CHAPTER 3

Comoros: Legacies of Monsoon Trade and Un-Finished Independence

French Shadows

The Comorian archipelago has historically served as a human bridge between mainland Africa and Madagascar, as well as an important hub in the commercial and religious networks of the western Indian Ocean, connecting the region with the Arab world. The heyday of the dramatically scenic islands was from the 16th to the late 18th centuries, when the slave trade – initially to the Middle East and later to the Mascarenes – provided the ruling elites with huge profits and Comoros emerged as a prominent center of Islamic learning. Colonized by France and as dependencies attached to Madagascar, in the 20th century the former sultanates were relegated to the periphery. At the same time, the dominance of Islam and the links with the Arab world continued. Today, the Union of the Comoros (Udzima wa Komori) is the only Muslim country in the African part of the Indian Ocean and Mayotte is unique in being a French department with a majority population of the Islamic faith. Comoros, in addition, is the only state to be a member of the African Union, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, the Arab League,1 the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Indian Ocean Commission.2 Arabic, finally, is one of the three official languages.

Isolated, poor and disjointed, from its independence in 1975 Comoros has experienced more than twenty successful and attempted coups d’états, de facto mercenary rule, separatism and the breakaway of Mayotte. The first ever peaceful, constitutional transfer of power took place in 2006. Already the following year, yet another separatist crisis prompted a military intervention by the AU. Whereas both intra- and inter-island rivalries have been prominent throughout history – leading to the expression ‘the archipelago of the battling sultans’3 – directly and

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1 The Union of Comoros is the southernmost member of the Arab League, being the only country entirely located in the southern hemisphere.
2 Comoros, however, is not a member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).
3 In French, ‘l’archipel des sultans batailleurs’.
indirectly it is, nevertheless, French colonial policies and contemporary geopolitical designs that have determined the course of the small island nation. This applies, above all, to the case of Mayotte, which is discussed in a separate chapter. In general, however, there can hardly be any meaningful appreciation of the challenges facing Comoros in isolation from the shadows cast by France.

Together with its giant eastern neighbor, the Union of Comoros is one of the poorest countries on earth, mainly surviving on remittances by the emigrant diaspora and grants by the Arab Gulf countries. In contrast to Madagascar, it has no mineral resources, no modern infrastructure and no industrial base. Although Comoros is located at the northern entrance of the ‘western petroleum highway’ through the Mozambique Channel, every year several thousand international supertankers and container ships pass by without any tangible benefits accruing to the country. Similarly, within sight and at a low cost European and Asian trawlers and purse seiners ply the ocean for tuna and other oceanic fish beyond the reach of the Comorian artisanal fishermen. Barring the windfall of oil or gas discoveries, the economic outlook for the culturally rich, but politically unstable Indian Ocean nation remains bleak. Meanwhile, the lack of perspectives and planning stand out. In a candid assessment of the economy, the African Development Bank, the OECD, the UNDP