

PAULO GABRIEL HILU DA ROCHA PINTO, *Árabes no Rio de Janeiro: Uma identidade plural* (Rio de Janeiro: Cidade Viva, 2010). Pp. 200. ISBN 9788563437051.

REVIEWED BY WAÏL S. HASSAN, Professor, Department of Comparative and World Literature, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, email: whassan@illinois.edu



A note on the final page of this book points to the official recognition by the Brazilian government of the important role that Arab immigrants have played in many aspects of Brazilian society: the book, it is stated, “was concluded in September 2010, the year in which 130 years of Arab immigration to Brazil was officially celebrated on March 25, the National Day of the Arab Community, instituted by Federal Law number 11.764.” That role has been analyzed by several scholars who have focused on Arab immigration and ethnicity in Brazil as a whole or in particular states such as São Paulo, Goiás, Piauí, Espírito Santo, Minas Gerais, and Pará. Paulo Pinto offers the most comprehensive account to date of the Arab presence in Rio de Janeiro, which has the second largest Arab community in Brazil after São Paulo.

Árabes no Rio de Janeiro is the third volume in the series “Imigrantes no Rio de Janeiro,” the first two having focused on Portuguese and Jewish immigration. Meticulously researched and lucidly written (not to mention superbly produced), the book combines historiography and ethnography as it follows the trail of immigrants from the Ottoman province of Syria in the last decades of the nineteenth century to their second and third generation descendants today. The book is divided into five parts and eighteen chapters. The four chapters in Part I and three chapters in Part II focus, respectively, on the “departure” of immigrants from what is now Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine and their “arrival” in Rio de Janeiro. Pinto offers a concise outline of the historical, demographic, economic, and political conditions of those regions in the late Ottoman period, emphasizing the factors that led large numbers of Arabic-speaking peoples (Maronites, Orthodox, Melkites, Sunnis, Shias, Druzes, Alawis, Jews)

to emigrate both within the empire (to Egypt, for example) and to the Americas. Here and throughout the book, Pinto's conclusions are highly nuanced: while he concedes the role of ethnic and sectarian conflicts, he shows that it was only one of several factors that affected different regions in different ways, depending on local conditions – for example, European influence and ties cultivated with particular religious communities, the role of Catholic and Protestant missionaries, the decline of silk production in the Mount Lebanon region, the socio-political upheavals and famines caused by World War One, followed by the British and French mandates in the region and their consequences.

As in other countries of the Americas, the fact that those immigrants carried Ottoman passports led to their misidentification as “*turcos*.” Officially, at least, this official designation lasted until 1892, when it is replaced by “*sírios*,” although the “*turco*” continues to be used to the present time, mostly as a negative stereotype associated with pack-peddling, which was the commercial activity of choice for many of the recent arrivals. It is estimated that roughly 106,000 Arab immigrants arrived in Brazil (about a fourth of all immigrants to the Americas) between 1874 and 1930, with peak years from 1904 to 1914. In 1930, a quota system was implemented, resulting in a drastic reduction in the number of Arab immigrants. (The 1924 immigration law in the United States used that model, with the same result, but it is not clear to what extent the Brazilian system, which was of course the product of a different domestic environment, may have nonetheless been influenced by the North American one.) As is well-known, commerce was the predominant, though not the only, economic activity for Levantine immigrants, and their success was due both to what came to be considered as the pioneering spirit of the *mascate*, or pack peddler, who penetrated into remote and newly settled areas of the interior, as well as to the introduction of new practices such as selling on credit, which played an important role in the development of popular commerce.

Despite that success, Arab immigrants were not well regarded by Brazilian cultural elites, who viewed them from a perspective heavily influenced by European Orientalism, despite the fact that influential intellectuals such as Gilberto Freyre and Luís da Câmara Cascudo recognized Arab influence on Portuguese culture during Muslim rule in Iberia. Pinto cogently argues in Part III (on images and representations) that the construction of Arab identity in Brazil was also influenced by local, national, and transnational factors, including

general anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim sentiments, regional varieties of racism and xenophobia, and the perception that Arabs were not the desirable (i.e. European) kind of immigrants. These perceptions produced various reactions from the Arab community, ranging from affirmation of cultural and civilizational identity to the privileging of ethnic and sectarian affiliations and various local nationalisms that began to be affirmed in the Middle East, partially encouraged by British and French colonial ambitions. All of this led to a certain “ambiguity” toward Arabness within the immigrant community itself that is evident in the proliferation of labels such as “*árabe*,” “*sírio*,” “*libanês*,” and “*sírio-libanês*,” each of which emphasizing a different set of ethnic, religious, and national affiliations. Hence the “plurality” of Arab identity in Brazil emphasized in the book’s subtitle.

As Pinto demonstrates in Parts IV and V (on community organizations and participation in urban life, respectively), that plurality characterizes the various institutions created by the Arab immigrants in Rio, from newspapers and other publications to social clubs, commercial associations, schools, places of worship, and charity organizations. Such institutions have solidified the community and created a sense of continuity with Brazilian-born generations, which nonetheless construct different identities. Pinto warns here of a simple division between generations: since Arab immigration has never stopped (albeit greatly reduced in the second half of the twentieth century, with most of the recent arrivals being Muslims rather than Christians), first, second, and third generations have always coexisted. This has led to what Pinto describes as an increasing complexity of identity formation in relation both to the Arab world and the Brazilian environment. The activities of entrepreneurs like Gabriel Habib and Abrahão Jabour, who developed residential districts for lower income inhabitants of the city receive some extended treatment, as does the organization of the SAARA commercial association, which continues to be an important feature of Rio’s city center to the present day. The participation of the Arab community in the city’s cultural life is also emphasized through profiling the activities of writers, artists, academics, and others. One misses here a sense of the Arab role in city and national politics, especially that Rio was the capital of Brazil until 1960, and in comparison to the visibility of the Arab community in São Paulo politics. What is amply and admirably substantiated, however, is the author’s overall thesis, namely that Arabness is a “plural” identity and that there are many ways of being Arab in the *cidade maravilhosa*.