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In black and white? A look at race thinking, racialisation and racism in contemporary Lebanon

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“God shall save us from them”

Introduction

“When you go down the street, it is as if you are in several countries... it's so disgusting and something I don't know how to describe. God shall save us from them¹.” (Facebook, 2011)

In October 2011, Lebanese national news channel MTV² reported on the presence of migrant workers in the Beirut suburb of Burj Hammoud (Youtube, 2011a; Mohsen, 2011). In the report that alleges certain foreign groups of transforming the neighbourhood into a centre of crime, prostitution and drugs, reporter Raquel Mubarak expresses to viewers “at first glance you would not think you're in Lebanon, but in a Kurdish state or some Asian country.”

The hierarchy of identity or, perhaps more appropriately in the case of Lebanon, “race” is made blatant almost immediately through the manner by which the story was covered, through the views of people interviewed, through that of members of the Lebanese public following its broadcast, and through the exclusion of the opinions of migrant workers, as well as expert opinions of parties such as the Lebanese security forces, within the report.

It may be observed in the report a pattern of group boundary building that is highlighted; the arguably implicit assertion by the report and the explicit declaration by members of the public of a unified and victimized “us” against the outsider and criminal “them”, the standards of morality and excellence that manifest in imagery and words used to emphasize this difference (Barth, 1998: 14), and how this brings in elements of self- and other- racializations within the contemporary Lebanese context.

Over the past years, international and local media coverage has revealed discriminatory and xenophobic attitudes faced by Lebanon's migrant domestic worker communities. The media and voluntary sectors have drawn attention to shortcomings with the country's labour law, an “outdated and deficient” one that “excludes coverage of foreign workers” (Chaaban, 2010: 158), as well as with its work sponsorship system, known as *kafala*³, a practice that is widely used but has no legality and does not exist within its constitution. However, there has been little mention of racism in the media, and within NGO and academic publications.

It is especially interesting to note that the MTV report follows two years of substantial coverage by international media (North, 2009; Sterns, 2009; Sandels, 2010; McNeish, 2011) and local media (Ali, 2009); reports by the voluntary sector⁴; publications by voluntary sector organisations; initiatives and projects within the voluntary sector; and so on, on the abuse and discrimination faced by Asian and African domestic workers, revealing a “class not racism” paradigm adopted by the Lebanese public. This adopted position towards migrant workers has resulted in the frequent use of negative stereotyping tied to class as a rationalisation for racism.

Ultimately, what the MTV report has done is highlight the reality that foreign groups are not seen as a part of the nation's ethnoscape⁵ and are not welcome in the neighbourhoods of Lebanon⁶ (Abou Assi, 2006: 70). It has revealed a general attitude where migrant workers are seen as "an invader, as outsider otherness asserting itself over or inserting itself into local homogeneity" (Goldberg, 2005: 89).

Lebanon is a nation with an estimated 4 million people (Chaaban, 2010: 159), 18 sects (Knio, 2005: 227), and home to hundreds of thousands⁷ of immigrants and refugees. Its profound and persistent composition as a minority nation and as a nation of many minorities; its hierarchy of social groups which noticeably developed under the transformation of its economy into a capitalist one and then largely under colonialism and post colonialism; and the subsequent structure of its government and society as a whole; has created a country where race thinking, racialization and racism exist and yet not usually acknowledged, and are not yet a prominent part of social and academic discourse.

In Lebanon, there exists a conflicting state of raciality. This is partly fuelled by what seems to be a need to carve out a unique Lebanese identity separate from the region, as well as a lack of scholarly work carried out to address the question of racism in the country. This paper shall explore the extent of race thinking, racialization and racism in contemporary Lebanon: by building a picture of a possible shared Lebanese identity over the period dating just before the formation of the nation and the French Mandate until present day; by looking at self-racializations of three main groups: Maronites, Sunnis and Shi'ites; and by looking at the racialization of "the Other" with a focus on migrant domestic workers, as they bring in elements of class, gender and "race" into the discourse.

To develop and support each point, this essay shall draw on historical references regarding French colonial rule in Lebanon, the formation of the nation state and the migration of certain Lebanese groups; the process of identity fetishism (Hage, 2005); elements of ethnic grouping and boundary building (Barth, 1998); class, identity and marks of belonging (Skeggs, 2004); and other relevant material. It will then conclude by using the *Six Core Elements of Racism* (Law, 2010: 134) to support the case of the existence of racism in Lebanon.

This piece will present some limitations given its nature, and some of the material used as substantiation will be anecdotal and not based in academic discourse. However, such sources are part of the current environment, and will prove to play an important role in developing discourse on the subject.

A nation of minorities

The demography of Lebanon in brief

"There can be few countries which can claim to be so deeply and intrinsically composed of minorities as Lebanon," a country comprising an estimated 18 officially recognized religious denominations, and six major religious groups, each with "conflicting aspirations and fears" (McDowall, 1983: 7).

Lebanon is a relatively small country with a history of colonisation and civil war. It is surrounded by regional unrest and has a tense political environment. It is a country of migration, historically a sending nation and, of recent, a receiving nation (Tabar, no year: 10). It is home to labourers from neighbouring countries, domestic workers from Asia and Africa, asylum seekers and

refugees from the region and beyond, and has a sizeable population of Palestinian refugees, with only a few, mostly Christians, having been naturalized perhaps for fear of upsetting the Muslim-Christian balance in the country (Haddad, 2004: 498).

It has an unemployment rate estimated at 9% (Chaaban, 2010: 158), and presents itself as “an archetypical example of a country holding reservations about opening the labour market to specific groups of migrants”⁸ (Tabar and Rassi, 2010: 87).

During the last formal census held in 1932, results indicated Maronite Christians as having the largest number⁹ from amongst the country’s main religious sects (Farour, 1991: 631). Lebanon’s governmental structure is based on sectarian power-sharing, a multi-confessional system in which, as a result of the 1932 majority, the president has always been a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the house a Shi’ite Muslim¹⁰ (Farour, 1991: 631).

“The grouping of people by religion plays a critical role in Lebanon’s political and social life and has given rise to Lebanon’s most persistent and bitter conflicts” (Jamali and Keshishian, 2008: 282). Religious affiliation is an important organizing mechanism in Lebanon, and is a major part of one’s political and social identity (Ajrouch and Kusow, 2007: 79). The confessional nature of the Lebanese political system, as well as society, has led to it being a nation where people concentrate themselves into group-specific neighbourhoods, and this pattern of congregating has very much coloured all spheres of daily life (Fenton, 2003: 115).

Therefore, one can assume there is a tendency to draw boundaries based, not necessarily on differences in culture but, on perceived differences in social behaviour, or ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1998: 38), and ethnic identities and boundaries, which in this context have a religious nature, play important roles. Ethnic identity mobilization (Fenton, 2003: 114) is very much a driving force in the country; it has been a powerful source of action throughout its history (Hanf, 1993: 327 and 331), one notable example being the “identity-card massacres” during the civil war¹¹. Lebanon’s political system perhaps acts as a suppressor to individual mobility, playing a key part in the way people hold on strongly to their perceived identities as it ultimately engages them in being part of communal identities and separateness (Fenton, 2003: 114).

The country comprises a small but highly complex demographic with a shared, rich, multifaceted history. The next section will use substantive evidence to explore a possible common identity by strictly looking at the self-racialization of the three main groups based on the 1932 census - the Maronite Christians, the Shi’ite Muslims and the Sunni Muslims. The analysis will look at how each group, although having strong religious identities different from one another, may have developed one common identity theme representative of the country, and how this common identity, although in constant negotiation, holds a superior standing in relation to “the Other.”

“White¹², white to the bones”

The formation of a common racialized identity

The Lebanese, he asserts, are ‘white, white to the bones, of an unalterable white, authentic, that leads to no ambiguity; a fanatical white in opposition to the Moroccan, the Algerian or the Senegalese’ (Hayek as quoted in Hage, 2005: 197)

The significance of being “white” is perhaps based on the meaning that is given to it by people. “White” as a colour category is not new to the region. Historically, “the term ‘white’ was routinely used to identify Middle Eastern peoples and distinguish them from darker-skinned ones”, and

being black was an indication of inferiority (Bonnett, 2000: 11). However, this section attempts to shift focus from the Middle East and provide closer examination of the Lebanese context in order to highlight instances where “white” shifted from being a colour category to being a racialized identity embodying a set of superior attributes.

In order to define “the Other” there should be a definition of “the Self”, of what it is to be Lebanese. Regardless of Lebanon’s diverse makeup, all Lebanese sects seem to retain “a strong identification with the Lebanese state”, with many “identifying Lebanese citizenship as more important” than their group identities (Telhami, 2007: 26). Indeed, there perhaps persists a “continuing sense of a Lebanese identity”¹³ regardless of a history of civil war, the general air of distrust¹⁴ and persistent divisions between its different groups (Abou Assi, 2006: 84). It is perhaps Lebanon’s minority composition and not being part of any regional politically dominant elite which plays a part in its need to distinguish its “Self” identity as one that is very much different to those of its neighbours (Fenton, 2003: 106).

Hence, this section will look at instances of white self-racialization regarding the three aforementioned groups. The process of racialization will be utilized in order to later examine the existence of racism in Lebanon for two main reasons: Firstly, because “the concept of racialization is indispensable” and “involves the elaboration of the dynamic and complex processes” through which racial identities and meanings are constructed (Rattansi 2005, as cited in Law, 2005: 60). And, secondly, because racism “involves negative attribution of a specified racial group” (Law, 2010: 3), a process that can be likened to racialization and which presupposes race thinking.

We commence with the self-racialization of the Maronite¹⁵ Christians, as it was through them the earliest and strongest form of Lebanese identity took shape (Salibi, 1971: 77-78), it is by them the idea of a Lebanese state came into actuality (Thompson, 2000: 39), it is among them non-Arab sentiments arose (Kaufman, 2004: 2; Salibi, 1988: 170), and it is historically with them the position of Head of the State lies.

Kamal Salibi explains in *The Lebanese Identity* that the beginning of a Lebanese entity started in the first half of the 1800s with the Shihabs, a Sunni Muslim family who converted to Christianity, and who had already inherited parts of south Lebanon. They “succeeded in extending their sway” over the whole of Mount Lebanon and that is when a Lebanese entity “emerged, separate and distinct from the rest of Syria” (1971: 76).

It was during this time, the immediate period prior to French colonial rule, the Christians of Lebanon were forming an identity of differentiation, an identity of “whiteness” as opposed to “Arabness,” possibly in an attempt to stress “religious difference from a largely Muslim environment” (Hage, 2005: 185). Indeed, it was in 1920 Lebanon became a political entity, and this was achieved with “the French, in political collision with the Maronites” (Salibi, 1988: 231-2). But it was during the French mandate period that this constructed whiteness developed with intensity, and it was then a hierarchy of identities was defined and bequeathed to the country’s post-colonial society.

During the 19th century, the Maronites of Mount Lebanon moved up in economic ranks due to their involvement in the silk trade with the French (Salibi, 1988: 104-105). And along with a climb up the economic status ladder came a move into a higher identity status. The material successes of the Maronites during the transformation of Lebanon’s economy into capitalism provided constructed “evidence” of their capabilities and advancement, and of the inferiority of other groups. It was during this period a process of self-identification as white, and what Ghassan Hage coined as identity fetishism, was set in motion (Hage, 2005).

Assertions of whiteness were made by a number of prominent Christian figures at the time. Certainly, Christianity played some part in this need to identify with whiteness¹⁶, as it became the religion of Europe and its main export, making it distinctively white for most of its history (Dyer, 1997: 17). However, the strongest assertions of whiteness manifested during the French mandate, a period of colonial paternalism (Thompson, 2000: 40). It was a time when the Maronites felt their very identity was under threat from, and challenged by, the very people they emulated, “finding hard to reconcile this belief with the idea of being themselves colonized by the French” (Hage, 2005: 196):

(But the French) have spoken too much of a civilising mission. We do not need to be civilized... More than anyone else France knew our degree of evolution. Less than anyone else can it be forgiven for confusing things (Hayek as quoted in Hage, 2005: 196).

Assertions regarding the undisputed whiteness of the Christians were made by numerous prominent figures, such as Michel Chiha¹⁷, “considered a founding father of the Lebanese Republic” (Hage, 2005: 197) who said in his 1942 seminal lecture “the Phoenician alphabet is today used by ‘the quasi-totality of the white race’. ‘To which we belong’¹⁸.”

Partly owing to the perceived threat of being a minority group in a region predominantly Muslim, and intensifying as a consequence of colonisation by the French, the self-racialization of whiteness by the Maronites “transformed into a racialized world view that saw difference from Muslims in terms of cultural hierarchy and culminated in the Christian’s self-perception as more ‘European’ than ‘Arab’, and as ‘white’” (Hage, 2005: 195).

The Maronites were not the only group in Lebanon to have adopted a “white” identity. The Shi’ites, also largely a minority group in the region, may have begun their white self-racialization during the migration waves of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period which catapulted them out of the role of “bearers of a tradition of lament and submission” (Ajami, 1984-1985: 779).

With the arrival of Lebanese Shi’ites on West African soil came the shift into a new role of “indispensable middle men between town and country” and “between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’”, “a kind of buffer which enabled the French to stay clear of becoming too ‘africanized’, too ‘wild in the hinterland” (Bigo, 1992: 509, 512-513). Yet, regardless of this intermediary position between ‘white’ and ‘black’, civilized and untamed, it seems the Shi’ites formed a white identity of their own, perhaps distinct from the European white or the Maronite white but white nonetheless.

The Shi’ite Muslims were historically at the bottom of whatever social hierarchy that took shape with the creation of the nation state:

[In the late 1940s] No more than 10 percent of the entire community lived in cities. The vast majority of the Shi’i peasantry lived on meager plots with poor soil and very limited water resources (Nasr and James, 1985: 10).

During this same period, allusions to a “white” self-racialization with regards to Lebanese Shi’ites in the midst of black Africa began to surface within written testimonials such as travelogues: “Our immigrant’ is ‘the only white’ who dares to brave the African interior” (Muruwah as quoted in Weiss, 2007: 55).

As “the negotiation of identity involves a desire to forge a sense of self that is positive” (Ajrouch and Kusow, 2007: 89-90), one can conclude the Lebanese Shi’ite who found themselves in West Africa¹⁹ underwent a process through which they removed themselves from the lowest rungs of Lebanese social hierarchy by placing another group in that position; they “internalized elements of colonial discourse and then, in an inversion, re-deployed it vis-à-vis the black Africans they encountered” (Weiss, 2007: 48).

If the Lebanese Shi’a were relegated to a kind of degraded status within the Lebanese sectarian cultural hierarchy, the integration of ‘Africa’ into Lebanese cultural hierarchies facilitated a sort of cultural ‘upward mobility’ for the Shi’a. Another way of putting this, paraphrasing Michael Herzfeld, would be to say that ‘Africa’ has occupied a particular niche in the Lebanese ‘hierarchy of value,’ one that was even more degraded than ‘The Shi’a’ (Weiss, 2007: 51).

Finally, this section looks at white self-racialization with regards to the Sunnis in Lebanon. As mentioned earlier, white as an identity was widely used in the region and “whiteness was a valued physical attribute” (Bonnett, 2000: 14). As the Sunnis are the dominant religious group in the Middle East, as “whiteness was incorporated into dominant groups’ collective identities” (Bonnett, 2000: 14), and as this majority position and “white distinction” may have had attached to it a superior class and status ranking (Goldberg, 1993: 69), one can assume a racialized white identity was also structured and adopted by the Sunnis in the region, and, plausibly, in Lebanon.

Race thinking and colour hierarchies existed in the Arab world for centuries, before and during the spread of Islam. And although both Islam and the Qur’an condemn racial prejudice and present a “colour-blind” world (Lewis, 1971: 19), in reality, colour awareness in the region was evident and held class, status, and inferiority/superiority connotations as we shall see.

With the advancement of Islam beyond the Arab world was the increased practice of slavery and slave trade. This brought about a situation of domination over another and one where inferiority is implied when one is subjugated, where “slave” began to be synonymous with “black” and where Africans were seen as an inferior race destined to be slaves (Davis 1984: 33, Lauren, 1988: 8, Lewis, 1997: 23). That is where the reluctance by the conqueror to be equal or even outranked by the conquered (Lewis, 1997: 23), regardless of what religious principles they both may be governed by, manifests²⁰.

The Sunnis of Lebanon, and of the region as a whole, may have not declared a white identity as often as the Maronites did during the mandate period when they felt that identity was under threat; nor as the Shi’ites did during the process of elevating themselves from the lowest position in Lebanese social hierarchy²¹. For the Sunnis, being the dominant group could have meant a white identity was seen as a centric identity that was not “racially seen and named” and was just a human norm (Dyer, 1997: 1). And this white identity perhaps reflected criteria by which to measure all other colours; a racialized white identity that held superior ranking in terms of intelligence, morals, values, and so on.

Before concluding this section, it should also be noted that throughout Lebanon’s history there have also been attempts to prove “Lebanese differed radically from their Arab environment, often linking them to the Phoenicians” (Hage, 2005: 197; Salibi, 1988: 171). A recent case in point is the multimillion Genographic Project²² which, as part of its objectives, sought to verify Lebanese as the descendants of Phoenicians (Antelava, 2008; LAU, 2011).

It would seem that during the Lebanese civil war²³, “Christians and Muslims often disputed their Phoenician roots, each claiming they were the true descendants” (Antelava, 2008). During the length of the Genome project this urge to equate Lebanese with Phoenician was once more made evident. The general public was particularly enthusiastic about the project, many “queuing up every day to have their DNA tested. Many, it seems, are hoping to discover their Phoenician ancestry” (Antelava, 2008). This is perhaps an indication of how “racial” identity in Lebanon does, in fact, hold much importance.

What all this highlights is that an identity of whiteness has been essentialized by different Lebanese groups and by Lebanese society as a whole, and has become an intrinsic part of self, group and, perhaps, national identification, probably more so because of the confessional nature of its society.

It is interesting to note this adoption of a white identity is not only by differently positioned communal groups, be it the “distinct” Maronite, the “majority” Sunni, or the “underprivileged” Shi’ite, but by different levels of social class within each group as well. This is the result of identity fetishism, of “not experiencing the relational reality behind their process of identification” and instead consolidating an experience of identity through religious ideology and social relations, with positive selection and negative suppression coming into play (Hage, 2005: 200).

Finally, with regards to how this plays a role in the construction of a collective, Lebanese identity, given it is a country of many minorities, it can be argued that to belong is to be “white”, to be Lebanese is to be “white”, and “whiteness becomes the mark of national belonging” (Skeggs, 2004: 19). This is not to say Lebanon is a homogenous white class of citizens and there exists a white/black divide based on this. But there is the existence of a possible unifying identity – white – amongst a diverse population that creates a sense of belonging, as well as a basis of exclusion.

Thus, in conclusion, although adopted through very different processes, it can be argued a collective self-racialization as “white” has been evident and held common between the Maronites, the Shi’ites and the Sunnis of Lebanon. “White” is a racialized identity maintained by, but not exclusive to, each group and has created “a sense of absolute difference between self and other” (Hage, 2005: 202). The existence of race thinking as a way to define confessional groups and, as this paper has argued, a national population, facilitates “the fixing of characterizations of inclusion and exclusion” (Goldberg, 1993: 80), and with this we introduce the next section of the essay: the racialization of “the Other”.

“We regret being superior to them”
Early constructions of the “Other”

‘We owe a lot to our brothers of the black and yellow race. We regret being superior to them. Nature must be unjust but what can we do about it’ (Hayek as quoted in Hage, 2005: 197).

This section shall present a brief overview of earlier constructions of the darker “Other”. It shall highlight how racial categorisation in Lebanon took root during the era of Islamic slave trade and how it continued to develop and define itself during the French mandate period. The inclusion of racialization processes during the mandate period is to emphasize the importance of how “states and citizens are constructed under colonialism and then bequeathed to their postcolonial successors” (Thompson, 2000: 1).

As previously mentioned, attitudes towards people considered darker in comparison to constructed whiteness of the Arab world were apparent during times of slave trading. The dynamics of the slave trade may have started a process of racial prejudice, positioning “whites” as natural masters (Lauren, 1988: 18 -19). Although contradictory to the doctrines of their religion, it is possible the Islamic world engaged in a form of categorizing people during enslavement within a system that encouraged some form of race thinking and discrimination which persists until today in the region.

Following the spread of Islam into Africa and Southeast Asia, it is probable Arabs began equating inferiority to people with darker complexions than theirs, as they “encountered fair-skinned people who were more advanced and darker-skinned peoples who were more primitive” (Lewis, 1971: 27). In addition, in the early 19th century, the main source of white slaves was stopped. Therefore, there was an increase in slaves taken from Africa and the use of black slaves as domestic help was common practice (Hunwick and Powell, 2002: 123). This perhaps enforced the association of darker skin with dirt (Anderson, 2000: 147, 156; Palmer: 1989: 140).

In the period prior and during the mandate period, race thinking and negative stereotyping of blacks were shaped further in Lebanon specifically through interaction with, and the influence of, the French. Although French mandate took place in the early 20th century, there was already established and frequent interactions in place between the French and the Maronites of Mount Lebanon during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, via trade (Hage, 2005: 186-189), a shared religion and missionary schooling (Kaufman, 2004: 2, 3). This early period of interaction left its mark on Lebanese society’s attitude towards “darker” peoples.

It was during this period racism in France was most significant and resilient: when, in late 18th century France, a set of laws was passed concerning the slave trade and specifically the black slave, known as *Le Code Noir* (the Black Code) which deemed African slaves as property, stressed discipline, punishment and racial segregation (Lauren, 1988: 19), and which left some companies “with the exclusive right of the trade in Negroes” (Riddell, 1925: 322); when 200 years of scientific racism culminated in 1800 and presented itself through French scientist Georges Cuvier, who “linked race with hierarchies of inferiority and superiority with whites at the top” (Law, 2010: 29); and when challenging French racial colonialism could result in image defamation such as the case with 19th century black revolutionist Toussaint L’Overture (Law, 2010: 16).

French rule in the region also played an important part in how different groups were viewed and positioned within Lebanon. It was during this period the racialized image of Senegalese soldiers²⁴ developed due to their use by the French army to quell Lebanese and Syrian revolt. Racial undertones especially manifested with Lebanese rebel groups who played on the racialized image of blacks as animalistic and dirty, through leaflets that referred “to the supposed bestiality of Senegalese soldiers whose “filth” might violate their pure women” (Thompson, 2000: 48).

“A whore market”

Migrant domestic workers as “the Other”

“At night you find whatever you want. Ethiopian women, Filipinas who have *Equamet* [residency visa]... all kinds of sexual indecency.” “Now we need a passport and visa... Look at what’s happening. There are all kinds of people [coming here]. On Saturdays and Sundays this street becomes a whore market.” (Nassar, 2011; Youtube, 2011a)

One of the themes highlighted in the MTV report is of a victimized Lebanese populace surrounded, and whose neighbourhood's value has been depreciated, by foreign presences, one type being female migrant workers. This section shall examine the racialization of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in contemporary Lebanese society.

There are an estimated 200,000 to 400,000²⁵ MDWs from Africa and Asia residing in Lebanon, making up at least 5% of the country's population. Yet, these women are subjected to exclusionary designs and practices, as well as racism. The situation of MDWs is exacerbated by not just being women in a "white", patriarchal society but also by being foreign, "darker" women involved in what is perceived as lower class, stigmatized work.

As colour is not the only signifier of racism and is not the only mode of exclusion and differentiation (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992: 100), an analysis that integrates social class, gender, and "race" will be presented here. This section shall explore how these factors interact and interrelate to result in a situation where MDWs are racialized, inferiorized and excluded, a situation through which racism clearly manifests itself in Lebanese society.

It is useful to begin with a look at gender within the Lebanese context as "racism or racial categorization involves discourses relating to subordination as well as exclusion" and as gender and race both relate to a particular representation of "natural" difference (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992: 112).

Lebanon's established patriarchal structure suggests that women, both citizens and foreigners, are still largely excluded from many facets of society. The country ranks 153rd out of 164 countries in the world regarding women's economic activity (CRTDA 2006: 7). Out of almost 4 million people only 20% of women of working age are actually in the labour force (Chaaban, 2010: 158), leaving many positioned within the confines of the private sphere. Its system of patriarchy is firmly rooted in the practical and legal aspects of daily life; it is a country where women cannot pass their nationality to their child or husband (Charafeddine, 2009: 7); and where there are no legal provisions made in the law regarding domestic violence²⁶ (BBC, 2011).

The case of MDWs is exacerbated by the *kafala* which ties each MDW to one *kafeel* (sponsor). The *kafeel* becomes wholly responsible for her legal status. This system places the MDW at the mercy of her employer and confines the worker to the private sphere of society, making MDWs even more invisible in an already highly patriarchal society.

It is perhaps understandable to assume both Lebanese and "foreign" women be brought together by a shared oppression attributable to their gender, and the plight of MDWs be of primary concern to Lebanese feminist groups. However, this does not seem to be the case; the notion of female solidarity is challenged and disadvantages migrant women disproportionately (Andall, 2000: 193) through the issue of class divisions, and racism as well, illustrating that "feminists have proved no more immune to racism than the society they inhabit" (Phillips, 1987: 6).

In Lebanese society "women are divided on many accounts, including those of ethnicity, class and citizenship" and "the social matrices of dominant – subordinate relationships occur not only between men and women but also among women", a situation where women themselves reduce other women to objects (Yeoh and Huang, 1999: 1150; Anderson, 2000: 147). In fact, many cases of abuse against MDWS are at the hands of Lebanese female employers (HRW, 2010).

The nature of work undertaken by MDWs has perhaps always been marked in Lebanon by class divisions and, of recent, “race” divisions. Initially, domestic labour did not always fall on foreign workers from African or Asia. It was occupied by Arab women who were less vulnerable as “there was a shared culture with an understanding that family honour was at stake” (Jureidini, 2003: 1). However, this dynamic changed for a number of reasons²⁷, resulting in an altered industry composition.

Foreign women engaging in work perceived as dirty is significant as “dirt is not a scientific fact, but a principal means to arrange culture” and dirtiness is often grouped with other qualities that justify social rankings of race, class and gender (Palmer, 1989: 139, 140). As one report explains, even “if Lebanese workers were able to receive higher wages for the same occupations performed by foreign labour, the culture of shame surrounding cleaning [...] would cause Lebanese job seekers to avoid these occupations” (Chaaban, 2010: 185).

As explained by Floya Anthias, “migrants are already class subjects before migration and the forms of exclusion they face in the society of migration are compounded by their class as well as their migrant status and racialization” (1992, 32). This situation is further worsened by the process of inferiorization these women go through at the hands of Lebanese female employers who use them to attain desired class privileges and who reinforce gendered power relations in Lebanon rather than challenge them. This is partly owing to a process of patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti, 1988).

“In classic patriarchy, subordination to men is offset by the control older women attain over younger women” (Kandiyoti, 1988: 279) or in this case the control of Lebanese women over their foreign female maid. Here we see a situation where the inferiority of one social group is offset by the placement of another group in that position, and where inferiority is implied through the type of work and its class positioning.

The previous paragraphs have skimmed the topic of how domestic labour has been racialized and associated with certain nationalities and, consequently, colour categories. Indeed, race thinking and racialization have played a part in creating a society where racism has become an integral part of MDWs everyday experiences. Certainly, it can be argued the racialization of domestic labour is so firmly established that where Asian and African “female migrants are employed, their principal employment occupation is that of domestic worker” (Andall, 2000: 19) and this “limits opportunities for penetrating different spheres of labour activity” (Andall, 2000: 225).

Employment gatekeepers also play a role in the racialization of domestic work. They engage in practices such as catalogue shopping, which perpetuates the commodification of African and Asian women (Abu-Habib, 1998: 53-54). They also encourage ideas of “racial characteristics”²⁸ and help to produce “racial” differentiations not only within Lebanese society but also amongst the different migrant communities²⁹ (Parreñas, 2001: 174; Anderson, 2000: 155).

Specific nationalities in Lebanon have been further racialized and used to describe different types of stigmatized work, such as the use of “Sri Lankieh”³⁰ to mean “maid” regardless of the maid’s country of origin (Lutz, 2010; Anderson, 2000: 156), and “Habashiyeh”³¹ which has become somewhat synonymous with “prostitute”.

Finally, the process of racializing “the Other” has also involved the construction of moral standards. The MTV report portrayed victimized citizens faced with a foreign female population who act immorally and a male migrant populace who act criminally, implying that Lebanese men

and women do not. This situation not only highlights a situation where “race” intersects with notions of citizenship and nationality (Anderson, 2000: 147), it also leads to the assignment of negative stereotypes to “the Other” and uses morality as a scene of legitimizing and justifying opinions, acts and actions (Goldberg, 1993: 14).

According to Goldberg, morals are “key in defining the interactive ways social subjects see others and conceive (of) themselves” (1993: 14). As Lebanon is a nation of people who “belong first and foremost to their religious confession” (McDowall, 1983: 7), constructed standards of morals/virtue play a large part in the way people interact with one another and are used to emphasize differences, be it in culture or social behaviour (Barth, 1998: 14). Morality then becomes part of the many intersecting subordinations experienced by MDWs.

This is a theme which manifests in the MTV report. The report conjures up “facts” about the deteriorating state of Lebanese society’s social values and moral fibre as a consequence of these foreign workers. Assigning a set of constructed morality/virtuousness to one’s self that is different and superior to that of others is one way of stereotyping. Stereotyping characterizes “the representation of subordinated social groups and is one means by which they are categorised and kept in their place” (Dyer, 1997: 12). Indeed, the construction of shared morals and values play a part in exclusionary practices, “othering” and racism, and negative stereotyping becomes a justification for discrimination and racism.

All these processes and factors have led to a situation where “ethnic minority women tend to be losers, for they are the meeting point of the intersection of class, ethnic and gender disadvantage and exclusion” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992: 123), and where all these intersecting oppressions contribute to the creation of a racist society.

“Animals” and “niggers”

Racism in contemporary Lebanon

“We need to start facing racism. It is not unique to Lebanon, but we haven’t started tackling the problem yet. Many unacceptable things are tolerated and embraced here” (Houry as quoted in Ali, 2009).

The process of racializing “darker” people, the dominance of domestic work by women from Africa and Asia, and the existence of various processes such as inferiorization, negative stereotyping, boundary building, and so on, has resulted in a Lebanese society where racism proliferates.

Racism manifests itself through various avenues in Lebanon: in music videos where MDWs are portrayed in racist stereotypes such as the unintelligence of Sri Lankan maids (Rousseau, 2010); through song lyrics that refer to black people as monkeys (Shenker, 2009); in news headlines that emphasize nationality with wrongdoing even in the case of lack of evidence (Galey, 2010); through weak and inflammatory reporting (Mohsen, 2011); and through product branding such as Negro sponge³² and *Ras Al Abd* candy³³.

The existence of racist attitudes and behaviour in public and private spheres of Lebanese society seem to have been highlighted only over the recent years, such as with the 2010 raid and subsequent physical and verbal abuse of Sudanese at a fundraiser in Beirut who were called “animals” and “niggers” by members of the police force (Mroueh, 2010), and the arguably racist views by members of the security forces³⁴ (Youtube, 2011b).

In the region as a whole, the word *abd* which translates to “slave” has become synonymous with black people (Davis, 1984: 33; Anderson, 2000: 156), and “may still be heard with reference to Africans and Sri Lankans” (Jureidini, 2003: 1).

Exclusionary designs and practices have taken shape in Lebanese society: ranging from spatial exclusion of MDWs from the pools of private swimming resorts (Ali, 2009; North, 2009), where the main identifier of profession is indeed physical (Youtube, 2010)³⁵; to institutional exclusion such as continuous non-provision in Lebanese Labour Law; to spatial inequality within the sphere of the home which signifies the lesser social status of the MDW (Parreñas, 2001: 105).

All this has also led to situations where racism is experienced beyond the realm of “darker”, “foreign”, “low class”, women involved in “dirty work” to those where “African and Asian men and women who hold prestigious positions (diplomats, professionals) being mistaken for servants and treated with contempt” (Jureidini, 2003: 1); and where Lebanese citizens of mixed heritage also experience racism (Lee, 2009).

It is a country characterized by strong kinship or, perhaps more appropriately, ethnic groupings, boundaries and mobilizations, based strongly on religious identity; institutionalised discrimination; exclusionary designs, practices and language; arbitrary arrests of migrants and refugees; and a work sponsorship system that has created situations likened to modern-day slavery.

And, as this paper has argued, it is a nation where race thinking, racialization and racism manifest perhaps in an unapologetic and overt manner, but where practices of race thinking and racism are often denied and scarcely challenged.

In summary and in conclusion, by using Ian Law’s *Six Core Elements of Racism* (2010: 134), we see clearly a situation where racism exists in various facets of contemporary Lebanese society through: the signification of race characteristics to identify a collectivity (the racialization of “Self” and “Other”); the attribution of negative biological or cultural characteristics (the construction of different moral standards, racial categorisations, exclusionary practices); the designation of boundaries to specify inclusion and exclusion (ethnic grouping and boundaries, *kafala*, exclusion from public spaces); variation in form in that it may be a relatively coherent theory or a loose assembly of images and explanations; its practical adequacy; in that it is successfully “makes sense” of the world for those who articulate it (views expressed by members of the public and security forces); and its pleasures (songs, lyrics, product branding).

Notes

1. The quote is originally in Arabic and has been roughly translated by me. See *Annex I* for the screen shot of the Facebook post that holds the original text.

2. MTV is an independent Lebanese media station. It’s current chairman and CEO is Michel El Murr, nephew of well-known Lebanese politician also named Michel El Murr. Part of the promise of MTV is “providing its viewers with content that informs, entertains, develops minds and ripens individuals, free of any bias.” For more details, visit www.mtv.com.lb

3. *Kafala* is used in several practices in the region, such as the sponsorship system mentioned in this essay. *Kafala* in this context ties the MDW to one sponsor, who becomes solely responsible for the legal status of the employee. The 2010 *Without Protection* report details the problems that arise with this restrictive system (HRW, 2010).

Interestingly, another use of *kafala* concerns the practice of adoption. In this context, *kafala* is used as a means “to preserve blood ties as the only way of creating filiation” (ISS/IRC, 2007). It is interesting to note a theme of paternalism similar to the practice of *kafala* as an employment sponsorship system, and may perhaps explain why many MDWs are encouraged to refer to their employers by parental titles, such as *baba* (father).

See *Annex II* for the complete factsheet (No. 50) from International Social Services (ISS) on *kafala* and adoption. To download a copy, go to: <http://www.iss-ssi.org/2009/assets/files/thematic-facts-sheet/eng/50.Kafala%20eng.pdf>

4. Reporting by the voluntary sector is done through websites such as Migrant Rights (<http://www.migrant-rights.org/category/news/lebanon/>) and Ethiopian Suicides (<http://ethiopiansuicides.blogspot.com/>).

5. The majority of migrant workers in Lebanon come from Ethiopia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India and Nepal (Chaaban, 2010: 183).

6. The Abou Assi report claims that nearly half (45%) of the Lebanese population have a problem with having foreign workers as neighbours.

7. Some sources estimate this number to be around 200,000 (HRW, 2010), while others estimate it to be as much as 400,000 (Nallu and Anderson, 2011).

8. This is despite the fact that the work migrant workers do is often dangerous, dirty, underpaid and generally undesirable to the Lebanese public (Tabar and Rassi, 2010: 95).

9. It is believed the numbers of these three groups changed shortly after the 1932 census, with the Maronites losing majority status (Thompson, 2000: 82; Faour, 1991: 631).

10. The allocation of governmental positions was agreed upon in the 1943 National Pact, an unwritten pact that has been accepted, practiced and largely uncontended until present day (Faour, 1991: 631).

11. “Lebanese identity papers record confession – and the holder’s name usually betrays it anyway. Hundreds of Muslims were killed simply because they were Muslims and hundreds of Christians simply because they were Christians” (Hanf, 1993: 327).

12. I have heard similar opinions of a perceived white Lebanese identity during my time in Lebanon. One recent example is an incident that took place during a street festival in Beirut in 2011. I was asked, along with two brothers, by a random man where we were from. As the three of us were Lebanese by nationality - we each have Lebanese fathers and are Lebanese citizens - I answered with “We’re Lebanese.” The immediate reaction was one of shock and the response that followed was “You don’t look Lebanese!” I decided rather than explain our mixed heritage to ask “How should a Lebanese look like?” to which the man responded “Well, white, like me.”

13. Ibid.

14. The Abou Assi report states that an “intimidating 86% of respondents indicated mutual distrust in fellow citizens”.

15. A uniate Catholic church found in Lebanon (Salibi, 1971: 76).

16. According to *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations* (Cashmore, 1996: 378) whiteness “developed in contradiction to blackness, which has a longer genealogy, stretching back to the Christian period when the color acquired negative connotations and became associated with sin and darkness.”

17. Michel Chiha was, in fact, a Chaldean Christian (Salibi, 1988: 179) and not Maronite.

18. Ibid.

19. Ajrouch and Kusow (2007) also demonstrate a process of “whitening” which Lebanese Shi’ite immigrants experienced in the United States, during migration waves in the 1970s and early to mid-80s.

20. I acknowledge some controversy exists regarding the works of Bernard Lewis but I feel the point he makes here is of importance and validates the argument I wish to present.

21. I recognize Lebanese Sunnis may have shared similar experiences, defending their “white” identity during early waves of migration (Hage, 2005: 185; Gualtieri, 2001), and their interactions outside Lebanon may have shaped their identities in Lebanon as well. However, here I focus on a constructed white identity based on the Sunnis’ presence as a majority group in the region.

22. The project was supported by a grant from National Geographic's Committee for Research and Exploration, and involved the genetics lab at the Lebanese American University in Beirut (Antelava, 2008; LAU, 2011).

23. The Lebanese civil war lasted 15 years, from 1975 to 1990 (Knio, 2005: 227).

24. See *Annex I* for a scanned page from Thompson’s book (2000), showing a caricature of a leering Senegalese soldier holding a scared Lebanese woman wearing the Phrygian cap of Marianne (who Thompson describes as a French symbol of democracy). The original image was printed in 1943, in the Beirut magazine *al-Dabbur*.

25. Ibid., 7.

26. There is presently a draft law on the issue of domestic violence in Lebanon. However, it has met stiff opposition from religious figures and conservative politicians in the country, with one body describing the law as a “Western idea” that would “undermine the position of the man in his family” (BBC, 2011).

27. It should be noted that one reason is Lebanese policy-makers who have encouraged a high influx of foreign workers “to take the available low-skilled jobs” rather than “address the issue of high reservation wages” in the country (Chaaban, 2010:185).

28. Such as how these women are “naturally” good at domestic work, which nationalities are easier to control, which are less argumentative, and so on (Anderson, 2000: 153, 155).

29. For example, Filipinas reproduce, claim and embrace their “racial” differentiation (largely constructed by agencies and employers) from blacks and highlight the distinction they have as the educated domestics, i.e., the ones who speak English better.

30. It means “Sri Lankan” in Arabic.

31. It is a Lebanese colloquial term used to refer to Ethiopians, with probable roots from the word *Habesha*, which Ethiopians and Eritreans use to refer to themselves. The Arabic word for “Ethiopian” is actually الاثيوبية, “Al Ethiopiya”.

32. The product is also referred to as *leef al abd* (slave/nigger loofah). See *Annex I* for images of the product.

33. The brand name translates to “head of the slave/nigger”. The product name was recently changed to *Tarboush*, but it is still referred to by its former name and the Facebook group for the brand has retained the former name in its title. See *Annex I* for an image of the product.

34. I use the term “arguably” here for the following reasons:

The video is entitled *Police Racism Hits the Fan*. However, based solely on the available footage, the assumption of racism on the part of the police officer seems premature, perhaps mainly functioning to promote the cause of the group who filmed the video (Antiracism Movement, <http://antiracismmovement.blogspot.com/>).

The officer is caught on camera saying (in rough translation): “Lebanon can’t contain migrants and refugees or tatatata.... and not one that killed in his own country and comes to our country. What we have is enough; the country is tight on us [as in space]. A person not coming in urgency does not need to come to us.”

It remains debatable whether the views expressed by the police officer are racist or purely xenophobic, as he does express some degree of exclusion and boundaries (“our country”) and negative attribution (by assuming all refugees are murderers), but he does not express clearly a view of the inferiority of refugees.

35. The Youtube video shows two members of Antiracism Movement, both Lebanese, and a third individual who is Madagascan attempting to gain entry into a private swimming resort in Beirut. The person at the front desk singles out the third individual, asking the other two who she is, and finally refuses her entry after being told she is a maid.

Appendix

Annex I

Lebanese Resistance by LF- | x THE DAILY STAR :: News | x The University of Leeds Por | x Leeds University Library Cat | x mtv news lebanon - YouTu | x

www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=179941685420957

facebook Search Nisreen Kaj Home


 bouwai w terkhi lebanon la soraba wi
 October 17 at 10:40pm · Like · 3


Sam Nassif والو وين الرجال اللبناني ؟
 October 17 at 11:30pm · Like · 1 · Translate


Djarc Saba shou haida ya 3ami bala ma trekdo wara shi ma elo ta3mi sa3do hal 3alam 3ala halsibe yalli henni fiya wkebb hal ajanib kelloun barrat lebanon
 October 18 at 12:02am · Like · 1


Majed Wakim meshketna ne7na lebneyi mnedrot men tiz wes3a kel beit fi kedmi aw 2
 October 18 at 1:58am · Like · 2


Raema Taouk Can some one pls translate?
 October 18 at 2:14am · Like


Francis Kassir I can feel the tide. a lot of non christians are settled, incidences of christian desecration and the infiltration of Saudi and Gulf arabs with the lure of their dirty money. It fits with the bigger picture in the muddle east, doesn't it?
 October 18 at 3:30am · Like · 1


Lebanese Resistance by LF-Kataeb-NLP-Cedar Guards-Tanzim must be shareddddd
 October 18 at 6:55am · Like · 1


Angel SaMau eh wala ma3oun 7a2 , btnzal k2ank seret bi kaza balad w chi 2araf w chi medre kif, alla ynajina menoun!!!
 October 18 at 7:13am · Like · 1


Daniel Serghany ya 3aybechoum !!
 October 18 at 8:05am · Like · 1

The quote is that of Angel SaMau, October 18 at 7:13am: “eh wala ma3oun 7a2 , btnzal k2ank seret bi kaza balad w chi 2araf w chi medre kif, alla ynajina menoun!!!”

Appendix
Annex I



18. "Here is Our New [National] Emblem"
Al-Dabbur, a Beirut magazine, celebrated Lebanese independence in 1943 with this cover, depicting a pair of male and female citizens and the country's new emblem on the man's shield. The woman wears the cap of Marianne, French symbol of democracy. She appears as much a captive as a companion of the male citizen.

Source: *al-Dabbur* 21 (December 6, 1943) front cover.



19. "For the Sake of France"
 Earlier in 1943, *al-Dabbur* had printed another cartoon featuring a captive Marianne: She was embraced—or kidnapped—by a leering Senegalese

Homepage

Brand	Product Range	Perfect Surfaces	Quality	Contact
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Welcome to NEGRO - Middle East's Number 1 Steel Wool

Here you will find what is behind the success of NEGRO: Over 100 years of experience in manufacturing steel wool, a wide range of consumer-oriented products and reliable delivery services which satisfy customers in many countries of the Middle East region.





[Brochure \(PDF, 2 MB\)](#) [Print version](#)



This image was retrieved on January 5, 2012 from the following source:
<http://www.kabobfest.com/2010/02/update-on-lebanons-negro-maytha-does-some-investigative-reporting.html>

Appendix
Annex I



This image was retrieved on January 5, 2012 from the following source:
<http://www.gandour.com/family.aspx?MID=3&CatID=CCD&ID=CNL>

For the product Facebook group, go to:
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Ras-l-3abed-Tarboush-/9560375269?sk=wall>

Appendix
Annex II

**Fact Sheet
N° 50**

Specific case

KAFALAH

Even though the institution of kafalah is of growing interest to many receiving countries, its meaning, its origin and the variety of its practices within the Muslim world remain quite unknown for most Western professionals. The information gathered by the ISS/IRC is summarised in this fact sheet in order to give the reader some general ideas about this specific child protection measure, as recognised by article 20 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Source

Kafalah finds its origin in the Sharia. The Sharia is a set of rules, which governs the life of a Muslim. It is based on different sources, including the Koran, the Sunna (teachings from the Prophet's life), the Ijma and the Qiyas (collection of case-law), as well as other sources such as customary law, the opinion of savants, the Old Testament, etc. Different schools of thought have influenced the development of the Sharia, beginning with the distinction among Sunni, Shiite, Ismailia, etc. In addition, the social and historical evolution of the various Muslim societies have played an important role in the way the Sharia is understood and applied: some apply a strict reading of the Sharia, while some other Muslim countries have incorporated the religious sources into their legal system, but with a more or less important degree of adaptation.

The prohibition of adoption, as a means to create new filiation bonds, is based on an interpretation of two verses of Sura N° 33 of the Koran and is seen by Sharia law as a falsification of the natural order of society. It is declared *haram* (forbidden) in order to preserve blood ties as the only way of creating filiation. The preservation of inheritance rights and the protection of the surname also play an important role in Muslim social traditions.

However, the Koran gives an important place to orphans and to their protection; it values the care of an orphan in one's home. The child should be treated as a biological child, but he/she is not entitled to the same rights as the latter (in particular the name and inheritance). Thus, kafalah is the model proposed by the Sharia in this respect.

Definition

Kafalah is usually defined as "the commitment to voluntarily take care of the maintenance, of the education and of the protection of a minor, in the same way as a father would do it for his son" (art. 116 Family Code of Algeria). Kafalah creates the following effects: exercise of the parental authority and the obligation of maintenance of the caregiver on the one hand, and persistence of the family bonds and preservation of the child's family status on the other.

Different practices in different countries

As the Muslim world is very diverse, the following examples illustrate the fact that it is necessary to put any kafalah decision in its national context in order to understand its meaning. A special focus is put on the potential "international" aspect of a kafalah.

a) *Countries with strict application of a "non international kafalah"*: Iran, Mauritania, Egypt.

They reject kafalah at the international level, based on a strict interpretation of the Sharia and rejecting all equivalence between kafalah and adoption. Thus, abandoned children only have limited possibilities to leave their country in order to benefit from a placement abroad, except by relatives. At national level, child placements in non-biological families exist, but remain very limited or outside the legal framework (for example, traditional family placements).

b) *Countries with a "case-by-case" solution.* Morocco, Algeria, Jordan and Pakistan.

They estimate that the situation of children deprived of family and the lack of national applicants for kafalah is such that it may be necessary to allow international kafalah, as long as the applicants respect some of the procedural conditions for a kafalah (for example, the conversion to Islam).

- Morocco allows for international placements of abandoned children, in favour of nationals living abroad, but also by foreigners.

- In Pakistan, according to law, non-Muslim children may be adopted by non-Muslim applicants, whether nationals or foreigners. However, it is very difficult to find evidence of this practice and to know how the procedures are dealt with.

- Algeria and Jordan have systems, which privilege national candidates, but both countries allow for the placement of children abroad, either with nationals or with foreigners, under the condition that they have the same religion as the child, meaning that they are Muslim. However, international placements remain rare and documented to a limited extent.

It is to be noted that in Jordan, the word kafalah refers to the monthly financial support

granted to children living with a single parent (for the greater part the mother).

c) *Countries having legislation on adoption or on the "conversion" of kafalah:* Tunisia and Indonesia.

Even though they are very much attached to Islamic values, these countries allow for adoption, with full legal consequences in relation to filiation. However, by law (in Indonesia) or by practice (in Tunisia), adoption is limited to national applicants, living in the country or abroad, but of the same religion as the child.

Common findings

- In the great majority of these countries, national legislation explicitly prohibits adoption, with a particular emphasis on concordance of religion between the adults and the child. The concept based in the Koran is respected and is the basis of this choice.

- The reasons for abandonment are very similar from one country to another: children born out of wedlock are the first victims of abandonment, and may remain stigmatised throughout their life.

- The issues of secrecy of kafalah and the name of the abandoned child are direct consequences of the previous issue, but efforts are being made, in an increasing number of countries, to oppose this practice.

- With the exception of Morocco, the international placement of children under kafalah remains rare, or even inexistent, except for nationals living abroad. However, it seems that individual cases have been processed over the years, but it is very difficult to have them documented.

ISS/IRC, December 2007

For more information:

BARGACH Jamila, *Orphans of Islam: Family, Abandonment, and Secret Adoption in Morocco*, Rowman & Littlefield Pub Inc, Mars 2002, pp. 304

We are interested in your opinion! To tell us your experiences, ask us your questions about the themes addressed in this file, or to send us your suggestions for changes, don't hesitate to write to us at irc-cir@iss-ssi.org. We also invite you to share this file with other interested persons in your country. Thanks in advance!

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