationalist forces. From the early 1950s, Arabist movements led the independence struggles, especially in North Africa. After an attack by the Moroccan nationalist party *Istiqlal* in Casablanca on 29 December 1953, Voisin’s articles started to equate the Lebanese with supporters of pan-Arab nationalism, as embodied by the Arab League or Nasserism.²⁶ The crisis of French imperialism in its Arab-Muslim territories and, more generally, in the Arab world, provided Maurice Voisin with many opportunities to revive his anti-Lebanese rhetoric. In his words, the Lebanese became explicit enemies of France and its imperial order in Africa. In this way, Voisin adopted a framework of argumentation previously formulated in 1945 by the former mayor of Dakar, Alfred Goux. On the occasion of the withdrawal of French troops from Syria, Goux had highlighted the dangers associated with the so-called “Syrian question” in his newspaper, *Le Sénégal*.²⁷ Through the column title, Alfred Goux intended to deny a separation between the two newly independent states of Lebanon and Syria. Thus, he equated all Lebanese migrants with the Syrian nationalist movements that fought against French troops in May-June 1945, a stance that Lebanese intellectuals, including

²¹ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, “Le Problème Libano-Syrien,” *Les Echos africains*, 26 April 1947.

²² Like convictions for black-market activity, unlawful price rises not regulated by the colonial administration, currency trafficking with neighbouring foreign colonies such as Gambia or Guinea Bissau, gold trafficking, trafficking in quota goods, etc.

²³ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/1432, “Rapport du Comité Syro-Libanais du Sine-Saloum” in Letter from the Gouverneur général de l’A.O.F. to the Ministre des Colonies, 26 January 1936.

²⁴ Marwa El Chab, “L’Economie de bazar.”

²⁵ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, “Le Problème Libano-Syrien,” *Les Echos africains*, 26 April 1947.

²⁶ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, “Réponse aux agents de la Ligue Arabe à tous les Libanais et Syriens amis des assassins de Casablanca et ennemis de la France,” *Les Echos d’Afrique noire*, 29 December 1953.

²⁷ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Alfred Goux, “Réponse à mise au point,” *Le Sénégal*, 3 May 1946.

the Beirut journalist Kamel Mrowa, had denounced.²⁸ Born in 1915, he had indeed become a distinguished liberal journalist who increasingly opposed the rise of authoritarian and pan-Arabic regimes. In 1946, he founded and assumed the leadership of *Al-Hayat* newspaper, a position from which he championed Lebanese political independence—particularly regarding Syria—and, from 1954, opposed Gamal Abdel Nasser’s pan-Arabism.²⁹ In 1953, disregarding the varying degrees of commitment to Arabism among Lebanese political forces, Maurice Voisin directed his opinion campaign against the Lebanese consul in Dakar, Mohamed Sabra. This occurred despite Sabra’s Francophile profile, which was praised by the French colonial and diplomatic administrations.³⁰ His strategy was also guided by personal reasons, since the consul had filed a lawsuit for libel and incitement to hatred against him because of his articles, and the trial was to take place on 19 May 1954. Voisin associated the Lebanese consul with Lebanese government diplomacy and its voting at the United Nations General Assembly, where Ahmed Balafrej, a leading member of the Moroccan nationalist party *Istiqlâl*, regularly defended the party’s cause:

“At the United Nations, the Lebanese government defended *Istiqlâl* against France. [...] However, the Lebanese consul in Dakar is the official representative of the government [...]. The Lebanese consul was only recently appointed. He therefore represents the policy of his government. By calling for sanctions against one of the only free newspapers in A.O.F, the consul is showing his true colours.”³¹

The changes in the Moroccan situation in the summer of 1955, which escalated into extreme violence with the bombings in Oued-Zem on 20 August and the subsequent anti-terrorist measures, provided Voisin with new opportunities to intensify his anti-Lebanese campaign. He now presented himself as the sole defender of the imperial cause to an African audience largely indifferent to the fate of the European population and the French army in Morocco.³² Maurice Voisin then called for a “Day of Repentance” in his newspaper, intended as a demonstration of loyalty to the French Empire by the Lebanese community.³³ The initiative sought to urge Lebanese shopkeepers to participate in a one-day strike to demonstrate their pro-French sentiments and support for the French in Morocco and their soldiers. Maurice Voisin dedicated nearly the entire 5 October 1955 issue of his newspaper to this event. This action was intended as a reaction to a general strike and protest marches in Beirut in August 1955, organized by representatives of various Arabist political organizations as part of a “Day of Solidarity with the Maghreb.”³⁴ Maurice Voisin had previously reported on a fundraising campaign in support of Moroccan nationalists, which raised 100,000 Lebanese pounds (12,000,000 francs). Maurice Voisin ignored the political and sectarian contrasts in Lebanon and portrayed Lebanese opinion that unanimously supportive of the pan-Arab thesis. A D.A.F. leaflet promoting this “Day of Repentance,” explicitly entitled “Après les événements d’Afrique du Nord, les Libano-Syriens à la porte,” attributed collective culpability to the entire Lebanese population. The leaflet cited the presence of Lebanese

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

³⁰ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Letter from French Embassy in Lebanon to *Président du Conseil* and Minister of Foreign Affairs Georges Bidault, 12 December 1946.

³¹ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, “Réponse aux agents de la Ligue Arabe et à tous les Libanais et Syriens amis des assassins de Casablanca et ennemis de la France,” *Les Echos d’Afrique noire*, 29 December 1953.

³² ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, “Deux mois de réflexion,” *Les Echos d’Afrique noire*, 5 October 1955.

³³ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, “Grève générale pro-française de tous les libano-syriens d’A.O.F le samedi 15 octobre prochain,” *Les Echos d’Afrique noire*, 5 October 1955.

³⁴ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, “Ce qu’écrivent quand même les autres sur le Liban,” *Les Echos d’Afrique noire*, 5 October 1955.

delegate Sami Sohl at the Bandung Conference, whose participants were accused of promoting uprisings in the three “North African states.”³⁵ The “Day of Repentance” was a call to the Lebanese in *A.O.F* to publicly distance themselves from the actions of left-wing Arabist political forces to prove their Francophilia. Voisin asked Lebanese shopkeepers to raise an amount equal to that collected in Beirut for the victims of the attacks in Morocco and for aid organizations, namely three million francs, for “the social works of the French army,” “unfortunate Senegalese children,” and “schools for Senegalese children.” These requests explicitly referred to the children of Senegalese infantrymen serving in the French army, to win local opinion for his latest initiative. Finally, the Lebanese shopkeepers were ordered to close their shops on 15 October. Maurice Voisin also appealed his readers to form teams of volunteers on that day to check whether the Lebanese shopkeepers in Dakar were following these instructions. To avoid possible prosecution by the colonial administration for disturbing public order, Voisin laid out the modalities for these surveillance teams. They were instructed to meet either in the courtyard of the building housing the newspaper’s offices or in a private location. According to Voisin, the surveillance teams were to “note the names of Syrian and Lebanese shops which, if left open, would show their approval of the foreign policy of the Arab states.”³⁶ The lists would then be sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the General Government in Dakar.

Maurice Voisin’s Disconnection from French Imperial Strategic Interests

While the previous section examined Maurice Voisin’s anti-Lebanese rhetoric and its roots in settler interests, the following analysis demonstrates how this narrative increasingly diverged from French imperial strategic objectives, revealing both the nuanced understanding of colonial administrators and the transnational agency of the Lebanese migrants. This section demonstrates that Maurice Voisin’s narrative on Frenchness became increasingly disconnected from the position of French colonial officials regarding the Lebanese migrants in Senegal. Indeed, an in-depth analysis of colonial archives reveals that they did not share his homogenizing and racialized bias on the Lebanese. Furthermore, their awareness of broader imperial interests led them to view the Senegal Lebanese as potential agents of pro-French influence.

It is now well established that the Senegal Lebanese political identities were transnational, ranging from Arabism or Syrianism to Lebanism. While Maurice Voisin conflated all of these identities to anti-French sentiment, the French colonial administration continued to interpret them through an outdated framework from the early 1920s, viewing Islam with political suspicion. French colonial officials employed sectarian representations to categorize Muslim Lebanese migrants, a practise that emerged in the 1920s, when migration from Lebanon had become predominantly Muslim. Fearing the spread of anti-imperialist ideologies among African colonial subjects through Arab Islam—believed to be transmitted by Shiite Lebanese migrants—colonial administrators pursued close surveillance of their cultural and political activities. This policy of containment was particularly evident during the interwar period.³⁷ They had hoped to preserve the special characteristics of “Black Islam,” which was considered politically unobjectionable, and to secure the loyalty of the African subjects to the empire.³⁸ This perception of Islam explains why administrators differentiated among Lebanese migrants along sectarian lines, privileging Christians

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Julien Charnay, “Peur coloniale et politisation des immigrants chiites sud-libanais du Sénégal dans l’entre-deux-guerres,” *Le Mouvement social*, no. 262 (2018): 69.

³⁸ Christopher Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa 1860-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

over Muslims. However, in contrast to Maurice Voisin's homogenizing bias, colonial officials adopted a pragmatic approach regarding the Lebanese community in Senegal. This divergence underlines the complexity of French colonial governance, which, rather than adopting the settler's racist rejection of the Lebanese as a whole, sought to instrumentalize internal divisions to its advantage. As such, the administration's approach reveals the pragmatism of imperial strategies that were not primarily guided by racial prejudice, but by geopolitical calculations and the pursuit of imperial cohesion. After the Second World War, political and ideological evolutions in the Middle East enhanced French colonial officials' concerns as they were convinced that the spread of Islam would give rise to anti-imperialist protest in Africa. Indeed, the Middle East witnessed a surge in Arab revolutionary nationalism as it became embroiled in the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War.³⁹ The protest was epitomized by a new generation of nationalist leaders who combined their struggle for complete independence with revolutionary projects for economic and social transformation inspired by socialism.⁴⁰ In 1945 and 1946, the chaotic departure of the last French mandatory troops from Syria and Lebanon due to nationalist protest had epitomized the political and military force of anti-French Syrian and Lebanese parties. On the regional scale, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who rose to power in Egypt in 1954, led this generation of "broad expectations," succeeding the Arab reformist elites of the interwar period.⁴¹ This process also reinforced the polarisation of local political identities, a tendency exhibited by the Lebanese in Senegal. More precisely, this reinforced the polarisation of a Lebanese sectarian political field structured between predominantly Christian and pro-Western "Lebanist" forces on the one side and predominantly Muslim "Arabist" forces on the other.⁴²

The rise of political Arabism in Lebanon made both French diplomatic and colonial officials even more aware of the strategic importance of the Senegalese Lebanese as potential agents of French influence. This perspective directly contradicted Voisin's for the massive expulsion of the Lebanese from the colony. Maurice Voisin alienated the French colonial administration who sought to curb his anti-Lebanese campaign. As a result, he faced several lawsuits for disturbance of public order, and his political activities were closely monitored by the colonial intelligence services.⁴³ In this way, the colonial administration complied with the requests of the Ministry of the Colonies (known as *Ministère de la France d'Outre-Mer*). The Ministry was concerned about the diplomatic consequences of the campaigns, which were reported by both Lebanese and French diplomacy. Indeed, the situation of Lebanese migrants in French West Africa proved to be an important lever for French diplomacy to cultivate a strong pro-French opinion in Lebanon. Since the late 1940s, French diplomacy and the colonial administration had sought to subsidize Lebanese publicists. Their aim was to ensure a positive portrait of the lives of migrants under French rule in French West Africa, thereby counterbalancing the influence of Arabist political forces in Lebanon. The selection of these publicists was made on the basis of their "Francophile" profile, as confirmed by the French consulate in Beirut. In addition, the consulate's agents conducted thorough investigations into their academic backgrounds and published works to ascertain their suitability for the role. In 1948, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed the Governor-General in

³⁹ Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, Gamal 'Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals 1958-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 – 1965).

⁴⁰ Christoph Schumann, "The Generation of Broad Expectations. Nationalism, Education and Autobiography in Syria and Lebanon, 1930-1958," *Die Welt des Islams* 41, no. 2 (2001): 174.

⁴¹ Reem Abou El Fadl, "Nasserism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern* ed. Amal N. Ghazal and Jens Hanssen (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), 225-247.

⁴² Kais Firro, *Inventing Lebanon. Nationalism and the State Under the Mandate*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

⁴³ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Letter from Minister of France d'Outre-Mer to the General Government of A.O.F, 23 Octobre 1947.

Dakar to issue a visa for Lebanese journalist Camille Aboussouan.⁴⁴ This visa was intended to enable Aboussouan to tour the Lebanese community of French West Africa. Upon his return to Lebanon, he was to conduct a pro-French press campaign in his newspaper “*Les Cahiers de l’Est*.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs expected from these articles to cultivate a pro-French sentiment in the Lebanese public opinion which would eventually influence the Lebanese government to sign a monetary treaty with France. Another goal of this pro-French propaganda regarding the Lebanese migrants of French West Africa was to maintain a strong economic influence in Lebanon through bilateral treaties and to facilitate the transfer of capital from migrants to Lebanon. In particular, French officials were concerned that Maurice Voisin’s anti-Lebanese campaigns threatened the Franco-Lebanese Monetary Treaty, which was intended to keep the Lebanese currency pegged to the franc in 1948.⁴⁵ French officials also saw migrant remittances as an important source of funding for development projects, such as the planning of the River Litani’s banks in 1955, which French diplomacy wanted to secure for domestic companies.⁴⁶ To summarize, Maurice Voisin’s anti-Lebanese campaigns were at odds with a number of French imperial interests that positioned Lebanon as a key-promoter of French economic and political influence.

Notwithstanding the orientalist and racist bias apparent in colonial archives from Senegal, these sources also illuminate the capacity of the French colonial administration to exploit and reinforce tribal and political divisions of the Shiite Lebanese migrants.⁴⁷ In the 1950s, the General Government’s security services continued to monitor Muslim and Arabist political networks in Dakar, as in the rest of French West Africa. The Shia community remained the main target of control and surveillance by the French imperial power in the post-World War II period. According to the colonial intelligence services reports, the Amelite⁴⁸ population’s adherence to Arabist theories during the Mandate period, their resistance to the French presence in a Greater Lebanon with disputed borders, their commitment to an Islam considered zealous, and the tribal social organisation of the region made them suspect of having anti-French tendencies. But far from monolithic and unanimous positions, Shiite militant sociability revealed the reproduction of social divisions inherited from communitarian logics in Lebanon. The author of a “Political Survey of the Shiite Community in Lebanon and Overseas” of June 1953, intended for the Ministry of *France d’Outre-Mer* (Overseas Territories), underpinned this observation with a typically Orientalist grammar by describing the reproduction of lifestyles, religious customs, and Amelite clan affiliations by migrants from overseas.⁴⁹ In his words, these led to political divisions and, more precisely, to an attitude towards French influence in the region and French imperialism that vacillated between open opposition and accommodation.⁵⁰ After a history of the political integration of Jabal ‘Âmil into Greater Lebanon and the marginalisation of this community dating back to the Ottoman period, the author established a direct

⁴⁴ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/3411, Letter from the Office of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of *France d’Outre-Mer*, 13 January 1948.

⁴⁵ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/3411, Financial and monetary agreement between France and Lebanon in *Note sur les Syro-Libanais de l’Afrique Occidentale française au ministère de la France d’Outre-Mer*, 1948.

⁴⁶ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Letter from the Ministry of France d’Outre-Mer to *French Présidence du Conseil*, 27 December 1954.

⁴⁷ On sectarianism in Lebanon, see Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism. Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Some authors have discussed sectarian accommodation in the case of Jabal ‘Âmil during the Mandate regime. See Tamara Chalabi, *The Shi’is of Jabal ‘Amil and the New Lebanon* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and Max Weiss, “Don’t Throw Yourself away to the Dark Continent: Shi’i Migration to West Africa and the Hierarchies of Exclusion in Lebanese Culture,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 7, no. 1 (2007): 46.

⁴⁸ Originating from the Jabal ‘Âmil or South Lebanon.

⁴⁹ ANS, 17G590, “Aperçu de la communauté chiite au Liban et en A.O.F.” June 1953.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

link between the anti-mandate battles waged by the Za'im -s of the region and the "events in Syria" of 1945.⁵¹ He then developed his account further by describing the emergence of an anti-French protest ideology based on political and religious repertoires. In this context, he referred to the rise of Arabist parties such as the "Syrian People's Party" in the late 1930s and to attempts at a pan-Islamist rapprochement organised by Shiite and Sunni religious leaders through the creation of a "Grand Council of the Muslim Community" in Aley, Shuf, in 1944. He then drew a parallel with an "Islamic Union," which was described as the ultimate and hidden goal of the Arab League. In this breeding ground of ideas, the clan affiliations of the Amelite migrants from A.O.F. reinforced their "Francophobia," because the Shiite population of southern Lebanon, like "sheep of Panurge," followed the rules of alliances that resembled those of a "feudal regime."⁵² In this respect, he painted a detailed picture of the families of notables who dominated the political field in Jabal 'Âmil, emphasizing the clans that were most opposed to French authority and those who chose to cooperate with France and integrate into the administrative and political structures of Greater Lebanon.⁵³ Ultimately, political resistance to French influence in Lebanon arose against the backdrop of clan rivalries between the Amelite Za'im -s. Some clans were considered "decidedly Francophobic," such as the Osseyrane family from Saïda, whose head, Adel Osseyrane, was a close ally of Riad Al Sohl.⁵⁴ Other clans had collaborated with the French authorities, such as the families of Ahmed Al Assad, President of the Chamber of Deputies in 1953, the family of the former deputy Yussuf Al Zein, who was described as "a loyal friend of France, the only one among the Shiites," and the family of the Great Sayed of Tyre, Abd Al Hussein Charafeddine, one of the highest religious authorities in the region and a political ally of the French mandate before its nationalist turn in 1943. The politicisation of the Shiite migrants from A.O.F. is thus seen as a transnational extension of the clan and political rivalries of Jabal 'Âmil:

"In fact, the Shiites of Lebanon and their co-religionists from the A.O.F. form a firmly united family, and neither the change of environment nor the social development that the latter have experienced during their emigration have led to any significant differences of opinion within the family. The Shiites have therefore remained conservative in every respect despite the distances that separate them."⁵⁵

The author described a migrant community that had remained "conservative" in religious, social, and political terms: in religious terms, "the practise of religion [...] pushed to the highest degree of fanaticism"; in social terms, with "the same social spirit" in A.O.F. as in South Lebanon, illustrated by the restriction of women and the continued wearing of the veil, which only the visits and public speeches of nationalist intellectuals such as Kamel Mrowa could challenge; and in political terms, with the reproduction of clan loyalties and conflicts. In this way, the author explained the intensity of the transnational links that shaped true globalised villages between Lebanon and Senegal. He cited the case of the brothers Hamid and Nagib Attié, shopkeepers in the Rue de Thiès in Dakar and supporters of Ahmed El Assad and the Christians in Jabal 'Âmil. The rivalry between the Attié clan and the Khalil clan, an enemy of the former, had led to the death of one of their members in Lebanon during a brawl linked to a conflict between the two brothers and a member of the Khalil clan in Senegal. This rivalry would have explained why supporters of the Assad

⁵¹ Traditional political and tribal leader.

⁵² ANS, 17G590, "Aperçu de la communauté chiite au Liban et en A.O.F.," June 1953.

⁵³ Sabrina Mervin, *Un Réformisme chiite*.

⁵⁴ Sunni political leader who was Prime Minister when Lebanon got independence in 1943.

⁵⁵ ANS, 17G590, "Aperçu de la communauté chiite au Liban et en A.O.F.," June 1953, trans.

clan reported a member of the Khalil clan to the French authorities who tried to emigrate to Brazil during his stay in Dakar. This overview of the Shiite community in Lebanon and A.O.F concluded with descriptive pages on the migrating notables of the Shiite community, i.e. merchants with considerable personal wealth who acted as representatives of the community, particularly within the Syrian Lebanese committee. Again, the author summarized the personal rivalries between the leaders of the committee in terms of their clan affiliations and suggested that the change at the head of the committee from Yussuf Hachem, “a figure most actively involved in the Arab League,” to Mahmood Burgi, a merchant from Kana who enjoyed a “good local reputation” in 1949, could be explained by the rivalries between the Amelite clans as well as commercial rivalries, as Burgi had embezzled money from a false bankruptcy declared by Hachem for his own benefit. Mahmood Burgi came from a family of political supporters of Ahmed El Assad, which for the author was proof of his benevolence towards France, as evidenced by his recent naturalisation. These conflicts, though sectarian in appearance, reveal how Lebanese migrants negotiated their legitimacy through competing visions of loyalty to France or to Arabist causes, reflecting the very transnational tensions. They also show that settlers’ vindications and perceptions, though politically vocal, did not always translate into colonial policy. Regarding the Lebanese of Senegal, the colonial administration rather focused on the imperial strategic interests that made them crucial agents of pro-French influence on a global scale. The Lebanese of Senegal’s ability to navigate these competing narratives—settler hostility and administrative pragmatism—further underscores their agency within the colonial context.

Dakarois Lebanese agency in the face of Maurice Voisin’s Frenchness: Negotiating with the Empire and Claims of Autochthony

A final intriguing aspect of Maurice Voisin’s anti-Lebanese campaigns is that they shed light on the agency of Lebanese in Senegal, both at the local scale and in a broader context, as subjects of French Empire. Mara Lechtman demonstrated that they developed a common sense of belonging and collective awareness of shared interests among the Dakarois Lebanese.⁵⁶ This section argues that their public reactions illustrate the diversity of their agency. In the context of an array of self-identifications, the Dakarois Lebanese demonstrated a multifaceted approach in their interactions with the French Empire, ranging from accommodation to outright support. At the same time, African reactions underscored their position as central actors in the local transactional culture.

In the preceding section, it was argued that the advent of revolutionary Arab nationalists enhanced French colonial officials’ political mistrust regarding Islam they associated with anti-French sentiment. This section further demonstrates that this development also intensified the Dakarois Lebanese clash over political self-identifications. In Lebanon, these regional tensions challenged both the confessional division of power established during the Mandate period and the compromise on the country’s national identity defined in 1943 by Christian and Muslim independence leaders as the “National Pact.”⁵⁷ The involvement of the Middle East in the bipolarisation of the Cold War divided the political field between regimes and political movements that aligned either with pro-Nasserite revolutionary leftism or pro-Western conservatism. The young Lebanese parliamentary democracy was therefore torn between conservative movements, mainly Maronites, who claimed the unique identity of a Greater Lebanon in relation to its Arab neighbourhood and were

⁵⁶ Mara Lechtman, *Shi’i Cosmopolitanisms*, 58–61.

⁵⁷ Georges Corm, *Le Liban contemporain. Histoire et société* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012).

attached to France, and Arabist forces, mainly Muslims, some of whom called for the country's integration into a "Greater Syria." The transnational reproduction of Lebanese political divisions within the Senegalese community sustained intense identity-based clashes among the migrants. These divisions were particularly visible at the inter-confessional level and reveal how collaboration with French imperialism was a divisive issue for Lebanese migrants.⁵⁸ An illustrative example of this clash involved a sports club which, according to the security services of the Dakar district, was "exclusively reserved for Catholic Lebanese," although it carried the ostensibly inclusive name "*Club Amical de la Jeunesse Libano-Syrienne*" (C.A.JE.LI.S).⁵⁹ C.A.JE.LI.S was run by the brothers Georges and Robert Richa, two shopkeepers born in Senegal in 1923 and 1925 respectively. Founded after the Second World War, it brought together members culturally and politically close to France, many of whom were members of the "*Phalanges Libanaises*" (*Hizb al-Katâ'ib al-Lubnâniyyat* in Arabic), the country's main Lebanist pro-French and pro-Western party. Dakar district security investigators praised this association to the colonial administration because of the sociology of its members, who could "strengthen the Francophile ties of the Lebanese" after the unrest linked to the "events in Syria" of 1945.⁶⁰ Members of C.A.JE.LI.S displayed characteristics that appeared to guarantee loyalty to French authority. The author of the report pointed out, for example, that they all held at least the "*Certificat d'Etudes Primaires*," a French primary school degree, and were unfamiliar with Lebanon, which most of them had never visited. The club had been founded by young Lebanese reservists from the French army, and he added that all the members were "French at heart" from a "national point of view," having completed their military service. Some had even opted for French citizenship, in accordance with the 1927 law on citizenship, which allowed foreigners born in a French territory to opt for French citizenship when they came of age. The association's confessional composition reassured the authorities since its strict compartmentalisation was seen as preventing any form of pan-Arab solidarity, which the author attributed to the Shiite Muslims. It was actually closed to Syrian nationals, including only people of Lebanese origin and "Catholics who did not want to welcome Lebanese Muslims in their midst." This sectarian compartmentalisation was confirmed in 1947, when the same security services reported the failure of a plan to merge C.A.JE.LI.S with the sports section of Youssef Hachem's "Lebanese-Syrian Committee" (S.S.C.L.S). The latter's members were "all Muslims, most of them with pro-autonomous... and nationalist ideas."⁶¹ The author of the information bulletin, relying on "good Lebanese sources," noted that, unlike the younger members, the C.A.JE.LI.S board was composed of Lebanese nationals. They were therefore pressurised by members of the "*Comité Hachem*" to merge. According to him, the main point of contention was the name of the future joint association. The proposed names reflected two different perceptions of Lebanese national identity. Thus, the members of C.A.JE.LI.S rejected the name "Arab Sports League," which had been proposed by the members of the sports section of the S.S.C.L.S; in turn, the latter rejected the proposal "French-Lebanese Sports Federation." The security service's Lebanese informant suspected that members of S.S.C.L.S. sought to infiltrate C.A.JE.LI.S under the pretext of providing the sports facilities it lacked. He also explained that their aim was to transform the new association into a forum for Arabist politicization, which the author of the security report summarized ironically:

⁵⁸ David Todd, "*Un Empire de velours. L'Impérialisme informel français au XIX^e siècle*" (Paris: La Découverte, 2022): 24.

⁵⁹ Mistakenly substituted for Maronite. ANS, 21G99/17, Note from Dakar District's intelligence services, 28 September 1945.

⁶⁰ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/3411, "Compte-rendu des réunions de la colonie libanaise à l'occasion du passage à Dakar des émissaires des Phalanges libanaises transitant par l'Amérique du Sud," in Letter from Governor General of the A.O.F to the Minister of France d'Outre-Mer, 1 June 1948.

⁶¹ ANS, 21G99/17, Note from Senegal's colonial intelligence services, 31 May 1947.

“Furthermore, the members of C.A.JE.LI.S opposed the name of the new association, *Ligue sportive arabe* (translated here as “Sports Arab League”) as it deliberately echoed the Arab League. It would only have been a very small step from SPORTS ARAB LEAGUE to simply ARAB LEAGUE...”⁶²

If we turn back to the reactions of the Dakarois Lebanese to Maurice Voisin’s press campaigns, we can first support Mara Leichtman’s argument regarding the emergence of an African-Lebanese identity that encompassed and fused scattered sectarian affiliations.⁶³ Indeed, the anti-Lebanese campaigns triggered a collective mobilization among the Lebanese that transcended sectarian affiliations. This was evident, for instance, in their complete dismissal of the 1955 “Day of Repentance” mentioned above. Furthermore, the establishment of Lebanese national institutions in Senegal, such as the consulate in Dakar in 1946, created new opportunities for institutional visibility among Lebanese migrants in French West Africa. Nevertheless, it is crucial to underscore that the Lebanese population residing in Senegal exhibited a fragmented stance towards French imperialism. Political loyalty to the French Empire was a strategy used by Lebanese migrants to justify their position in Senegal. This offers a more complex view of Lebanese transnational politicization, as recent studies mainly focused on Arab or Syrian nationalism in the diaspora. Indeed, several migrants’ spokespeople explicitly condemned the anti-French views expressed in Lebanon. In an address to the Governor General on 23 September 1955, Hassan Sabbah, an established pro-French merchant, pointed out a paradox which, in his views, disqualified the Arabist political forces active in South Lebanon.⁶⁴ He argued that the dependence of this region on emigrants’ remittances meant that criticism of France ran against its inhabitants’ economic interests. Hassan Sabbah reinforced his argument with an insightful overview of sectarian antagonisms in Lebanon, linking them to French diplomacy in the Arab world and, more specifically, to colonial policy in North Africa. He believed that the Maronite community was unanimously Francophile but isolationist on international issues, which limited its influence on national public opinion in Lebanon. He also suggested that the Sunni community was overtly Francophobic and very active in favour of Arabist causes. The Shiites were described as a community torn between their Arabist sympathies and their awareness of the interdependence between their community interests and French imperial ones. Ultimately, he blamed “elected representatives” and “voters” who had no personal or family ties to A.O.F emigrants for spreading anti-French feelings in Lebanese public opinion. In his view, the strength of these ties between immigrants and French colonial interests accounted for their imperviousness to the nationalist and anti-colonial views expressed by some Lebanese political parties in the 1950s. Identifying himself as a Shiite, he even offered to serve as a spokesperson for the French cause in Lebanon and asked the French government for assistance in carrying out this mission:

“This action plan would require, in addition to my activity and my personal authority in Lebanese and French West African circles, the support of the government on certain points which I will explain in detail.”⁶⁵

This rift between the immigrants and the Lebanese government is also evident in a protest telegram sent to the President of the Lebanese Republic on 6 October 1955, following a petition drive to collect signatures:

⁶² Ibid, trans.

⁶³ Mara Leichtman, *Shi'i Cosmopolitanisms*, 58–61.

⁶⁴ ANS, 17G530/144, Letter from Hassan Sabbah to General Governor of A.O.F, 23 September 1953.

⁶⁵ Ibid, trans.

“The undersigned, holders of (x) signatures on (y) members of the Lebanese colony of Dakar, hereby express our astonishment at the official position of the government delegate to the UN on the question of French North Africa [stop]. We regret that we must distance ourselves [stop]. We benefit from the great French hospitality, but we do not understand the aims of the leaders of our motherland, which justify sacrificing us to vague interests [stop]. Moreover, the Lebanese people, a civilised nation, cannot learn of the attacks on defenceless people without horror [stop]. We are sure that you will use all your authority to put an end to these mistakes [stop]. We assure you of our full appreciation and trust.”⁶⁶

Another strategy used by some migrants was to emphasize their roots in colonial Senegalese society and their ties to French imperial authority as the following case illustrates. In October 1955, Tony Jaber, a long-established Dakar-based merchant and General Secretary of the local section of the *Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais* in M’Bour, downplayed the representativeness of the pan-Arab nationalism expressed in Lebanon in the 1950s in an open letter published in Dakar’s press. He denounced “*Radio-Damas*,” which had called over the airwaves for retaliation against French settlers in North Africa. Maurice Voisin had used the same calls for revenge to link the Lebanese of A.O.F with the “terrorists” of *Istiqlal* and to panic his African readership. Tony Jaber also reminded him of the solidarity of all immigrants, whom he described as “children of the land” to their new homeland, a status that, as his own case demonstrated, could ultimately be converted into French naturalization. Having lived in Senegal for so long, the Lebanese were able to dismiss Maurice Voisin’s blackmail, which he regarded as nationalist and racist propaganda.⁶⁷

“I have only one thing to say to the Lebanese and Syrians: if they agree to close their shops on 15 October, it means that they acknowledge their debt and want to make amends. The same goes for all the other requests in Mr Voisin’s leaflets”.⁶⁸

A security intelligence bulletin dated 15 October 1955 reported that the “Day of Repentance” was not as successful as Maurice Voisin had hoped.⁶⁹ In fact, the surveillance teams he had called for consisted only of a “horde of vile mechanics” who had taken seats in about fifteen taxis. They fled when the police intervened to prevent the convoy from forming. The Lebanese community also agreed: not a single shop was closed that day. Maurice Voisin’s “Day of Repentance” finally gave the Lebanese community the opportunity to express opinions that were loyal to the French imperial order, albeit for pragmatic reasons. For at least some Lebanese, this expression of belonging justified a break with the Arabist diplomatic stance expressed by the Lebanese government during the colonial crises in North Africa between 1953 and 1955.

Finally, the public reaction revealed by Maurice Voisin’s press campaigns indicated a shift in the dynamics of Dakar’s transactional culture that had been unfolding since the end of the Second World War. Indeed, Voisin’s vitriolic rhetoric can be understood as a backlash to the economic and political marginalization of French independent business representatives. Local African actors were quick to voice their opposition to the campaigns and claims advanced by Maurice Voisin against Lebanese immigration and against the French colonial administration. Lebanese immigrants were no longer mere middlemen in the colonial economy but became daily partners of the local African population through economic

⁶⁶ ANS, 17G530/144, Note from Senegal’s colonial intelligence services, 6 October 1955, trans.

⁶⁷ ANS, 17G530/144, Letter from Tony Jaber to Maurice Voisin, October 1955.

⁶⁸ Ibid, trans.

⁶⁹ ANS, 17G530/144, Note from Dakar District’s colonial intelligence services, 15 October 1955.

diversification strategies. In other words, they bypassed the central position claimed by the French settlers in A.O.F social and economic life.⁷⁰ A revealing example of this dynamic is Voisin's attempt to use the Dakar property market to portray the migrants as a common enemy, especially for the African population.⁷¹ In his articles, he argued that the Lebu, an ethnic community living on the Cape Verdean peninsula, had been dispossessed of their land. The Lebanese traders acted as lenders of last resort for the Lebu owners, which Maurice Voisin denounced as usury. In his view, this phenomenon could have serious political repercussions, as it called into question the usefulness of the French civilizing mission in Africa. The plundering of Lebu landowners by their Lebanese lenders could blow a "wind of discontent" among the Africans, who would accuse the colonial administration of negligence in supervising immigration.⁷² However, since Lebanese traders had become everyday partners, some Lebu representatives distanced themselves from Voisin's campaign when he called on the members of the French National Assembly to introduce stricter laws on loans and leases in the name of the civilizing mission. On 7 January 1954, eleven prominent representatives of the Lebu community, including El Hadj Alia Codou N'Doye, the *Grand Serigne of Dakar*,⁷³ and local chiefs from the capital of the Federation,⁷⁴ petitioned the Governor General to oppose Maurice Voisin's demands for more restrictive legislation on leases in French West Africa. Although they acknowledged the existence of disputes in some districts of Dakar, such as Tound, they argued that these should be settled between the parties concerned and not through new regulations by the colonial administration. They also emphasized the crucial role of Lebanese merchants as lenders to a population who regularly faced urgent needs for cash. They even highlighted the benefits that the Africans could derive in the long term from the property projects initiated by the Lebanese lenders, as expressed in a petition to the Governor General of A.O.F in 1954:

"This question of leases, several of which were signed in the past with several Europeans from here, but who later had to cede their rights to Lebanese-Syrians who stayed with us. As you can see, Mr High Commissioner, they are not exploiting us at all but are doing us a favour in our hour of need. You only have to look around the city to see that on almost every plot of land leased to these Lebanese-Syrians, a building has been erected at a cost of 4, 5, 7 and 10 million francs C.F.A., and despite the long delays that have been reported, these buildings will benefit our children and grandchildren in the future."⁷⁵

This statement illustrates the solidarity between Lebanese immigrants and African economic actors within colonial social and economic relations, thereby challenging colonial paternalism. Yet, Maurice Voisin was also marginalised in Senegalese politics where key players criticised his racist rhetoric.⁷⁶ Charles-Guy Etcheverry, who was close to the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (R.D.A)*, replied that "there was no Lebanese-Syrian

⁷⁰ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Questions. Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁷¹ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, "Les Points sur les i. Voilà comment petit à petit, les libano-syriens dépossèdent tous les propriétaires africains de Dakar et deviennent, en fait, les maîtres de l'A.O.F," *Les Echos d'Afrique noire*, 27 January 1954.

⁷² ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Maurice Voisin, "Voici le premier appel de l'association Défense de l'Afrique française", *Les Echos d'Afrique noire*, 14 December 1953.

⁷³ The title of Serigne is an honorary title like the Arabic title of "*sheikh*" and refers to advanced knowledge in the Muslim religious and legal field. He acts as a spiritual guide.

⁷⁴ ANS, 17G530/144, Note from Dakar District's intelligence services, 11 January 1954.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, trans.

⁷⁶ Alexander Keese, "Colons français."

problem in West Africa,” and accused Voisin of distracting the African population from the true socio-economic causes of the African discontent in the 1950s.⁷⁷ Ibrahima Loum who was also close to the R.D.A, denounced, “in the interests of the country,”⁷⁸ a “fair-ground speaker”⁷⁹ and used religious arguments to label Voisin’s campaign as criminal because it was directed against a “majority of religious brothers.” The 1953 campaign thus failed to overcome the racial and political divisions in Senegal, which undermined Voisin’s attempt to rally broader support. The reports of the colony’s security services confirm once again his lack of credibility. For instance, a report noted that the D.A.F meeting on 19 December 1953 had only attracted a small audience “consisting mainly of people who had come there to pass the time and have a bit of cheap fun.”⁸⁰ The members of the association’s provisional steering committee are also portrayed in a less than favourable light, as they are depicted as “more or less staid locals with no local activities.”⁸¹ Dissatisfaction quickly emerged within the association affecting prominent figures and leaders in the D.A.F. However, they had been cited by Maurice Voisin as proof of the unanimous support for his movement and the anti-Lebanese resentment in the colony. El Hadj Ousmane Diop, who had been appointed honorary president of the association at its foundation, resigned as president of the Council of Notables of the Lebu Community in an open letter to Maurice Voisin on 20 January 1954.⁸² Beyond the style of expression Voisin adopted in his anti-Lebanese attacks, observers noted his vehemence towards the colonial administration. This trend continued, as other local section leaders of the D.A.F. distanced themselves in the following months, such as such as Kader Diagne from Kaolack on 19 June.⁸³ These defections illustrate how Voisin’s campaigns not only failed to mobilize broad support but also revealed his marginalization: while Lebanese migrants successfully portrayed themselves as loyal supporters of the French Empire and established themselves as pivotal actors in Senegal’s late colonial society and economy, his rhetoric increasingly lost resonance among both African and colonial audiences.

Conclusion

After 1945, the development of French imperialism towards more informal forms promoted Lebanese migrants to the rank of potential influencers. Even if this reorganisation was primarily aimed at changing France’s influence in the Middle East, it had an impact on other parts of the imperial edifice. In Africa, and particularly in Senegal, these changes led to a controversy over the political identification of the increasingly integrated Lebanese “middlemen minority.” The failure of the French colonial circles epitomised by Maurice Voisin to label the Lebanese as enemies of the empire can be explained by this reconfiguration of the empire’s interests. Despite the remnants of old racist representations directed against Muslim migrants, the French imperial institutions wanted to maintain this land as a lever of influence in a region as strategic as the Middle East.

While their loyalty to the French Empire was thus called into question, the Lebanese of French West Africa were able to utilise a diverse agency. From a transnational perspective, they reproduced divided political identifications for which closeness to Frenchness

⁷⁷ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Charles-Guy Etcheverry, “Il n’y a pas de problème libano-syrien en A.O.F,” *La Communauté*.

⁷⁸ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Ibrahima Loum, “Réponse à Maurice Voisin,” *La Communauté*.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Un animateur de tréteaux de foire (trans.).

⁸⁰ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2164, Letter from Ministry of France d’Outre-Mer to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 March 1954.

⁸¹ ANS, 17G530/144, Note from Dakar District’s intelligence services, 4 January 1954.

⁸² ANS, 17G530/144, Letter from El Hadj Ousmane Diop to Maurice Voisin, 20 January 1954.

⁸³ ANS, 17G530/144, Information note from Senegal’s colonial intelligence services, 19 June 1954.

was a divisive point. Although this was an essential part of Lebanist identity, Shiite Muslim migrants also adapted to French rule in the A.O.F which involved to distance themselves from Arab nationalisms. Finally, another effective strategy to counter colonial attacks was to assert their position as integrated social and economic actors in Senegal. This set the conditions for their integration as Senegalese-Lebanese after 1960.

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