

Reunion, Mauritius and Seychelles: Creole Islands in Development

Distant and Different

Situated east and north of Madagascar, on practically all accounts the French department of Reunion and the independent states of Mauritius and Seychelles differ from the countries discussed in the previous chapters. From the points of view of political stability, as well as of social and economic development, Reunion, Mauritius and Seychelles not only stand out in the indian-oceanic region, but also vis-à-vis continental Africa. In their case, it is relevant to discuss causes of progress and peace, rather than of poverty and conflict. Albeit not without challenges, the demographically small island states – globally renowned as up-market tourist destinations – cluster at the top of African rankings regarding most development indicators, from GDP per capita and business environment to governance, education and health. In several respects they rank highly also in a global context.

Historically too, the Mascarene islands of Reunion and Mauritius¹ and the vast archipelago of Seychelles (as well as the Chagos islands) are exceptional in both the Indian Ocean region and in the wider African context. Although it is assumed that Arab sailors and other voyagers visited the islands, they remained uninhabited until the arrival of the European powers. Contrary to Comoros or Zanzibar, they are not off-shore parcels of mixed African and Arab civilizations and have no pre-colonial human history. As Houbert observes, “[d]istant Europe, rather than Asia or Africa, created this mid-oceanic world of islands precisely because of their location.”²

Strategically situated on the maritime spice route to India and the Far East, once placed on the European maps and until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Mauritius and Reunion were central to the quest for naval dominance in

1 In addition to smaller islets, Rodrigues Island – a semi-autonomous part of Mauritius – also belongs to the volcanic Mascarenes. Situated some 600 kilometers east of Mauritius, it is the easternmost populated land of Africa. The Mascarenes are named after the Portuguese seafarer Pedro de Mascarenhas, who visited the main islands in the early 16th century.

2 Jean Houbert: ‘The Mascareignes, the Seychelles and the Chagos, Islands with a French Connection: Security in a Decolonised Indian Ocean’ in Hintjens and Newitt (eds) *op. cit.*, p. 93.

the Indian Ocean. At the same time, the establishment of coconut, coffee and, above all, sugar plantations based on Malagasy and African slave labor formed the demographic and socio-political profile of the islands, over time giving them a creole character closer to that of the West Indies than to Africa. The subsequent introduction of indentured labor from India added another significant dimension to their ethno-cultural and political landscape.

In an African context, finally, the continued presence of European colonial powers sets the sub-region apart. East of Seychelles, the United Kingdom still administers the British Indian Ocean Territory as a colony, whereas the overseas department of Reunion – situated between Madagascar and Mauritius – forms an integral part of France. As members of the African Union, the Southern African Development Community and other African organizations, in their regional relations the independent states of Mauritius and Seychelles have to take these realities into account.

This is far from easy, nor without controversy. Through its possession of Reunion, France formally and directly exercises a major role in the African part of the Indian Ocean, a fact which is acknowledged by the neighboring independent states, but only reluctantly accepted by the AU. In addition to the weight of its economic, military and cultural interests and influence, France is a full member of the Indian Ocean Commission, which uses French as its working language. Originally set up in 1984 by Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles to promote inter-island cooperation in various fields, two years later the *Commission de l'Océan Indien* was enlarged to include not only Comoros, but controversially also Reunion/France. In the process, France became a *de facto* state of the Indian Ocean.³ Contrary to other non-African state actors, France regards itself as a local power. Thus, the government in Paris approaches many issues in the western Indian Ocean “as part of its internal affairs, rather than as matters of external relations.”⁴

Reunion

A Dramatic Island

The solitary island of Reunion (*La Réunion*; formerly *Île Bourbon*), located some 700 kilometers east of Madagascar and 200 kilometers south-west of Mauritius, occupies a unique place in French colonial history. For almost a

³ Ibid., pp. 108–11.

⁴ Isabelle Saint-Mézard: ‘The French Strategic Vision of the Indian Ocean’ in *JIOR*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2013, p. 54.