

The Comoros: Encounter With Their Reality



THE archipelago includes four islands: Grand Comoro, Anjouan, Mayotte, and Mohéli, located at the northern entrance of the Mozambique Canal between 11° and 13° south latitude and $40^{\circ} 30'$ and $43^{\circ} 10'$ east longitude. It is 500 km from Madagascar and approximately 300 km from the eastern coast of the African continent. Volcanic islands, they are very fertile; green all the year round. Like every tropical country they have only two seasons: one a dry season from May to October and the other a wet season from November to April (great torrential rains). They enjoy alternately both the monsoon and the trade winds, and their highest point is Karthala, whose peak rises to 2500 meters.

The archipelago of the Comoros has a median temperature of 27° . There are no large savage animals.

HISTORY

The islands' history is largely unknown. According to an Arabic manuscript found in Mayotte, the first inhabitants were Arabs under the reign of the prophet Suleiman Ben Daoud: two Arabs with their women, children, and servants. Later Africans from the East coast of Africa came.

Between 1500 and 1506 there was a Portuguese invasion. But the Portuguese did not stay long, since the wholly Muslim population had nothing to do with the Portuguese Christians. They say that Islam was introduced into the Comoros under the reign of the Omayyads (Ottoman caliph) about 940 a.d.

About the year 360 of the Hégira, the Chirrazianos came to the Comoros. Slave trade which was very much practiced in the Comoros, brought many blacks there from Africa and Madagascar, although it is difficult and almost impossible to distinguish the different groups. There were also Madagascans. These ranges of origins were merged in time to produce the present day Comoro in which the African dominates. Arab characteristics are very strong, especially in the coastal cities.

The Comoro is entirely different from the Madagascan from every point of view: culture, language, customs; on the other hand nothing distinguishes him from the African of the eastern coast.

Before colonization, Swahili and Arabic were the official languages.

Although each island was independent, the sultan or reigning family was the same for the four islands. This proves the ethnic and religious unity of the population of the archipelago. Mayotte was the first island colonized, in 1841. The strategic position, coasts easily accessible in all seasons, and by ships of any tonnage, attracted the greed of France which hastened to sign protective treaties with the sultans, which would then be violated by declaring the islands French colonies. Subjected first to the authority of the Governor-General of Reunion, they served as a base of infiltration for the French colonization of Madagascar (1895) before finally being joined to it in 1912. Recognized from then on as a dependency of Madagascar, the archipelago was turned into a liability.

This annexation was fatal for us also because the taxes on the Comoros and the "aid" from the metropolis was always held in Tananarive. A psychological factor also played a role in its oblivion and that is that the Comoro, with his Afro-Islamic culture and fanatically religious, felt at a disadvantage next to his Asian Christian Madagascan brother; on the other hand the inability of Christianity to penetrate the Comoros worried the French. From that time on the Comoro populations knew and still know the worst moments of depersonalization, of humiliation, and of exploitation practiced by colonialism and feudalism.

From 1946 on, as with all the French colonies, the archipelago has been represented in the French National Assembly and the representation was made by Said Mohamed Cheikh un-

til 1962. At the same time a consultative council was created. All the members were recruited from the noble families of the country (thus feudal) and from functionaries known for their docility toward the administration.

In 1952 the Comoros gained financial autonomy and the Consultative Council became the General Council of the territory, under the authority of a chief administrator who was responsible to the Governor General of Madagascar until 1960, date of the latter's independence which represented the total separation of the islands from Madagascar. It was then that the archipelago was given the status of a French overseas territory with its own administrative organization.

POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE SITUATION

As a French overseas territory, which covers close to 3000 km² and with 500 000 inhabitants, the archipelago juridically forms an integral part of the French Republic, one and indivisible. It is represented in the metropolis by two deputies to the French National Assembly, a senator and a member of the Economic and Social Council. A law of December 22, 1961, amended December 7, 1967, confers on the territory a false administrative autonomy, officially called "internal autonomy" in order to confuse public opinion.

A High Commissioner of the French Republic retains almost all powers:

- a) defense and security, foreign relations;
- b) civil law and common right;
- c) in charge of the protection of the

people's rights and liberties, individual or collective, recognized by the French constitution: money, treasury, credit, foreign exchange and commerce, press, radio transmission, television, citizenship, the police, and higher education (this does not exist). He is qualified to annul or modify the decisions of the local chamber or dissolve it if he judges it necessary because of French interests; he also controls the legality of the actions of local authorities and undertakes nullification procedures; for these reasons, Comoro administrative acts and deliberations are submitted to him before being exercised, published or put into action by the Council of the Comoro Government.

With all these overwhelming powers of the High Commissioner, the law pretends that it wants to give the constitutional organizations (Chamber of Deputies, Government Council) a wider latitude in some cases. We ask which.

The 31 members of the Territorial Assembly, known until then as the General Counsellors, actually have the name of deputies of the Comoros and are elected for five years in a parody of universal suffrage; they have two ordinary sessions a year which do not last more than two weeks and each one earns 80 000 francs monthly (CFA, or the equivalent of US \$320); election is by one list and majority vote for collective candidates, without preferential vote (a law inspired by a French law of 1817, after the fall of Napoleon).

The candidates are designated by a handful of bureaucrats who are part of the native feudalism (families of sultans and nobles) and the colonial bourgeoisie (the French colonials). This group, which enjoys the total support of the administration and of the foreign monopolies (French and India), forms a class of privileged intermediaries between the Comoro masses and the colonial authorities. That is why we have had the same persons or the same families in the Territorial Assembly since 1946. If theoretically any Comoro can be elected, the same is not true for eligibility; in effect, to be elected one must know how to read, write, and speak French well (scarcely 1% of the Comoros speak French).

Practically speaking there is no universal suffrage but rather a pure and simple nomination since the people are kept totally outside of political life; political parties that fight for independence, demonstrations, meetings are prohibited; there is a total lack of press and means of communication, the collaboration of the Comoro oligarchy with the administration created a police state and France rejects every reform that would permit the population to participate democratically in the political life of the country. There is no need to stress the campaign of intimidation and threats which colonialism and its agents take against all popular protests.

THE GOVERNMENT COUNCIL

It is composed of six to eight ministers, the number being fixed by law, and is responsible to the Chamber. The President is elected by the Cham-



ber and together with his ministers (whom it is said he himself names) is invested by decree of the High Commissioner of the Republic. This Council is concerned with internal affairs and is presided over by Said Mohamed Cheikh, former Comoro representative in the French National Assembly.

— **Said Mohamed Cheikh, President:** doctor in the local medical service (AMI), left the medical school of Tananarive in 1926; selected by France, represented the Comoros in the Bourbon Palace from 1946 to 1962.

— **Said Ibrahim:** or Prince, as he calls himself, son of the Sultan Said Omar, who signed with France the protectorate for the island of Grand Comoro; former native governor, Deputy to the French National Assembly, also President of the Chamber.

— **Ahmed Abdallah:** big landowner and trader; Senator in France and Deputy to the Chamber of the Comoro Islands.

— **Mohamed Ahmed:** royal family of Anjouan; former native governor, Deputy to the French National Assembly and the Chamber of the Comoro Islands.

— **Marcel Henri:** native of Sainte Marie (Madagascar); former functionary, member of the Economic Council (he is for a departamentalization of the Comoros).

— **Said Mohamed Dahalani:** nephew of Said Mohamed Cheikh; former regional chief, Minister of the Interior, and Deputy from the Comoros.

— **Said Mohamed Djohar:** nephew of Said Mohamed Cheikh, former pri-

mary school instructor, Minister of Social Affairs.

— **Affane Mohamed:** nephew of Ahmed Abdallah; former primary school instructor, Senator, Deputy from the Comoros, and Minister of Public Works.

— **Salim Ben Ali:** brother-in-law of Mohamed Dahalani; ex-notary, Deputy, and Minister of Public Affairs.

— **Ahmed Dahalani:** nephew of Said Mohamed Cheikh; Administrative-Secretary, Deputy from the Comoros, former Minister of Economy, is currently Prefect of Grand Comoro.

— **Mohamed Djaffar:** son-in-law of Said Mohamed Cheikh and nephew of Said Ibrahim; Secretary of Administration, Deputy, and former Minister of the Comoros.

— **Nakib Said:** brother of Said Ibrahim; Administrative-Secretary, Deputy from the Comoros.

— **Said Omar M. Saidi:** nephew of Said Ibrahim; primary school instructor, Deputy of the Comoros.

— **Mohamed Chanfi,** nephew of Said Mohamed Cheikh; former regional chief, Deputy.

— **Prince Bourhane Hamid:** nephew of Said Mohamed Cheikh and of M. Djaffar; deputy functionary.

— **Mohamed Elarif:** nephew of Said Ibrahim; chief of the Chadhouli Confraternity of Anjouan, big trader, Deputy.

— **Hector Rivière:** french colonel, monopolist.

— **Legrand:** french colonel, Deputy, monopolist.

— **Toybou Dada:** Indian, primary school instructor, Deputy.

This is a brief account of the present "leaders" of the Comoros.

The action of the members of the local chambers who have not belonged to a political party like those of the Government Council, is not governed by any principle and they are at the mercy of the Administration. We should add that the Colonial Administration and its agents exploit religious fanaticism against every demand and accuse the nationalists of being communists.

For her part, France is preparing to construct a military base on the island of Mayotte. The plans have been under way for three years. The Minister of State in charge of overseas affairs in Courve de Murville's Cabinet, M. Inchauspe, confirmed it in his speech during a trip to the Comoros, March 25 to 28, 1969. There are more than four French regiments, mostly legionnaires, in the Comoros. To underline the strategic importance of this island, it is enough to note that in 1942 when Petain compromised himself with the Germans, the British army occupied the Comoro islands, with Mayotte as its headquarters to prevent German infiltration through the Mozambique canal (evacuation in 1946).

Moreover, France indulges in the maneuver of divide and conquer: this is what she did in December of 1967 in amending the famous law of 1961 which created what is called the personality of each island, seizing on the fraudulent elections of 1958 to oppose the idea of the country's independence. We cite the declaration of Bil-

lote, former Minister of the Territories and Overseas Departments, before the French Parliament on December 7 at the time of the debate on the amendment:

We need not hide the fact that we are reaching the final stage and the modifications that have been proposed will permit its achievements; over and above this we will emerge from the mark of the Republic in which in 1958 the peoples of the archipelago chose to remain The project itself answers the four concerns that inspired its development . . . to define the conditions which will express the personalities of the different islands of the archipelago, each forming a subdivision with its own affairs.

MOLINACO vigorously opposed and denounced these proposals whose only purpose is to prevent our unity which is ethnic and religious (100% muslims) and hold back the activities of a general movement of struggle for independence. This reform is also conceived to favor procolonialist feudalism on each island.

Before continuing with the chapter on the economic and social field, let us emphasize that if the members of the Government Council are physically autonomous, their cabinets are directed by the French in the guise of technical advisers.

ECONOMIC SITUATION

The sources of the country are exclusively agricultural at the present time. From an exceptionally fertile soil, the archipelago produces various tropical products:

- 1) Vanilla: 145 119 tons (second place following Madagascar)
- 2) Coconut fibre: 4 178 249 tons
- 3) Essence of perfume: 70% of the french production, according to official figures
- 4) Sisal: 525 800 tons
- 5) Cocoa, cloves, coffee, pepper
- 6) Wood
- 7) Earth (lava for construction) 2846 tons.

These statistics are from 1967.

The food crops are bananas, tapio-
ca, sweet potatoes, yams, bread fruit,
and various fruits in considerable
quantity. The horticultural cultiva-
tion is found around the large cities.

Nevertheless, the undernourishment
of the people reaches an alarming ex-
tent due to the fact that three-quarters
of the cultivable area belongs to for-
eigners (French and Indian), as well
as to the bourgeois feudalists who
wholly control the industrial products
(for exportation). This obliges the
territory to import many of its food
products, especially rice.

As a main example we mention the
figures of the National Statistical in-
stitute of Economic Studies (INSEE,
a French organization):

"In 1962, Anjouan Island, more
than 100 000 hectares:

Percentage without food:

Morning: 52.8%

Mid-day: 33.8%

Night: 7.3%

there is an absence of milk, fish is
a scarce food, meat in the nature of a
luxury."

Costs make up more than 85% of
incomes. The peasant is an agricul-
tural worker or sharecropper. The
lack of any kind of trade union and
legislation concerning sharecropping
exposes the peasant to the whim of
the landowner. Let us stress that the
peasant is paid 5 francs (CFA; IFF)
per kilo of flowers picked; to collect
20 kg a day he must bring his wife and
children to work, which will earn him
100 francs (CFA); rice costs 65 francs
(CFA) a kilo.

To show the domination of the co-
lonialist and feudal bourgeoisie in
the country, we use two examples both
drawn from the report of the French
Parliamentary Commission of Finan-
ces, General Economy and Plan for
the Department of Reunion and for
the Comoro Territory (1963), and Mr.
J. P. Tarty:

a) These resources are weak, ex-
clusively agricultural. Actually and
above all they are exploited by a
society, the **Pambao**, which profits
from a quasi-monopoly whose con-
cessions, economic, and fiscal system
seem to us to merit a profound
study.

b) The existence of a historic Co-
moro feudalism and the domination
by certain large associations of the
Comoro economy. Increasingly, the
feudal structure serves the great
French associations which hold the
archipelago in their dependency.
Thus the **Comores-Bambao Associa-
tion** whose headquarters are on
Boulevard Haussman in Paris, close-

ly linked with the Nioumakels societies (Angouan), the Commercial Society of the Comoros (Grand Comoro) and the Society of Perfume Plants (Mayotte)... The diverse measures proposed are only secondary if they are not accompanied by a structural reform, that is to say, an agrarian reform. The domination exercised by the large companies must diminish, the local aristocracy must also accept the sacrifices necessary if it wishes to survive... if the aid authorized benefits only one oligarchy, then we frankly say that such aid is useless, [Mr. Tarty concluded in his report]. Is it necessary to cite other examples?

We have more.

EDUCATION

This accurately reflects the political and economic situation. Theoretically 11% of the population receives schooling. Secondary education which dates from 1950 is given in a Lycee in Moroni (capital of the islands) with two annexes (one on Anjouan and the other on Mayotte). After elementary preparation or primary studies (Ciclo BE and BEPC) those selected (generally the political proteges) continue their studies and finally obtain the bachelor's degree (since 1966). Last year, 1967-68, ten Comoros passed this examination (the figure has never before been so high).

To enter the university in France or in Madagascar, it is necessary to have a scholarship; this deals the fatal blow to the one or two "intruder" students, sons of the poor plebians who were able to make it to the final

grade. We have less than ten engineers and technical aids; there are no Comoro professors. Technical or professional training is nonexistent as is higher education. 99% of them do not know how to read or write and much less speak French, against the more than 70% who know how to read and write the mother tongue (Swahili) in Arab characters. The Comoros are one of the most brilliant focal points for Islam in East Africa.

Health is taken care of in three hospitals and four medical posts serviced by ten doctors and equipped with insignificant material. The theft of medicines which are sold in the black market is the only pharmaceutical commerce (European) in the territory, and the lack of qualified personnel constitutes a flagrant scandal. Hygienic services, at least for the masses, are nonexistent.

MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

After 130 years of French presence, the archipelago has 100 km of asphalt or hard surface roads. There are two flights a week to Madagascar on Air France or Air Madagascar (DC-3 and DC-4); since 1967 there have been two flights a week to Dar es Salaam on the DC-3 of a private company with the false name Air Comoro. Two ships of the Messagerie Maritime Company pass by once every three months and three small ships make the round trip between the Comoros and Madagascar.

The colonial power has never given up its isolationist policy in order to avoid all contact with the exterior. Even the Comoro citizens living

abroad, especially in Africa, are not authorized to return (denial or revocation of passport on the part of the French diplomatic missions). Even after the incidents that the Comoros suffered from Zanzibar they were not permitted to enter their country.

France and its agents fear their return because they now have a political consciousness.

THE NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT OF THE COMOROS (MOLINACO)

It is the political organization committed to the fight for independence. It was created in 1963 thanks to the collaboration and participation of the Comoro citizens in East Africa and its base is Dar es Salaam, since in the Comoros a French law of 1901 and article 80 of the French Penal Code condemn all association or action aimed at independence. This is considered an attack on the integrity of French national territory. The movement is more a front than a political party and tries to mobilize the Comoro masses on behalf of independence and for an authentic revolution of Comoro society which has remained archaic. In effect, isolated and deprived of all political formation and civic spirit, the Comoros must be prepared, informed, and interested in political life (the Comoro representatives in France are always affiliated with the French political party in power, therefore, they are always dependent on the administration.)

The first tasks involve mobilization, information, formation of cadres, and propaganda.

Despite our material and financial problems, we print bulletins in French and Swahili and send them to the Comoros with difficulty, given the censorship and the searching of Comoro passengers. We stress that the bulletins in Swahili should be written in Arabic characters in order to allow them to reach the masses which is after all their wish. But typewriters with Arabic characters are difficult to come by.

Our 45-minute radio program in Comoro and French on Radio Tanzania from Dar es Salaam, an overseas program since 1967, is an effective medium although the time is insufficient; there is still much to do.

In the interior, clandestine cells function, particularly among the youth in the rural areas. But the material difficulties and the lack of cadres constitute a great obstacle; nevertheless, enormous and satisfactory progress has been realized in the field of politicalization and raising the level of the peoples' consciousness concerning independence. In effect, our political program which can be summarized in the following points, is better understood and supported all the time;

- 1) Recognition of the political rights of the Comoro people for independence.
- 2) Democratic electoral reforms.
- 3) A date for independence by referendum under international arbitration.

This program was submitted to the French Government in our three memoranda; April 1966 to the Minister of the Colonies, June, and October 1967 to General de Gaulle.

France, in collusion with the reactionary oligarchy, follows its colonialist policy of oppression and depersonalization.

The events that are mentioned below and the situation that exists in the Comoros effectively demonstrate the role that MOLINACO plays today in Comoro political life, and its perspectives for the future.

In 1967, during the local legislative elections, the population protested for the first time against the existing election system and asked that each canton freely designate its own candidate. This provoked upsets in various regions, in particular the canton of Mboude (the North of Grand Comoro), which was subjected to a state of emergency for six months, and all the administrative offices were closed.

In February of 1968, before the insults hurled at the entire population because of an aviation accident in the Morani airport, the lycee students, at the head of the masses, organized anticolonial demonstrations over three days, had altercations with the French Legion and called a strike and evacuation of an educational establishment for a month. This was a small revolution: homes and administrative cars sacked and three assaults. Balance: 150 students injured, various arrested, 200 definitively expelled out of a group of 400 lycee students; various dismissals in the public and private sector; an increase in the oppressive military force.

Here is how the imperialist press reported it.

Le Monde, March 19, 1968:

After a school strike which has been going on for a month and which has expressed dissatisfaction with the authorities, fairly violent incidents took place on Friday and Saturday inside the lycee. 200 students along with some adults, were taken into custody [...] in order to avoid new upsets, the French authorities responsible for maintaining order sent reinforcements to Grand Comoro, principal island in the archipelago....

The paper of the 21st reported the Declaration of Billote, Minister of the Overseas Territories: "the manifestations which have taken place reveal the existence of a certain number of problems concerning internal order. Their solution is naturally incumbent on the territorial institutions."

The local government, caught between popular discontent and the maneuvers of the High Commissioner to endorse the colonialist crimes, had to resign and return three months later. Through it all, the Foreign Legion and the police jailed and threatened in order to "clarify" the situation and make it propitious for the puppets. Here are the declarations of the High Commissioner as reported by **Le Monde** of April 11, 1968:

Mr. Colombani has just defined by communiqué his position in the Comoro governmental crisis which opened Friday afternoon with the dismissal of all the ministers (seven) of the archipelago. [...] As far as maintaining order is concerned, the High Commissioner, in accord with the local authorities, considers it

his duty to put into practice all the supplementary measures necessary to the prevention of disorders. The communiqué specifies that this reminder is intended for a **small number** [our emphasis] of those that speculate on the momentous difficulties that affect the young Comoro institutions and think they can act outside the framework of the law, but also and above all for the Comoro population....

We should add that MOLINACO members arrested on that occasion are for the most part still in prison. In the course of their trial before the Appeals Court of Moroni, the defense was guaranteed by a lawyer from Paris, Mr. Buttin Maurice, member of the Association of Democratic Jurists, and they were given sentences which vary from two to five years in prison and from five to ten years prohibition of residence.

Threatened with death and shaken to its foundations, the Comoro reaction judged it opportune to create a so-called political party aimed at checking the influence of MOLINACO and dividing the masses. So a political party named Democratic Grouping of the People of the Comoros was created (RDPC), whose objective is precisely that of maintaining the French presence and fighting for some reforms and bourgeois liberties. Its leaders are Mr. Mohamed Djaffar, Mouzaoir Abdallah, respectively President and Secretary-General, and also local deputies, as well as Abdou Mdahoma, reactionary and former leader of the realist party of Zanzibar, expelled after the revolution in Zanzibar

and given his position by the French. This party was created last October (see Statute). Exploiting this bourgeois liberty we tried to form another party, the Socialist Party of the Comoros (PSC), which would give our members a chance to meet. But the colonialists and their lackeys, who consider the PSC dangerous, reacted brutally. Under the repression, dismissals from jobs, threats, intimidations, and the problematic material situation, the PSC functions with difficulty.

As for the formation of the cadres, we have a dozen students in the USSR, three in Bulgaria, and one in Yugoslavia.

In foreign affairs, expressing our acknowledgement to the African Committee of Liberation (Committee of Eleven) which grants us subsidiary financial aid, we deplore its attitude of disinterest toward the Comoro question, even if it were only in the press or the listing of the Comoros in the UN as a territory under colonial domination. On this last question, the attitude of the Committee has been prejudicial to us. The resolution of the OAU at the summit meeting in Algiers continues unimplemented despite our efforts and those of the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania.

In addition to French imperialism, we encounter the opposition of her African satellites, Madagascar at the head, which (we have every good reasons to believe) promised France when she attained her independence to be her accomplice in the Comoro question. The same Madagascar Govern-

ment is greedy for our island as is very clear from its attitude in the UN and the OAU. But with the support of certain friendly progressive and socialist African countries, we hope to achieve our ends.

Our difficulties are above all material. The distance from the continent is not favorable to us. We have to have a lawyer come from Paris or Madagascar since this type of man is nonexistent in the Comoros. The lack of financial resources makes inter-islands movement difficult, since transportation facilities are only for the wealthy.

AID NECESSARY IMMEDIATELY

If because of the dimensions of the archipelago and the distance from the Continent, an armed struggle of a guerrilla nature is difficult or practically impossible to contemplate, a subversive war of terrorism, already successfully tried during the events of February-March of 1968, presents itself as desirable, necessary, and even inevitable in the long run. Consequently, we urgently need material appropriate to the formation of men and the financing of the PSC for its survival, which is necessary for tactical reasons.

—It is vital that we have scholarship students, university and technical graduates in order to prepare the cadres that will pull our country out of its terrible backwardness.

—Educational material, books, notebooks, paper, etc. Published material in latin and arabic characters....

—France must be condemned as a colonialist power.

—The National Liberation Movement of the Comoros must become known to the progressive international and national organizations that can help us.

—We must make our struggle known.

In writing this sketch, we have tried to paint as objectively as committed liberation fighters can, the situation in our country and of our movement. We have dedicated ourselves to informing rather than to making propaganda. We hope that men who love peace, justice, liberty, those committed to the struggle against imperialism, will not remain indifferent to the appeal we have made here. A government can decide that our little islands merit scarcely any attention. A deplorable error. For imperialism there are no small countries. We can also say that there are no inferior human beings, no inferior colonized people.

Oppression and barbarous exploitation, the systematic depersonalization of the African people of the Comoros merits more than an indifferent shrug of the shoulders or a simple condemnation of French imperialism. Not to denounce French colonialism is to make oneself an accomplice in the crimes committed against the Comoro people.

June 15, 1969 in Dar es Salaam

Abdou Sakari Boina,

Secretary-General