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Settler Colonialism as a Structure?

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Contested 'Modernities', Unaccepted Intermediaries? In Between-men in Settler Colonial Settings from the Levant

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From the very outset of settler colonialism, intermediaries played a crucial yet contested role, navigating between colonial powers, local societies, and transnational networks. In the early 20th century Levant, certain individuals (primarily men from non-majority population groups, and more rarely women) held unique linguistic and cultural resources that allowed them to mediate between imperial structures and local communities. While deeply rooted in their own societies, these intermediaries cultivated perspectives that extended beyond their immediate surroundings, enabling them to function as essential brokers in proto-national movements, colonial governance, trade, education, and diplomacy.

Mediation occurred not only across the Mediterranean but also within these societies themselves, (at times within a very same religious institution) shaping interactions between various social, religious, and political groups. These intermediaries, or 'in-between figures,' (Heyberger & Verdeil 2009) straddled multiple worlds, facilitating negotiations, adapting ideas, and often challenging rigid colonial binaries. Despite their indispensable role, they remained ambiguous and, at times, unaccepted, as both colonial authorities and (proto)nationalist movements viewed them with suspicion, questioning their loyalties and allegiances.

How to define this/ these group(s) of 'intermediaries', its delimitations and its (un)porous boundaries in a (settler) colonial setting? What were their multifaceted role in the settler colonial structures and their role in shaping, challenging, transforming these structures? To what extent were they essential at a macro, miso and micro levels? What were the points of contact/ connections/ interactions/ impact in the settlers' homeland?

Adopting a micro-historical approach, this short study does not answer these broader questions but examines points of contact, networks, and power dynamics that shaped the role of intermediaries in the colonial Levant settings (i.e. here the British and French Mandates Levant, 1918-1948). Focusing on two atypical figures of brokers, it explores how these figures functioned within and against colonial institutions, shedding light on broader questions of agency, contested modernities, and the limits of colonial control. The discussion focuses on two case studies from Ottoman and Mandate Palestine (1900–1937), illustrating how these brokers navigated between different socio-political spheres and how their presence complicates traditional narratives of settler colonialism and indigenous resistance.

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This short analysis intends to contribute to the historiographical debate on settler colonialism by addressing some of its limitations in acknowledging intermediaries, the complex role of these mediators who shaped, to a certain extent, colonial rule and nationalist movements. Yet it is necessary to integrate more intermediary figures into the study of colonial structures to better understand the fluidity of power, identity, and cultural exchanges that took place in the early 20th century Levant.

The Structural Role of Intermediaries in the Levant's Colonial Context and the 'In-Between' Problem in Settler Colonial Narratives

Settler colonial theory has traditionally emphasized the binary opposition between settlers and indigenous populations, focusing on the logic of elimination and the structural domination of settler regimes (Wolfe, 2006). However, this framework often overlooked the role of intermediaries, individuals who navigated the complex political, economic, and cultural landscapes of these societies, mediating between colonial authorities, local communities, and transnational networks (Lawrance, Osborn, & Roberts, 2015). These intermediaries (such as merchants, translators, educators, and bureaucrats) were both essential and contested figures in colonial governance, contributing to the functioning of settler states while often being perceived as unreliable or suspect by both colonizers and indigenous populations (Ben-Bassat & Büssow, 2011; Eldar, 2018). Their presence challenges the rigid categories of settler vs. native, revealing a more nuanced colonial landscape where power was diffused through layered and shifting allegiances (Schayegh, 2013; Khalidi, 2006).

Recent scholarship has begun to address this gap by examining the agency of intermediaries in shaping colonial rule and nationalist movements. Figures like Albert Antebi and Niqula Khoury (Sanchez Summerer, 2022; Irving, Nassif, & Sanchez Summerer, 2022) exemplify how local actors could leverage their positions to negotiate between empire and community in Ottoman Great Syria, yet their contributions have been largely sidelined. The rigid application of settler colonial structures theory to the Levant context often fails to account for the persistence of intercommunal ties, economic entanglements, and cultural brokerage, which were central to the experiences of these intermediaries (Campos, 2011; Evri, 2019; Smith, 2021). Additionally, the legal and administrative spaces occupied by intermediaries, whether within Mandate bureaucracies, educational institutions, or trade networks, complicate simplistic notions of colonial domination and indigenous resistance (Elkins & Pedersen, 2005; Cavanagh & Veracini, 2017).

By incorporating intermediaries into the analysis, we gain a more dynamic understanding of colonial governance, one that accounts for fluid identities, contested modernities, and alternative forms of resistance and collaboration (for ex. Tamari, 2004; Wallach, 2017, and the 'Arab Ashkenazi project',

forthcoming; Sanchez Summerer 2022). Exploring how intermediaries functioned as agents of cultural transmission, political negotiation, and economic transformation in settler colonial settings across the Middle East (Vilmain, 2022; Fishman, 2021, for ex.) and beyond, allows us to understand the multifaceted perceived loyalty vs. real agency.

Intermediaries indeed often had their own agendas, using their position not just for colonial administration but also for self-advancement and communal negotiation. Their positions were often unstable, often subject to colonial backlash, resentment of their own communities, or shifts in power structures.

Albert Antebi and Niqula Khoury, Arab Jew and Orthodox Arab Intermediaries?

Albert Abraham Antebi (Ibrahim Entaibi in Arabic in some sources) was animated by the desire to '*régénérer les Orientaux par les Orientaux*' (regenerating Orientals/ Easterners by Orientals/ Easterners themselves) and 'strengthen Mediterranean resistance' to a German model in the Levant. Originally from the Jewish community of Damascus, director of the AIU (Alliance Israélite Universelle) vocational school in Jerusalem from 1896 until 1913, vice-president of the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce, Antebi was also a community leader in Ottoman Jerusalem, an engineer, the representative of the Jewish Colonisation Association (ICA) from 1899 to 1913, land buyer for Baron Edmond de Rothschild and for the Lovers of Zion (founded in Russia in the 1880s to encourage emigration to Palestine), advisor to Cemal Pasha from early 1915 to October 1916, friend of Meir Dizengoff (founder and first mayor of Tel Aviv) and of Said Effendi al-Husayni (mayor of Jerusalem 1902–6 and deputy to the Ottoman Parliament), godfather of Amin el Husayni (the later Haj Amin), 'liberator' of David Ben Gurion and Isaac Ben Zvi, soldier of Mustafa Kemal and dragoman of the French embassy in Constantinople.

Analysing the imperial Ottoman and the British, French and German colonial structures via the complex experiences of Albert Antebi offers a glimpse into the porous boundaries of cultural identification, the role of some of these intermediaries in Ottoman/ early Mandate Palestine. His enormous personal correspondence and the AIU archives help tracing and questioning the imperial and proto-national policies, the French paradigm through which he continued to perceive the local and transnational situation of Palestine and to examine his complex positioning towards the proto-national scenes in Ottoman and British Mandate Palestine. They highlight the ways in which Antebi saw the entangled relations within which he existed in Palestine in the first two decades of the twentieth century: through Franco-German national and cultural competition in the region; the contest between cultural

and political or 'Oriental' and European schools of Zionist thought; and economic-cultural versus political-national models of Jewish integration into the wider society of the Ottoman Levant.

In a period when identifications were fluid and loyalties sometimes overlapping, the figure of Antebi lies between exclusive identification modes (for example, religious groups) and inclusive ones (Ottomanism or local urban identities like Jerusalemite). This is rendered even more complex by his positioning within different groups, as he was never fully integrated into either the governing AIU elite from France or the Sephardic elites in Jerusalem.

Antebi's colonising activities are incomprehensible without recalling that the First Aliyah was partially influenced by French Jews. Albert Antebi was an expert at the crossroads of the two legal orders of Ottoman Jerusalem (the reformed Ottoman law of the Tanzimat period and Capitulations law). As an expert in Ottoman land law, he became an indispensable interlocutor for reform-minded Ottoman officials and a skilful practitioner in the provincial institutions. He also became an essential intermediary for the French consuls in Jerusalem, an expert on the status of consular protection in the field of Jewish institutions and individuals.

From his correspondence with the AIU, a trans-community of sociability between Ottoman Jerusalem elites appears: the Arab Muslim aristocracy of Jerusalem seems to have had no objection to sending their children to Alliance schools, and Jewish notables did the same with the Christian missionary schools. Yet, after 1913, more rigid lines were drawn between certain affiliations and Antebi became an unwanted figure to many in the Jerusalem landscape.

The second case study is of an Arab orthodox priest from a very humble family from Ottoman Palestine. In the summer of 1937, in the midst of the Palestinian uprising against British rule, the possibility of partitioning Palestine between Jews and Arabs shifted from a marginal proposal to a very real prospect. After the Peel Commission report that year, the League of Nations and its Mandates Commission debated the notion of partition at the former's Geneva headquarters. The Arab Palestinian nationalist movement dispatched a number of delegates to Switzerland, amongst them the Greek Orthodox priest, educator and campaigner Niqula Khoury.

Khoury's memoirs, written in the early 1950s but long ignored in an archive in Beirut, depict a Palestinian clergyman, educator and nationalist and offer a personal perspective on the regional impacts of the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the Palestinian struggle for self-determination under British colonialism and political Zionism. As a priest of the Orthodox Church (as well as the son and grandson of Orthodox priests), Khoury was a high-profile and energetic agitator against the domination of the Orthodox Church in Palestine by the Greek hierarchy, a movement rooted in the nineteenth century and in the Nahda (often referred to as the 'Arab renaissance'), positioning Christian Orthodox communities within Arab nationalism. The manuscript itself was apparently written in Lebanon in the 1950s or the

early 1960s, shortly before Niqula Khoury's death in 1964. We thus do not have explicit details of Khoury's 'autobiographical pact' (Lejeune & Elger and Köse, 2010), the mutual understanding with his putative reader of the nature of the story he would tell and their relationship to his self-presentation. But almost forty years earlier, Niqula Khoury and his cousin Shehadeh had published a history of the Orthodox Church in Palestine which became an important document in the battle of representations and narratives within the greater war for control of the Greek Orthodox Church and its resources in the region. He was thus well aware of the potential value of a written account and its impact on wider discourse.

Khoury was also deeply opposed to splitting the territory of Palestine between Jews and Arabs. As he travelled across the Balkans, he visited senior members of the Orthodox churches in Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria to ask them for support in Geneva, during the League of Nations debates. The details of his trip highlight the links and contestations within and across the Orthodox world and going beyond Greece and Russia as the main Orthodox state actors. His account of the Geneva conference itself is also a rare window on Palestinian participation in the international negotiations whose outcomes were imposed on the Palestinian people in a disastrous form. The diplomatic means he used to attract support and challenge the plans of a Great Power via alternative networks of power and loyalty, shed light on the ideas and strategies that the Palestinian nationalist movement was utilizing at the time (see extract below, at the end of this short article).

Figures like Albert Antebi and Niqula Khoury exemplify how Levantine intermediaries negotiated the tensions inherent to the colonial settings, using their linguistic, social, and political capital to bridge the gap between Ottoman authorities, British colonial powers, and local communities. They served as cultural translators, educators, and to some extent record keepers, 'filtering' colonial policies for local communities while simultaneously influencing how colonial authorities understood the region. However, this process was fraught with tension. While Khoury seems to have reinforced colonial stereotypes (sometimes for self-preservation or career advancement), Antebi actively shaped alternative narratives, resisting colonial interpretations of governance. Some of the challenges they faced are valid for the settler colonial structures context: at times accused of distorting information or being mere extensions of some of the colonial interests, to colonial rulers, they appeared as 'too indigenous', too embedded in local networks to be fully trusted. To their own communities, they were viewed by some with scepticism or even resentment for their proximity to colonial power structures. This double alienation highlights the precarious nature of their roles, while their knowledge and expertise were valuable, they remained vulnerable to political shifts and ideological battles over cultural and national identification.

Intermediaries also reveal the limits of settler colonial control. British and French Mandate authorities struggled to manage figures who did not fit neatly into clear categories, as these intermediaries often navigated multiple allegiances and complex social positions. Many of them did not simply enforce colonial rule but also challenged it from within, who contributed to nationalist thought and cultural resistance. Some participated in nationalist movements while still holding administrative or diplomatic roles within Mandate structures.

Moreover, modernity/ies in the colonial Levant was deeply contested, and intermediaries were at the centre of these debates. Their efforts to promote hybrid forms (for ex. for urban planning, education, and legal reforms) were frequently delegitimized. Their agency and their role in shaping alternative, locally grounded visions of modernity/ies, that did not conform to either colonial or nationalist orthodoxies, their fluid loyalties of intermediaries allow for a more nuanced understanding of power relations in settler colonial structures and encourage us to rethink certain categories, to recognize the complex negotiations, compromises, and contestations that shaped colonial (and postcolonial) societies.

Conclusion

The role of intermediaries in settler colonial structures challenges conventional narratives that have long framed colonial encounters as a stark binary between settlers and indigenous populations. Intermediaries, a group far from being monolithic indeed, whether bureaucrats, educators, traders, or political actors, shaped and contested colonial governance, navigating the complex intersections between imperial administrations, local communities, and transnational networks. Their presence complicates the rigid structures of colonial rules, revealing how power was negotiated. While often perceived as ambiguous or suspect, these figures were pivotal agents of cultural transmission, economic exchange, and political brokerage, adapting and redefining their positions based on shifting colonial and nationalist dynamics.

Their experiences offer valuable insights into how colonial and indigenous actors coexisted, collaborated, and clashed, shaping the development of modern nation-states and identity formations. The study of intermediaries invites us to move beyond static categorizations, recognizing the fluidity of power and the agency of individuals who operated within, between, and beyond colonial frameworks. By applying micro-historical approaches and transregional perspectives, we can uncover the nuanced ways in which intermediaries facilitated, contested, and even subverted colonial agendas, the porous nature of colonial boundaries, where collaboration, adaptation, and opposition coexisted. They enrich our understanding of the complex human landscapes that characterized colonial rule and the struggles

over governance, identification, and cultural heritage. Uncovering these neglected figures is a necessary step in reclaiming the agency of those who operated in the interstices of empires and settler colonial structures.

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