

BOOK REVIEW

Kathleen Keller. *Colonial Suspects: Suspicion, Imperial Rule and Colonial Society in Interwar French West Africa*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. xi + 264 pp. List of Abbreviations. Note on Translations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0803296916.

In her book *Colonial Suspects: Suspicion, Imperial Rule and Colonial Society in Interwar French West Africa*, Kathleen Keller addresses the category of “suspects” as it evolved under colonial rule in French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française, AOF) between 1914 and 1939. First, she provides insight into the implementation of a surveillance policy and the everyday methods used by the French authorities to label and categorize people and groups who were considered potential threats. Incidentally, she also uncovers some tension inside the colonial administration, notably between the Ministry and the Government General. Second, she gives an overview of the colonial society in AOF and its otherwise little known “margins” through the exploration of the designation “suspicious.” According to Keller, “suspicious” is a category in its own right, alongside “race,” “gender,” and “social class,” which “was characterized by the ways it disrupted colonial modes of understanding people” (6). Consequently, the evolution of this category corresponds to the evolution of the population in AOF, especially in the interwar era. During that period, Dakar, the most “European city in West Africa” (12), faced sudden demographic changes: the arrival of Europeans in larger groups than before, the return of the Senegalese *tirailleurs* after WWI with their expectations of equality, and the emergence of an African elite that had gained influence in the political scene, among others. Keller argues that the interwar era was a time of turmoil for the French authorities, which prompted an often irrational and sometimes paranoid “culture of suspicion.” The category “suspect” was an “attempt to manage a rapidly changing colonial landscape in the uncertain years following the First World War” (4).

Chapter One engages with the emergence of a surveillance policy in AOF, which Keller links to the association policy. While these policies developed independently, they both constituted a response to the demands and demographic changes occurring in AOF at that time, especially in Dakar and Saint-Louis (50). Originally *marabouts* and travelers potentially carrying


diseases, after WWI “suspects” became the African elite, *tirailleurs*, communists, pan-Africans, and nationalists. Interestingly, the designation of “suspects” was mostly the result of distant concerns and characterizations from the Ministry of the colonies.

Chapter Two focuses on the methods and techniques used by the French administrators to implement surveillance policies and monitor “suspects.” While a variety of means were used, from bureaucratic checks at ports to denunciations, Keller demonstrates the limits of these various methods. For example, “shadowing” was based on techniques used in metropolitan France, and was therefore ineffective outside of Dakar and other big cities, as well as in some areas of Dakar itself such as the Medina. She questions the overall efficiency of these methods: “Otherwise authorities relied on instinct, gossip, and luck and, above all, followed up on information sent from other agencies around the empire” (60).

The last three chapters describe in more detail the different “types” of “suspects.” Chapter Three addresses the largest group: foreign “suspects” who, unlike the other groups, could be expelled from AOF. Most of them were under surveillance because of their connection to communism, pan-Africanism, or pan-Islamism, which French authorities viewed as threats, and which usually worked as organized networks. However, this group expanded, especially in Dakar, which was such an important port: “Colonial authorities discovered that the people who caused them the greatest consternation and problems were not necessarily political radicals but shady characters, potential frauds, itinerant travellers, or even crooks” (119). Foreigners were in fact the most important group of “suspects,” in the sense that they “disrupted the economic and social order with fraud or by defying race and gender norms” (118).

Chapter Four engages with metropolitan Frenchmen in AOF who were labelled as “suspects” because of their marginality, but who did not really constitute a threat to the colonial power. The final chapter focuses on Africans in AOF. Whether subjects or citizens, they were mostly dissidents and political activists. This chapter is informative with respect to their activities and modes of operation, which, Keller argues, were characterised by “fluidity between groups” (174). Here, the author acknowledges that the sole use of official French records and archives made it difficult to extend her exploration of political activists in AOF beyond the point of view of the French authorities (176).

Keller’s demonstration might have had more impact on the reader with broader contextualisation of the specificities of the French colonial surveillance compared to other political regimes, colonies, or epochs. Nevertheless, *Usual Suspects* offers a brilliant demonstration of the design and mechanics of surveillance in a colonial context. The originality of its approach makes it an important work and an in-depth study of colonial policing, with particular attention to who consisted a threat and why in the eyes of the French colonial power in AOF.

Fabienne Chamelot 

University of Portsmouth

Portsmouth, United Kingdom

fabienne.chamelot@port.ac.uk

doi:10.1017/asr.2020.27

For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Donaldson, Coleman. n.d. "The Role of Islam, Ajami writings, and educational reform in Sulemaana Kantè's N'ko." *African Studies Review*. 1–25. doi:10.1017/asr.2019.59.

Ould Mohamed Baba, Elemine, and Francisco Freire. n.d. "Looters vs. Traitors: The Muqawama ('Resistance') Narrative, and Its Detractors, in Contemporary Mauritania." *African Studies Review*, 1–23. doi:10.1017/asr.2019.37.

Skinner, Kate. n.d. "West Africa's First Coup: Neo-Colonial and Pan-African Projects in Togo's 'Shadow Archives.'" *African Studies Review*, 1–24. doi:10.1017/asr.2019.39.