
French Caribbeans in Africa addresses a topic that is sometimes mentioned but rarely analyzed in depth: interactions between the three “old” French colonies in the Caribbean—Guadeloupe, Guyane, and Martinique—and a section of the “second” colonial empire, French Africa. These interactions are explored through the circumstances that have led many French civil servants from the Caribbean to make a career in Africa. Emphasis is also on the role of these civil servants within the colonial administrative apparatus.

Although the prominence of Africa in the formation of Antillean societies is well documented, less is known about the period of history treated in this book, when the colonized were themselves engaged in a colonization process through the colonial bureaucracy. The originality of the situation lies precisely in the ambiguous status of this group of civil servants, who are both “colonized” and “colonizers”—civil servants steeped in Republican values that they tend to re-interpret against the background of their own experience as citizens denied the egalitarian treatment they expect to enjoy.

The book focuses on colonial administrators, the elite of the bureaucratic apparatus, who operate under the authority of the Ministry of colonies in positions reserved exclusively for French citizens, but it also considers the experience of the administrative executives who were their subordinates. Out of a list of 626 native French Caribbean colonial administrators, Véronique Hélénon has extracted the 357 who officiated in Africa between the 1880s and the 1930s. This list was prepared by cross-referencing several sources, including l’Annuaire du ministère des colonies (the Directory of the Ministry of Colonies), the directory of the alumni of the École Nationale de la France d’Outre-mer (ENFOM), personal records, and Masonic archives and interviews. The selection is further limited by criteria such as place and date of birth—for example, only administrators who had started their careers by the end of the 1930s are considered—as well as the chronological milestones of the investigation (1880s-1939).

The investigation provides sociological data on colonial administrators from the French Caribbean. This more or less homogeneous group, essen-
tially from the urban sectors of Antillo-Guyanese societies, is characterized by a high marriage rate compared with other sectors of the population, an indisputable occupational heredity, and an over-representation of the white minority relative to its weight in the population. Hence the central hypothesis of the book: the colonial administrators were part of these emerging intermediate categories encouraged by the state after the abolition of slavery, as part of the reconfiguration of Antillo-Guyanese societies. They are at the crossroads of two contradictory positions that of colonized citizens in their land of origin and that of colonized colonizers in Africa (p. 14). They are assigned a buffer role between both of these categories of colonized, while acting as living display windows for the opportunities supposedly offered by colonial policy to those who accepted to comply with its rules.

Chapter 1 describes the backdrop for the commitment of French administrators from the Caribbean to the colonial administration in Africa. This commitment was carried by a double movement: on the one hand, enthusiasm for administrative careers perceived as a means to escape the curse of the plantation system; on the other, the emergence of a colonial administration in the context of a policy aimed at eliminating any trace of the slave trade past and coping with new needs in Africa. The second chapter deals with “French Caribbean assimilationism,” perfectly embodied in the colonial administrators. These people were motivated by an aspiration to full-fledged citizenship, but inhibited by the complexity of the links built with Africa over the course of history. The third chapter focuses on a description of the colonial administrative machine, destroying the myth of a uniform and homogeneous apparatus. In reality, a significant portion of this machine was composed of colonized citizens, thought to be capable of coping with the severe climate and of playing the buffer role that fell to them. Finally, the last chapter highlights the rationale that drove the operation of this machine, wrestling with its own contradictions, but keeping close watch on the native Caribbean administrators. However, the latter could rely on various connections and show pragmatism for fulfilling their functions in a context plagued with persistent racism against them.

French Caribbeans in Africa has the merit of building bridges between two worlds—the old and the new colonial empire—which tend to be treated separately in historians’ works. Easy to read, it contributes to filling an undeniable gap. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that little significance