

Title—Colonial Suspects: Suspicion, Imperial Rule, and Colonial Society in Interwar French West Africa

Author—Kathleen Keller

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Categories: Colonialism, Surveillance, Policing, Politics, Movement

Place: French West Africa

Time: 1914-1939

Argument Synopsis:

Keller is focused on the surveillance of suspicious persons that emerged as a far-reaching operation in French West Africa. Operating mainly in urban areas, Keller demonstrates how police inspectors and local administrators conducted investigations of suspects beginning around the outbreak of the First World War. Her central questions are: who was suspicious and why? What do suspects and surveillance policies tell us about imperial policy and practice in French West Africa? What do they tell us about colonial society? Surveillance of suspicious persons was a very specific form of colonial control that sought to identify and quash potential political dissent and other kinds of behavior that appeared to be in opposition to the goals of the French state. Keller's book contributes to the growing field of historiography on specific forms of surveillance from the perspective of high policy and street level practice. She argues that the identification and surveillance of suspects was more of an attempt to manage a rapidly changing colonial landscape in the uncertain years following the First World War.

Central to the culture of suspicion was the concept of the suspect. She demonstrates how categories such as caste, religion, and tribe served to divide colonial people and establish parameters for creating order and doling out privileges. Keller argues that colonial law diverged considerably from metropolitan law—an example was it was illegal to belong to a union in the colonies, but not so in the French metropole. Keller utilizes primary sources from the archive of the Government General, especially from the Divisions of Police (SG) and the Political Affairs Bureau (APA). She consults ~400 suspect files from the period of 1914 to 1939 to better discern how surveillance and colonial power operated on an everyday basis. Keller divided suspect stories into categories that correlated to their legal status: foreign suspects, metropolitan Frenchmen, and African suspects. This division demonstrates that suspects formed a new colonial category that was not fundamentally grounded in racial difference.

The book is organized into five chapters. The first two chapters approach the history of surveillance from the point of view of the colonial administration. She begins by examining the practices of surveillance of suspicious persons through an analysis of techniques such as shadowing, postal control, port police, informants, denunciations, home searches, and gossip. The following three chapters examine the lives of the suspects themselves in order to tease out a new history of colonial society from the margins of the colonial state. The culture of suspicion and surveillance emerged as global fears about political radicalism coalesced with local fears about a turbulent and dynamic population.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- A culture of suspicion emerged in French West Africa in the interwar era that came to define the policies and practices of the colonial state
- The suspect was constructed as a colonial category that could both blur the distinctions between conventional divisions and serve as a new way of understanding how colonial authorities labeled people
- The suspect formed a new colonial category that was not grounded fundamentally on racial difference