

**ROBERTO KHATLAB**, *Les Libanais dans le Monde: Vision Socio-Culturelle et Historique* (Jdeide: Dar Saer Al Mashrek, 2013). Pp. 312. L.L. 30,000 paper. ISBN 9789953569277.

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Roberto Khatlab's book is a compilation of articles written by the author for the francophone Lebanese newspaper *L'Orient Le Jour*. The articles appeared in a monthly series about "The Lebanese in the World" that the newspaper ran since 2007, and were reproduced in the book as one hundred and six short chapters organized by country. The book aims to present a comprehensive overview of the Lebanese diaspora around the world through snapshots of various aspects of the life of each community.

The author was born in Brazil and has been living in Lebanon for more than twenty years, where he directs the Center for the Study of Latin American Cultures (Centre des Études et Cultures de l'Amérique Latine - CECAL) at the Université Saint-Esprit in Kaslik. He has published several books, in Portuguese, French, and Arabic about Lebanese immigration to Brazil, the relations between Brazil and Lebanon, as well as Eastern Christianity. He also has been active in promoting cultural and political relations between Brazil and Lebanon, being appointed by the Brazilian government as a member of the Council of Representatives of Brazilians Abroad (CRBE) in 2010 (79–81).

The numerous chapters of the book deal with the Lebanese presence in a vast array of countries, such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Egypt, Haiti, Ile de la Réunion (an overseas department of France in Africa), Japan, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Portugal, Senegal, Switzerland and Uruguay. One section deals with the presence of the Lebanese diaspora in Lebanon itself, presenting research institutes devoted to the study of Lebanese emigration; the visit to Lebanon of politicians and successful descendants of Lebanese migrants; and, finally, communities of

“Brasilbaneses” (Brazilian-Lebanese) that were created by Lebanese immigrants and their descendants from Brazil who returned to Lebanon.

This vast selection includes communities that are usually overlooked in the studies about Lebanese immigration – such as those in Haiti, Ile de la Réunion, Japan, Philippines, Portugal and Switzerland – enlarging the cognitive map of the Lebanese diaspora. But almost half of the chapters in the book, forty-nine in total, are dedicated to Brazil, while only a few are dedicated to other countries with a significant Lebanese presence, such as Argentina, Canada, Colombia, or Mexico. Furthermore, the United States and France are not included in the book, despite having important Lebanese communities and having had a central role in the history of the Lebanese migration. This uneven representation of diaspora reflects the author’s personal and professional experiences with Lebanese communities around the globe. Though some may find such selectivity problematic, others will welcome the attention paid to understudied communities.

Each community is presented through a small history of its constitution within the larger context of Lebanese emigration since the last decades of the nineteenth century. However, the narrative in most chapters focuses on biographic information about individuals who represent the economic, political, cultural and artistic success of Lebanese immigrants and their descendants in their countries of settlement or upbringing. Thus, the author offers profiles of individuals that achieved projection in national or global arenas, such as Carlos Slim Helú, the Mexican tycoon of telecommunications; Julio Ayala, president of Colombia between 1978 and 1982; and Michel Temer, Brazil’s current vice-president; as well as more local figures, such as the singer and harpist Ameylia Saad from Ile de la Reunion; Beto Carreiro, Brazilian entrepreneur and artist; and Madeleine Abdel Jalil, performer of Noh theater in Japan.

Through these individuals Khatlab presents the socio-cultural framework that shapes the collective experience and representations of the Lebanese diaspora in the various contexts of immigration. The major theme in the narrative is the economic entrepreneurship of immigrants in their host countries. Another aspect that emerges from the narrative is the strong investment that Lebanese immigrants made in the education of their descendants, which allowed them to create new stories of success in many fields, such as politics, literature, arts, and sports.

One of the merits of Khatlab's book is that it shows the variety of forms that entrepreneurship and "success stories" took in each social and cultural context, ranging from the more classical fields of economic, political, or artistic trajectories as well as less "orthodox" forms of entrepreneurship. An example of the latter, albeit the only one in the book, is the biographic portrait of Anísio Abraão David, the sponsor of the "Beija-Flor", an important "samba school" (association) in Rio's carnival as well as a major entrepreneur of the form of illegal gambling known as "Jogo do Bicho" (Animal's Game).

Another aspect of Lebanese communities highlighted by Roberto Khatlab is the high degree of cultural assimilation that Lebanese immigrants and their descendants present in the various countries covered by the book. An eloquent indication of the mastery of the language and insertion in the local culture by Lebanese immigrants and their descendants is the great number of artists, writers, and intellectuals who achieved preeminence in the cultural fields of their countries of adoption or birth. These include the aforementioned Lebanese-born Madeleine Abdel Jalil who became a performer of Noh theater in Japan; the writer Milton Hatoum, a major name in the Brazilian contemporary literature, who was born to Lebanese parents in the city of Manaus; as well as the Colombian poet Meira Delmar, who was born to Lebanese parents in Barranquilla in 1922.

The combination of entrepreneurship, upward social mobility, and cultural assimilation repeats itself throughout the book as a general pattern of Lebanese diasporic experience. Indeed this is the framework that informed the construction of the self-image and shared narratives that connect Lebanese immigrant communities across the globe. The intimate connection between the self-image projected by the Lebanese communities and Roberto Khatlab's narrative about them makes the book an interesting source to understand the shared representations that inform the relations between the various communities of the Lebanese diaspora and Lebanon.

This theme will resonate with the general public for whom the book was written. Academics, however, may find too much emphasis placed on the stories of economic success, upward social mobility, and cultural integration and not enough attention paid to the difficulties, conflicts and, sometimes, discrimination and hostility that many immigrants faced in their host societies. Those who do not fit into the "success stories" are left out of this narrative, which creates invisibility of the poor and disenfranchised. At a time when inequalities and

instabilities have been on the rise within Lebanon, it should be no surprise that its domestic readership will crave these stories of prosperity, integration, and steadfastness from the diaspora.

Given Khatlab's vast range of knowledge of Lebanese around the world and his more than twenty-years of living within Lebanon, this selective editing of diasporic experiences for a general homeland readership inhibited a more deliberate discussion of what Lebanese identity means or how it is constructed and debated in each different social and cultural contexts. Lebanese identity and/or Lebanese diasporic identity seem to be reproduced with very similar contents in Brazil, Mexico, Senegal, Japan or Canada, which may share common elements together with possessing discrete or divergent dynamics and meanings. For example, Lebanese identity in many countries of Latin America, including Brazil, is often associated with Syrian identity, being expressed through the hybrid Syrian-Lebanese (*Sirio-Libanês*). This matter is mentioned once in the book (290), and could have been more deliberately emphasized to challenge the targeted reading public to think beyond the seemingly more "fixed" but equally as socially constructed sets of meanings attached to "Syria" and "Lebanon" today.

At the same time that an imagined or real homeland serves as the implicit backdrop to this book, the author also strengthens migrants' respective places in the countries where they settled or were raised, thus reproducing certain discourses and representations about specific Lebanese communities. In the beginning of the book he affirms that during the visit of Brazil's emperor D. Pedro II to Ottoman Lebanon in 1876, the emperor "*Having found the Lebanese very dynamic invited them to emigrate to Brazil, assuring that they would be well received and would prosper*" (34). However, the emperor seemed to have only written in his travel diaries that he was informed that some Christians might be interested to migrate to Brazil.<sup>1</sup> The idea that the Lebanese were invited to immigrate to Brazil belies the fact that the Arabic-speaking immigrants were considered as "undesirable" by the Brazilian elite and state as well as faced various degrees of social and cultural rejection and, even, racist hostility since the beginning of the immigration in the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Again, this attention to dissonant dynamics would probably not be welcomed by readers in either the homeland or diaspora.

Because of its richness of information, broad scope and presentation of shared narratives and self-images among the various communities and individuals of the Lebanese diaspora, Roberto Khatlab's book will certainly interest academics who research the topic

and those who want to have a general overview of the Lebanese diaspora. Implicitly seen from the homeland and from the diaspora, this rare view of Lebanese around the world opens up the question of how those in Lebanon and abroad imagine their own global presence and interconnections. Some chapters can be combined with other readings to illustrate both the various trajectories of the Lebanese immigrants and the forms of self-representation of Lebanese communities and how it shapes a certain scholarship about them. In short, Roberto Khatlab's book broadens the scope of information on the Lebanese diaspora, and raises many more socio-cultural and historical questions for the future.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I thank the historian Monique Sochaczewski for this information.

<sup>2</sup> See: Jeffrey Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).