Résumé
M. Newitt - Les Comores et le commerce dans l'océan Indien avant le XIXe siècle.
Cet article analyse la réaction des classes commerciales comoriennes à l'arrivée des Européens dans l'ouest de l'océan Indien. Auparavant, l'archipel faisait partie de l'empire commercial de Kilwa, comme escale sur la route de Madagascar. Après la prise de Kilwa par les Portugais, certaines familles de marchands se réfugièrent aux Comores, dont l'importance commerciale s'accrut. L'archipel ne fut pas soumis à l'occupation portugaise mais devint fournisseur de vivres pour le fort de Mozambique. Au xviie siècle, les Comores restèrent la seule place de commerce musulmane au sud de Malindi et attirèrent un trafic en provenance de la mer Rouge, du Golfe et de l'Inde. A l'arrivée des Compagnies des Indes hollandaise et anglaise, elles devinrent d'importantes escales d'avitaillement, Mohéli et Anjouan l'important bientôt sur Mayotte et la Grande Comore, la première présentant un récif dangereux, la seconde manquant d'eau douce. En quête de sécurité contre les pirates basés à Madagascar, Anjouan devint un quasi-protectorat de la Compagnie anglaise. Les échanges avec les navigateurs européens entraînèrent le développement d'une économie de plantation utilisant une main-d'œuvre servile, les commerçants urbains devenant latifundiaires en refoulant les paysans dans les parties montagneuses des îles. Les contacts avec les Européens stimulèrent aussi les rivalités entre villes et entre îles, multipliant les escarmouches entre factions rivales. L'archipel, dont la richesse fut commerciale et agricole, et qui se trouva sérieusement appauvri par les raids malgaches à partir de la fin du xvieme siècle, devint au xixe un foyer d'investissement étranger.
The Comoro Islands in Indian Ocean Trade before the 19th Century

Historical Geography of the Islands

The Comoro archipelago consists of four islands which lie in the Mozambique channel between the north of Madagascar and Mozambique. The most westerly of the islands, Ngazidja (called sometimes by its French name Grande Comore), is 290 kilometres from the African coast and the most easterly, Mayotte, 320 kilometres from Madagascar. The islands lie well within the influence of the Indian ocean monsoons, experiencing mainly dry southerly winds from April to October and then being affected by the coming of the north-east monsoon which brings with it heavy rain, difficult navigating conditions and not infrequently cyclones of considerable force.1

The islands are all of volcanic formation, though geologically of very different ages. The oldest island, Mayotte, has suffered heavy erosion and partial flooding due to a raising of the sea bed. It is comparatively low-lying, is deeply indented with valleys and sea inlets and is surrounded by a barrier reef which lies from three to fifteen kilometres from the shore and is pierced only by two channels to the north and the east. The other three islands are not protected by reefs and their coasts are often steeply shelving and exposed. Only one of the islands is still actively volcanic. The Karthala volcano on Ngazidja rises to 2,361 metres and has been very active in the 20th century. The island is heavily scarred by lava flows many of which have entered the sea and created an extremely rocky and treacherous shore line.2

The islands all experience very heavy rainfall: 200 to 300 centimetres per year at sea level, the mountains receiving as much as 500. Moreover it rains throughout the year and this, coupled with the extreme natural fertility of the volcanic soil, has produced luxuriant growths of tropical

1. Geographical information about the archipelago can be found in, among others, the following: Esson, Flower, Strong, Lupton & Wadsworth 1970; Tri-Cart 1972; Fourmanoir 1954.
2. The best general study in English of the Karthala volcano is that of Strong & Jacquot 1971. There is a study of the cultural significance of the volcano for the islanders (with a comprehensive bibliography) by Boulinier 1976.

Cahiers d’Études africaines, 89-90, XXIII-1-2, 1983, pp. 139-165.
rain forest and favourable conditions for the cultivation of a large variety of tropical products. However, Ngazidja, which comprises half the land area of the archipelago, is not as well favoured as the other islands. The recent formation of its rocks means that they are extremely porous and that, despite the heavy rainfall, there are no perennial watercourses and wells cannot be dug except near the sea. Moreover, it has very little top soil, another consequence of its recent origin, and this presents agriculture with considerable problems.3

Geographical influences have played a key part in the history of the Comoros, both in the evolution of their human communities and in their relations with their neighbours. The islands lie like a series of stepping-stones between Africa and Madagascar, a natural crossing point between the continent and the Great Island, and have frequently been the route along which cultural and biological influences have passed (Benson 1960). However, their role in the history of the Indian ocean has also been influenced by the difficulty of their access. The Mozambique channel contains a number of navigational hazards, most of which, like the Geyser reef and the îles Glorieuses, lie on the Madagascar side, leaving a relatively unimpeded pathway along the coast of Mozambique. Ships travelling through the channel have tended to keep to the African shore sighting only the west coast of Ngazidja.4 Ngazidja itself did not invite contacts having a rocky and dangerous shore and offering neither safe anchorages nor fresh water supplies. Mayotte, likewise, was dangerous to approach because of its reef. Anjouan and Moheli were the only islands that offered a relatively safe anchorage to large ocean-going ships, which even then had to ride in open roadsteads and could safely lie close in shore only at a few select points. These restrictions, however, did not apply to the Swahili coasting craft nor to the ocean-going canoes.5

3. The shortage of fresh water on Ngazidja was traditionally overcome in two ways. The islanders built tanks to store rain-water and they dug wells near the sea which filled with sea-water, rendered less saline by filtering through the sand into the wells. Both systems are still in use today. The sea-water wells, however, are described as early as 1608 by Alexander Sharpey. See extract in GRANDIDIER 1903-20, I: 418-421.

4. The Bassas da India and the ile Europa lie in the middle of the Mozambique channel and the former was greatly feared by 16th-century navigators. João de Nova island lies towards the Madagascar shore but it is the Geyser reef and the îles Glorieuses, lying between Mayotte and the coast of Madagascar, and the shallows of the Madagascar coast itself which encouraged shipping to keep to the African shore. See ADMIRALTY 1911; and Admiralty Chart 2110, ‘Northern Entrance to the Mozambique Channel’.

5. The ports most frequently used by European ships were Pomboni on the north of Moheli and Mutsamudu and Wani on Anjouan. The sandy foreshore of Mitsamiouli in the north of Ngazidja was also occasionally visited. The practicalities of navigating sailing ships in the archipelago are discussed in HORSBURGH 1809-1811. Both Pomboni and Mutsamudu owe much of their prosperity to European vessels calling for supplies. This enabled them to compete with, and to a certain extent to supersede, the older dhow ports of Numa Choa and Domoni. The old town of Numa Choa on the south side of Moheli became deserted and is today overgrown with thick bush (and awaits excavation). Domoni, however, survived and retained a political importance to set against the economic dominance of Mutsamudu.
Although the islands are very small, their mountainous nature and the thick forest which covers them led to the evolution of distinct highland and lowland cultures which were also inland and coastal cultures. The coastlands were favoured points of settlement for Muslim immigrants; they developed trading contacts with the outside world and in their religion, social structure and material culture displayed the cosmopolitan influences of the western Indian ocean. The inland communities were more isolated, did not develop an urban culture and were less influenced by Islam. Conflict between coast and mountain has been an underlying theme in the history of the archipelago.
The Islands before the Coming of the Portuguese

There are three possible sources for the pre-Portuguese history of the islands; archaeology, local traditional history and references by contemporary Muslim writers. Archaeological investigation in the Comoros is as yet only in its infancy and has so far yielded only the most tentative results. A fair number of local traditional histories have now been collected and analysed but none of the existing texts predates the late 18th century and all are concerned with the origins and fortunes of the ruling Muslim clans. Their information about the period before the establishment of these clans is very shadowy. The third potential source is the writings of Arab geographers and navigators. The references to the land of the Wakwak and to the island of Kanbalû have sometimes been taken to apply directly or indirectly to Madagascar, while al-Idrisî’s reference to Andjuba has been considered a reference to Anjouan. More recently, however, it has been established that Kanbalû and Andjuba most probably apply to Zanzibar or Pemba. In fact the Arab name for Madagascar, at least in the 15th century, was ‘the island of al-komr [the moon]’ and the earliest Portuguese maps use a variant of this for the Great Island. By the end of the first decade of the 16th century, however, Madagascar had been christened by them São Lourenço and the term al-komr or Alcomor was applied only to its four tiny satellites.

When Madagascar’s history was first investigated in the 19th century, it was assumed that the island had been populated directly from Indo-

6. Viallard 1971; and Vérin 1967. Both these studies are of a very cursory nature. The archaeological potential of the islands is very great. Apart from the towns which are still occupied and are known to have a continuous history going back many centuries, there are at least two major deserted town sites, at Sima and Numa Choa. For the archaeology of Mayotte, see Kus & Wright 1976.

7. Extensive investigations are being carried out into the traditional histories of the Comoro islands. At present the principal accessible Comorian sources are the following: Noël 1843: 42-55; Grevy 1870; Aujas 1911; A. M’Safooumu, Histoire de la Grande Comore, Tananarive, 1917 (this work is cited in Poirier 1948; and in Vérin 1972, who describes it as ‘manuscrit originellement écrit en souéli vers 1917’). Also Zaki 1971; Bakari 1967. See also Allibert, Ahmed Chamanga & Boulinier 1976; aš-Sīrāzī 1976. For a discussion of Mayotte sources, see Allibert 1977.

8. Al-Mâs’ûdî speaks of the Wakwak whose land lies ‘on the edge of the Zanj mainland and at the end of this branch of the sea’ and which ‘produces gold and many other wonderful things’. See Freeman-Grenville 1962a: 14, 15. English-speaking writers have tended to identify the Wakwak with either Bushmen, or proto-Makua or with the legendary Akafula of Malawi. For example see Hafkin 1973: 1. French writers have followed Gabriel Ferrand and have seen the Wakwak as Indonesians. This theory was defended in detail in Ferrand 1908. See also Vérin 1972: 43-59. For the identification of Kanbalû with Zanzibar, see Chittick 1972a.

9. The Cantino map of 1502 and the Canerio map of 1505-1506 both call Madagascar ‘Comorbimam’ (Kammerer 1959). The earliest Portuguese reference to the Comoro islands appears to be in a Letter of Pedro Ferreira to King Manuel dated 31 Aug., 1506 and published in full in Axelsson 1949: 240-244. In this letter they are called the ‘Ilhas d’Alcomo’ and Madagascar is referred to as ‘São Lourenço’.
nesia. Now it is becoming increasingly accepted that Madagascar's people arrived from Africa and that even the Indonesian influence may have reached the Great Island via Africa. Any influences from Africa would inevitably have travelled by the stepping-stones of the Comoro archipelago, and its own population and culture would have been built from the same constituent parts as Madagascar's. This indeed is what the earliest archaeological record in Mayotte seems to show.

Later, this process can be more clearly seen as Islam spread south down the African coast and established itself in Madagascar and the Comoros. Prior to the arrival of the Portuguese the seaboard of East Africa had been dominated by a small number of trading cities of which Kilwa, Mombasa and Mogadishu were the most important. The commerce of these cities with the Red sea, Persian gulf and the States of western India had probably included a wide variety of goods but there seems little doubt that it was the trade in Central African gold that gave it international significance. Until the middle of the 15th century, Kilwa had controlled this trade through the tributary port of Sofala but in 1500, Indian merchants from Cambay were playing a prominent part and much of the shipping was in their hands. Dependent on the large trading ports were numerous smaller Islamic settlements, many of which can still be identified through the ruins of their mosques. These settlements were probably politically independent but had been founded by clans which had left the larger cities while still keeping kinship ties with their populations. They were also probably economically linked to the larger cities, finding in them markets for their foodstuffs and manufactures.

In this way, it seems that the trade across the Indian ocean contributed to the spread of Islamic coastal settlements and to the growth of local seaborne exchanges and a local productive economic activity. Something of this regional commercial network can be seen in early Portuguese reports which refer to specialised cloth industries in the Querimba islands, the production of coir and other palm manufactures at Querimba, Mafia and Angoche, the cutting of timber and the building of boats at Mozambique island. Some of these smaller coastal ports also produced pearls, amber, turtle shells and other luxury export items (Newitt 1978).

The Muslim trading towns in the Comoros and Madagascar almost certainly fit into this pattern. Swahili settlement at Vohemar, in northeastern Madagascar, probably goes back at least to the 13th century (Vernier & Millot 1971: 29, 160 fn.) and similar settlements in the Comoros may also date from as early. The Kilwa Chronicle, speaking of the earliest 'Shirazi' immigrants, has one of their party settling in Anjouan

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11. For the study of the mosque architecture of the East African coast, see Gar- lake 1966. For the role of merchants from Cambay in the Indian ocean trade, see Pearson 1976.
12. For instance see the stories connected with the founding of Mozambique, Quelimane and Angoche in Lupi 1907. Also Newitt 1972; and Hafkin 1973.
while the Mahdali clan, which succeeded them as rulers of Kilwa, also colonised the Comoros. By the end of the 15th century the route from Kilwa to the islands, and thence to Madagascar, was well established and ibn-Majid, the Arab navigator and geographer, refers to the journey, mentioning the town of Domoni on Anjouan and the island of Ngazidja by its Swahili name. From the Comoros the route lays to Langane and Sada on the western side of Madagascar (Chumovsky 1960: 51-52; Tibbetts 1971: 435). The traditional histories of the islands also stress the ‘Shirazi’ connection and underline the general cultural influence of the northern Swahili coast on the maritime towns of the archipelago.

The settlements in Madagascar produced large quantities of rice for export, manufactured and sold palm cloth, traded in slaves (see fn. 14) and also sold containers made of carved stone. The Comoro islands are described by ibn-Majid as places ‘where people buy and sell’ (Chumovsky 1960: 52) and it is clear that their main export was foodstuffs. In 1506 it was reported that ‘there are many provisions in the islands of Alcomor, millet, rice, cows, goats and hens [. . .] and from here Kilwa and Mombasa are supplied’. It is reasonable, then, to assume that before 1500 the islands were politically and commercially satellites of Kilwa.

The Comoro Islands and the Portuguese

The Portuguese arrived in East Africa in 1499 and soon developed a strategy of monopolising international commerce in the Indian ocean. They sought to achieve this by occupying Kilwa and Sofala and allowing the gold of Central Africa to pass only through the hands of the royal factors (Axelson 1973). Other forms of business could be carried on under license and local trade was actively encouraged. It was a strategy which required the physical destruction of independent centres of Muslim commerce, and Kilwa and Mombasa bore the brunt of the Portuguese assaults. By 1513 Kilwa had been reduced to a semi-deserted ruin through Portuguese attacks and the civil war between factions supporting and opposed to the Portuguese fortunes had been declining from at least the middle of the 15th century and families had

13. The two versions of the Kilwa Chronicle which retell the legend are printed in translation in Freeman-Grenville 1962b: 75. For the Mahdali connection, see Martin 1974; and for the ‘Shirazi’, Chittick 1970b.
16. Chlorite-schist vessels were imported from Madagascar to Kilwa. See reference in Posnansky 1978. A carved schist container was also found at the site of the old town of Shina on Anjouan in 1959. See Barraux 1959.
17. Letter of Pedro Ferreira, in Axelson 1949: 240-244. Seventeenth-century sources speak of boat-building and cloth-making in the islands but it is not known if these industries were practised at the beginning of the 16th century.
18. For the system of licenses, see Pearson 1976: 39-56; and Newitt 1978.
left to found new settlements at Angoche, Quelimane and Mozambique. The activities of the Portuguese caused further dispersal. Some of the Muslim clans went to the Querimba islands, others established themselves on the mainland (Newitt 1978). The Portuguese, however, pursued their foes to the smaller settlements where they had taken refuge. In 1511 Angoche was burnt and the Querimba islands raided and the shipping there sunk in 1523.19

It is very likely that some refugees from Kilwa found their way to the Comoro islands and that there was a major influx of Muslim families in the 16th century. The evidence for this is, admittedly, very uncertain. It derives principally from the local histories and genealogies which were assembled and discussed in summary form by Gevrey (1870) and by Völitzkow (1914).20 These trace the ruling clans of Anjouan and Mayotte back to ‘Shirazi’ immigrants who arrived at the beginning of the 16th century. According to the most commonly repeated story, a ‘Shirazi’ clan head, called Mohammed ben Haissa, reached Ngazidja with his followers about 1506 but their settlements were destroyed by Portuguese attack and they dispersed to found the dynasties on the other islands. The recorded succession of rulers is consistent with a date of arrival early in the 16th century. This story cannot now be accepted with the kind of confidence that Völitzkow showed. It is quite possible that we are dealing here with a ‘telescoped’ genealogy and that Mohammed ben Haissa was in reality the prestigious 10th-century founder of a Yemeni lineage, called Muhammad ibn ‘Isā, from whom the Arab families of the Comoros claimed descent. In the stories of his arrival in the Comoro islands we have certainly a case of a telescoped genealogy (Martin 1974: 373). Nor is there any Portuguese record of an attack on the Comoros in spite of the detailed accounts that survive of their early voyages in the Indian ocean. There were, however, Portuguese assaults both on Kilwa and on the Swahili towns of Madagascar in the years 1505-1507.21

The question of detail apart, however, there can be little doubt that the settlement of Islamic families in the islands continued in the 16th century, and that this was part of a long-term tendency which stretches back earlier than that century and was to continue long afterwards. There was also continued Muslim settlement in Madagascar, and the arrival of the Antaimoro in the south of the island may well date back to the second decade of the 16th century.22

19. For the attack on Angoche see ‘Summary of letters from António da Saldanha to the King, 1511’, in Documentos... 1962-75, III: 10-19; and ‘List of the India Fleets’, ibid.: 176-179. For the raid on Querimba see Letter from Pedro de Castro to the King, Mozambique, 8 July 1523, in Documentos... 1962-75, IV: 172-179.

20. This version of the islands history first appeared in Gevrey 1870; and was further elaborated upon by Völitzkow 1914.

21. Kilwa was sacked by the viceroy Dom Francisco de Almeida in 1505 and Madagascar raided by Tristão da Cunha and Afonso de Albuquerque in 1506-1507.

22. This is argued by Kent 1970: 100.
At first sight this immigration is hard to explain as the Portuguese were controlling the Mozambique channel and were busy trying to destroy Muslim commerce, but there are two probable explanations. First, the southern area of the Indian ocean was peaceful compared with the northern areas which were the main arena for the struggle of Portuguese and Turk and which witnessed some very destructive wars, like those which followed the Somali invasion of Ethiopia between 1530 and 1541 (Martin 1974). Compared with the disturbed state of the northern seaboard countries, the coasts of Madagascar and Mozambique were peaceful.

The second reason lies in the fact that the Portuguese, after an early interest, ignored Madagascar and the Comoros and made few attempts to interfere in their affairs. The first expedition to Madagascar had been little more than a series of piratical raids on the northern cities in 1506-1507. Thereafter the Crown made two attempts to set up a factory at Matitana, in 1514 and 1521, abandoning both partly because of local hostility but also because of the lack of any important trading commodity. Occasionally thereafter the Portuguese showed concern about the fate of the crews of Portuguese ships which were wrecked off Madagascar, and in 1530 a report suggested that the Crown might encourage individual conquistadores to undertake the conquest of the important Indian ocean islands like Ceylon and Madagascar. Madagascar, the report concluded, could support three or four fidalgos. In 1556, preliminary steps were actually taken towards the conquest of the island when Francisco Barreto, the governor of Portuguese India, ordered Baltasar Lobo de Sousa to explore the eastern coast of Madagascar and find a site for the building of a fortress. Sousa was granted the captaincy of the fortress for six years and was made captain-general of Madagascar. He also asked to be awarded the islands that lay off Madagascar ‘so that I can have them discovered and peopled by my children and relatives and friends’. The grant was also to cover the whole African coast from the cape of Good Hope to cape Correntes. Here, Sousa said, he could be of help to those lost in shipwrecks and from Madagascar he could send assistance to India if it was needed, for in that island there was ‘much iron, timber, pitch and quantities of supplies and people for oarsmen’. No captaincy was, however, granted and this ambitious project resulted only in an exploratory voyage round the islands and the northern coasts of Madagascar.

24. There were periodic suggestions that the Portuguese might take possession of Madagascar or the Comoros. Pedro Ferreira for instance says, in 1506, ‘que todas estas ylhas se pode senhorear e tributar’. The 1503 proposal is in a ‘Report sent to the King regarding the Fortresses of India’, in Documentos... 1962-75, VI: 293-303.
So the Portuguese made no serious attempt to conquer the islands nor even to establish an official factory there. They even remained officially very ignorant about them. India-bound ships seldom entered the difficult navigation of the eastern side of the Mozambique channel and although João de Castro (1968, I: 247) drew in his navigational notebook the outline of the island of Ngazidja, even the real names of the islands did not appear on official maps and the cartography of northern Madagascar remained confused and inaccurate well into the 17th century, a hundred years after the mapping of East Africa had been completed.

As a result, the Muslim traders of the islands and of the Madagascar coast were not interfered with and a considerable commerce grew up free from Portuguese control. This attracted not only refugees from the East African trading cities but also, increasingly, the attention of merchant capitalists from the Hadramaut and Western India.

The Portuguese neglect of the islands is, however, more apparent than real. The strategists who planned the commercial dominance of the East decided to ignore areas which produced none of the valuable items of international trade. It was soon realised that Madagascar had neither bullion nor ivory and that any spices it produced were insignificant compared with the products of India and Indonesia. The islands and their trading communities could, therefore, be officially ignored. However, if they could be discarded by the strategists of Lisbon and Goa, they were not by the local Portuguese residents. The islands yielded numerous commodities required by the Portuguese coastal stations, and a thriving commerce developed in foodstuffs, palm cloth, timber, stone and slaves—in short, the Portuguese continued the local trading pattern which had existed between the islands and Kilwa.

Rivalries within the Portuguese community also helped to preserve the independence of the islands. As the 16th century continued, the royal monopoly of the gold and ivory trade gradually broke down and was replaced by a system of contracts whereby the commerce of sections of the coast was awarded as a monopoly to the captain of Mozambique in return for a fixed annual payment (Axelson 1973: 171). By the end of the century the captain's monopoly included the Zambesi region and the coast from Quelimane to Inhambane. In 1621 a further extension

26. The names of the Comoro islands are given by Pedro Ferreira in 1506 as Lyna, Zoane, Ouzija, Maotoe, Molale and Acymae. Four of these can easily be recognised as the four islands of the archipelago which clearly bore the same names in 1506 as those used today by their inhabitants. Lyna may well have been the origin of the name Liona or Aioa which, throughout the 16th century, appears as one of the Comoro islands on Portuguese maps. Acymae could well be a rendering of the name Sima, the old 'Shirazi' capital of Anjouan. For most of the 16th century there was extreme confusion among cartographers about the number of the Comoro islands and it was believed that there were five far into the 17th and even 18th century. The Swahili names are not adopted until late in the 16th century when they at last begin to displace European names. Even the use of European names is far from consistent, though four can undoubtedly be picked out as favourites among map makers, 'Aioa', 'Espirito Santo', 'Ilha João de Castro' and 'S. Cristovão'.
of the monopoly brought in the coast from Quelimane northwards to Mozambique island (Axelson 1960: 61). In general the captain's monopoly was used to squeeze the profits of private traders and had the effect of discouraging Portuguese settlement and commerce. The residents and traders of Mozambique island were further restricted in their dealings by the activities of the royal factors who continued to buy ivory at Lourenço Marques and Kilwa on royal account. Therefore the trade of the Querimba archipelago, of the Comoros and of Madagascar alone remained open to the Mozambique settlers who fought any attempt at control by the captain or the Crown.

They had reason to fear that even this local commerce was in danger. In 1585 the captain, Dom Jorge Telo de Meneses, acquired the right to trade in ginger between the Comoros and Ormuz and attempted to set up a factory at Masselage on the Madagascar coast.27 Again in the 1650s we hear of the captain trying to lease the right of trade to Madagascar (Axelson 1960: 131). Nor were the more political ambitions of captains and viceroys ever entirely quietened. Francisco Barreto revived his project of conquering the Comoros in the 1570s;28 there were official embassies to the States of south and western Madagascar in the early 17th century (Grandididier 1903-20, II: 2-79) and, as late as 1668, an official report recommended the conquest of the Great Island as a way of recouping the dying fortunes of the empire.29 Still, it is clear that the determination of the Mozambique settlers to preserve the remnants of their local commerce is a large part of the explanation for the failure of Portugal to extend her official monopoly to the islands.

When the English, French and Dutch began to visit the Comoro archipelago at the very end of the 16th century, they recorded how well established the Portuguese contacts with the islanders had become. Lancaster in 1591 used a Portuguese interpreter (Foster 1940; Grandidier 1903-20, I: 160-152); Martin in 1602 found 'plusieurs individus qui parlaient portugais' (Grandidier 1903-20, I: 281-285) and, the same year, the Dutch admiral Spilbergen found Portuguese spoken on Moheli and captured a boat full of Portuguese mulattos carrying rice, cloth and slaves.30 Sir Thomas Roe in 1615 commented on the large boats that

27. See license issued by Duarte de Meneses, no date, printed in Theal 1898-1903, IV: 21; for the factory in Madagascar see extract from João dos Santos, 'Ethiopia Oriental', in Grandidier 1903-20, I: 155-158; Jorge Telo de Meneses also suggested in 1587 that the Portuguese occupy the Comoros to forestall the Turks. In view of his known career it is impossible not to suppose that his own commercial advantage underlay such a suggestion.


30. Grandidier 1903-20, I: 310-320; Alexander Sharpey in 1608 found Portuguese spoken a little on Ngazidja and Sir Thomas Roe in 1615 found interpreters and pilots who spoke Portuguese and Arabic on Anjouan.
carried on the trade with the Portuguese, and Christopher Newport in 1614 also remarked on the islanders' trade with the Portuguese and said that on Moheli Portuguese was spoken by many inhabitants. Both Spanish and Portuguese coins were current in the islands. The situation can be summed up in the words of François Pyrard: 'The Portuguese of Mozembic likewise come and traffic there. These islands are of the utmost convenience to Mozembic and to the Portuguese who dwell there for the supply of provisions.' (Gray 1887-90, I: 47.) If this local commerce has left few records, it may nevertheless have formed the economic mainstay of the trading communities of both the Mozambique coast and the islands.

The Trade of the Islands with Indian Ocean States

The towns of the Comoros did not however, just trade across the Mozambique channel with the Portuguese. They also developed very significant exchange with Arabia and India. The Portuguese were aware that this was going on. In 1521 a report to the Crown says that 'on this northern part of the Island of São Lourenço there is trade with all these Islands of the Comaro and of Melluane, and many other places on the coast of Malindi'; John Davis in 1599 found merchants from India and Arabia on Anjouan, and Sir Thomas Roe met a pilot and interpreter from Somaliland there (Markham 1880: 138; Foster 1899: 19). Peter Mundy in 1636 comments on the Arab merchants bound for Madagascar and the fact that Gujarati and Hindi were understood on Anjouan (Temple & Anstey 1907-36, V: 41). It is also clear that in the 17th century many of the ruling families of the Comoros had travelled to East Africa and in the Red sea area.

The nature of the trade with Arabia and India is important to establish. It is possible that the traders dealt in African commodities, receiving gold and ivory (Gray 1887-90, I: 47) smuggled past the watchful eyes of the Portuguese monopolists. However, although one might surmise that a considerable contraband existed, there is little evidence for it. In 1506 the trade with Kilwa was apparently in 'cattle, millet, rice, ginger and several fruits and sugar cane' (Axelson 1940: 242). In 1556 the

31. 'Many of them speake and writht the Arabique in a fair Character, and some few Portuguese, trading to Mosomibique in junks of 40 touns made of Cocor, sowed instead of Pinns, Cawked, tackled, and wholly fitted, victualed, and fraughted with that Vniversall tree.' Foster 1899: 21.
34. 'Relâche aux Iles Comores de l'Admiral G. Spilberg', in Grandinier 1903-20, I: 310-319. On page 312 we are told of the king of Moheli that: 'He had travelled to Arabia and in other countries and, every year, he made a journey to the African continent.'
commodities of the islands are still cattle, sugar cane and rice. Ginger is mentioned again as an item of commerce in 1566 and 1585 when the trade is specially said to be with Ormuz in the Persian gulf. In 1614 Anjouan is said to be importing opium and cotton cloth from the Red sea area and exporting rice, ambergris and slaves. It is this commerce in slaves which is probably the clue to the prosperity of Muslim trade with the islands.

For reasons which are not entirely clear, little is heard about Portuguese slave trade from East Africa in the 16th and 17th centuries. What little slave trading was carried on appears to have been to supply the American markets, though the Portuguese bought and employed a few slaves for their own purposes within their community. Moreover, far from selling slaves from their East African possessions, the Portuguese were apparently buying them from Madagascar and the Comoros, or at any rate acting as middlemen in the trade. In 1556 Portuguese were to be found buying slaves at Boina and Vohemar in Madagascar and João dos Santos mentions the trade in Madagascar slaves at the end of the century. In 1602 Spilbergen stopped a Portuguese boat loaded with slaves, and Edward Heynes, in 1630 took 'a small Portuguese junk trading from St. Lawrence to Mozambique with 3,280 sticks of sandalwood of mean value, paddy or rice, and 126 slaves'.

In 1615 slaves were being sold for nine or ten reales of eight in the islands, with the Portuguese traders allegedly expecting to charge hundred reales for them at their destination. However, the trade in slaves with the Portuguese was probably small in comparison with that carried on with Arabia and India. The Comoro merchants did buy slaves captured during raids on the other islands but chiefly they acted as brokers, buying from Madagascar and selling to all comers. The evidence for this trade naturally tends to be anecdotal but occasionally there is a hint that it attained considerable volume. In 1655, Peter Mundy 'happed on a poore vesseli with matte sailes. Shee came from Messalagia on the west side of the maine of St Lawrence [..] bound for the Red Sea; her merchants Arabians, her merchandise slaves, about 300 of St. Lawrence aforesaid'. As Indian ocean trade has always had

36. Carta de D. Antão de Noronha a El Rei, Goa, 15 Dec. 1566, in Rego 1940-47;
X: 165-166; license issued by Duarte de Meneses, in Theal 1898-1903, IV: 21.
37. Account of the Dutch captain Van den Broecke quoted in Greve 1870: 186-
187; for further reference to the export of ambergris, see Fryer 1909-15, I: 68.
38. Andrada, 'Crónica del Rey', in Grandier 1903-20, I: 100; João dos Santos,
39. 'Relação aux Iles...,' in Grandier 1903-20, I: 315; Edward Heynes to East
India Company, Gombroon, 20 Feb. 1630, in Calendar... 1892: doc. no. 10.
40. 'Second voyage of Walter Reyton into the East Indies', in Purchas 1905-1907,
41. Temple & Anstey 1907-36, V: 46. According to William Keeling, the Muslims
of Socotra 'make yeerly voyages to the Iles of Comora, to buy slaves', quoted in
Purchas 1905-1907, II: 515. Father Luis Marianno SJ tells the story of a
Malagasy prince sold by an Arab in Mayotte, taken thence to Arabia, returned
the pattern of the monsoons imposed on it, the importance of the Comoros was undoubtedly as a collecting point where slaves from Madagascar could be impounded in security until the trading ships could once again arrive. However, the buying in of large numbers of slaves by the island merchants started to assume a new significance when the visits of European ships began to increase the demand for foodstuffs.42

English, French and Dutch

In the 1590s other Europeans besides the Portuguese began to enter the Indian ocean. Initially their voyages were for reconnaissance but, by the first decade of the 17th century, they were challenging the Portuguese on every front. The interest which the European interlopers had in the Mozambique channel region was not primarily commercial. They were anxious to find ports where they could revictual and they wished to destroy Portugal's capability to intercept their India-bound commerce. In 1607 the Dutch attacked Mozambique island but failed to take the fortress and had to withdraw. From then on the duel with the Portuguese was a long-drawn-out affair of warships intercepting each other's commerce and preying on passing shipping. The Portuguese were secure in possession of their coastal stations, with a hinterland from which they could draw supplies, and it was only in the 18th century that they were briefly challenged on the mainland by the Dutch.

As the Portuguese retained control of the East African coast the other Europeans were forced to seek revictualling ports and bases in Madagascar and the islands. The Comoros at once assumed a considerable strategic importance and threatened to be caught in the cross-fire of European conflict. In the end they survived into the 19th century without annexation or conquest but not without these contacts having had a considerable impact on their society and economy.

The first non-Portuguese navigators visited all four islands fairly indiscriminately, but Mayotte and Ngazidja soon fell very much out of favour. The reasons are easy to see. Ngazidja possessed no harbour and, except in the north, no beach safe for a large ship to approach. Moreover its lack of fresh water and the evil reputation it acquired when thirty of Sir James Lancaster's men lost their lives there in 1591 discouraged contacts.43 Mayotte at first was often visited and in 1607 to Mayotte, then sold to Mozambique eventually going to England and returning to Madagascar. See Grandidier 1903-20, II: 68.

42. For further references to the Comoros and Madagascar slave trade in the first half of the 17th century, see Foster 1890: 21, 22; Van den Broecke in Gevrey 1870: 186; Temple & Anstey 1907-36, III, part I: 37; Middleton (1610) in Grandidier 1903-20, I: 472.

43. They are described in 1615 as 'a false and an unfaythfull people, having betrayd some of Sir James Lancaster's men long sithence, but nowe, having experience of vs at other Islandes, I doubt not they would regayne theyr Creditts'.

the Dutch admiral Van Caerden retreated there with his army to revictual.44 However, the dangers of the reef and the fact that the island soon began to be frequented by pirates again discouraged visits.45 So it was Moheli and Anjouan which received the full attention of the rival East India enterprises. Ships outward-bound in French, Dutch or English service would call at the islands to take on fresh provisions. Their arrival put heavy demands on the local economies. For example, in 1607 Van Caerden bought 366 head of cattle and 276 goats to supply his fleet (Grandidier 1903-20, I: 395); in 1617 Edward Monox was told that he could ship 30 head of cattle at once and the full 100 which he was requesting if he could wait a day or two;46 and in 1634 Richard Allnutt bought 79 head of cattle and 27 goats on Anjouan.47 In addition to fresh meat the visiting ships bought fruit, coconuts, rice and such other provisions as were available.48

The demands of European ships were continuous and although the islands' communities expanded their production they could not supply all the market. Increasingly ships called also at ports on the Madagascar coast and by the 1630s St. Augustine's bay had acquired a reputation in the cattle trade. Other solutions also were sought. The Dutch successfully established a victualling station at the cape of Good Hope in 1652 and the English and French tried to found colonies on Madagascar. In spite of these efforts, however, the Comoros remained essential to the development of European commerce with the East and they played a key service role in the rise of the English East India Company.49

Because the island was avoided by European vessels canoes had to bring the produce of Ngazidja to Moheli for sale. See Foster 1899: 17.

44. Grandidier 1903-20, I: 395. Another Dutch fleet stayed five weeks at Mayotte in 1613 while mustering strength for another attack on Mozambique island. Ibid., I: 487-488.

45. Van Heemskerk in 1601 had stated emphatically that Mayotte was the best island for Europeans to visit (Grandidier 1903-20, I: 271-276); and in 1615 it is still the island most frequented by the Dutch. In 1632, however, we hear for the first time of pirates using the island to lay up and careen. See Thos. Rosse to East India Company, 'Johanna', 22 Aug. 1632, in Calendar... 1892: doc. no. 300.


47. Richard Allnutt to East India Company, Surat, 31 Jan. 1634, in Calendar... 1892: doc. n° 534.

48. In 1614 the Dutch admiral Van den Broecke bought the following at Anjouan, 216 head of cattle, 40 sheep, 10 goats and 620 chickens. He paid 12 reales of eight for each head of cattle and a bar of iron for three head (Gevrey 1870: 186); Christopher Newport in 1613 bought 40 cattle at Moheli for a piastre a head and five for a sword. In 1636 Peter Mundy says that a bullock fetched 2 reales of eight. In 1655 he found the prices still between 2 and 4 reales for a bullock. Although it is clear that Van den Broecke's heavy demands forced up prices, it should not be concluded that prices rose and fell only with the availability of the goods. To a certain extent the demand for money in the islands controlled prices. Edward Monox in 1617 comments that if you have the right goods to exchange you can get more favourable price than if you just have money, in Danvers 1896-1902, VI: 271.

49. References to the role of the islands in the annual operations of the East India Company can be gleaned from the correspondence in Calendar... 1892.
Effects of International Trade on the Evolution of Comorian Society

It is possible that in the early 16th century the interior of the Comoro islands was imperfectly controlled by the Muslim merchant families who inhabited the coastal towns. It is also probable that they were imperfectly islamised. Certainly early writers make a sharp distinction between the two sections of the islands’ inhabitants. In the 1540s the Portuguese viceroy, Dom João de Castro, refers to the islanders as ‘blacks’ and says that ‘along the seashore live some moors’. Lobo de Sousa also distinguishes between ‘moors of Malindi’ who are the lords and the others who are described as very black and tattooed. Santos, at the end of the century, says the islands are inhabited by ‘heathen Kaffirs and moors who are the principal lords of them’. It seems that, under the stimulus of the demand for foodstuffs, the Muslim merchants of the towns gradually extended their control into the countryside. It is impossible to say how fast this process proceeded, but it was not complete even by the beginning of the 19th century. However, the arrival of European ships in large numbers in the early 17th century probably upset the traditional ways in which the surpluses had been marketed and caused the pace of change to accelerate. The dominant Muslim families sought to profit from the situation by controlling the markets and extending their direct cultivation through the use of slave labour.

Control of the markets was made possible because European ships overwhelmingly favoured two anchorages, the bay of Mutsamudu off Anjouan and the open roadstead of Fomboni off Moheli. In charge of these ports were officials variously described as governors, ‘subsultans’, and in one account as the schabandar—an Indian term for the head of a trading community, the use of which may testify to the extent of western Indian influence in the islands. Europeans were told that no trade could take place without the permission of the ruler who expected present if he were to grant it. It was, however, no empty formality. In 1611 Richard Cocks reported that the sultan of Moheli himself controlled the cattle trade. ‘Beeves is the dearest provision of all, for they are bought of the king and cost 3 or 4 rs of 8 per beeve.’ Cocks believed that this particular ruler was responsible for forcing up the price of meat because he had been to Mecca and knew the value of silver, ‘otherwise

50. Castro 1968: 247; Andrada, ‘Cronica del Rey’, in Grandidier 1903-20, I: 103; Santos 1609: f. 85. Edward Terry, landing on the south-west shore of Ngazidja in 1616 after the destruction of the Portuguese carrack of Dom Manuel de Meneses, comments strikingly on the two different sections of the population: ‘...most of the men but all the women [I saw] unclothed having nothing about them but to hide their shame. Such as were clothed had long garments like to the Arabians.’ Purchas 1905-1907, VIII: 11.

51. The term schabandar was used by Thomas Herbert who visited Moheli in 1626. See Grandidier 1903-20, II: 396-404.
heretofore we might have had anything for knives, tin spoons, glass beads, little looking glasses, leaden brushes and such like'.

It was the cattle trade which most interested the visiting European ships and it was its expansion which was probably the most important economic development of the early 17th century. Control of the cattle trade was essential for the continued political dominance of the Muslim élites.

However, although the evidence is scanty it is possible that this control was used to keep prices low and not, as Cocks supposed, to raise them. It is true that the demand for food surpluses was considerable throughout the whole area of the western Indian ocean and the islanders were able to sell in the markets of the African and Arabian mainlands, but they were not really in a position to force prices up. The islands increasingly had to compete with each other and with the coastal trading towns of Madagascar. Moreover the rewards of trading with Europeans were as much political protection as economic profit. Prices, therefore, remained surprisingly stable throughout the first part of the 17th century and attractively cheap in the eyes of most European captains.

The steady appropriation of land in the interior by the merchants is a process difficult to follow from the available sources. The best cattle regions probably lay then, as now, in the uplands of Ngazidja, particularly on the slopes of the extinct volcano of La Grille. However, Ngazidja was little visited and the cattle had to be brought by canoe for sale in the other islands (Foster 1899: 17). The demand for meat in Moheli and Anjouan would have led to the clearing of much of the tropical rain forest in the central hills and to the acquisition of this land by the merchant classes.

In 1689 John Ovington heard of one Arab notable


Foster (1899: 18): 'The Sultan in whose quarter we Anchored hath such authoritie that his subjects dare not sell a Nutt untill leave obtayned.' However the situation is complicated when we are later told that the port governor said 'he had noe Power to Compell or make price for others, but left the trade open to euerie will'. Terry says of Ngazidja, 'They seeme to live strictly under the obedience of a King, whose place of residence was some few miles up in the Countrey. His leave by Messengers they first craved before wee had libertie to buy any provisions.' (In Purchas 1905-1907, XI: 5-9).

53. The cheapness of food in the Comoros is the common theme of all European captains in the 17th and 18th centuries. This has already been discussed in fn. 48 above. As the demands of European ships frequently could not be met, scarcity should have driven up prices. That it did not can only really be explained by an artificial or political holding down of prices by the rulers who controlled the trade; their motive, the political support which they obtained from European ships. A curious, but well attested aspect of this trade is the great interest in acquiring paper. Edward Terry, for instance, comments that on Ngazidja 'wee bought as many good Oranges as would fill an Hat, for half a quarter of a sheet of white Paper, and so proportion all other provisions' (in Purchas 1905-1907, XI: 5-9). The Muslim ruling class were, of course, literate and many of them had reputations for religious learning. It may be, however, that the demand for paper had something to do with the writing of amulets, a traditional function of the Muslim mwalimu. It is not too fanciful to associate this with a progressive Islamisation of the population accompanying the growing economic and social control.

54. The destruction of the rain forest has been discussed by Benson 1960; Mundy
of Anjouan who paid a third of his fortune for a marriage alliance with the ruler of the island. This dowry was said to have been worth 500 sovereigns and to have consisted of slaves and cattle (Grandidier 1903-20, III: 462). These were clearly becoming the twin props of the wealth of the Muslim élite. Slaves were used to work the land, and in 1783 Sir William Jones was told that the Anjouan notables were planning a raid on Moheli in order to stock up slaves for the coming harvest. At the same time he shows something of the servile status of the island’s peasantry. He comments that the villages were taxed but the towns were exempt; the villagers did not make use of money and when bearers were conscripted to carry him, they ran away rather than fulfil their task (Jones 1807, II: 104).

This encroachment on the land by the urban class led to at least one serious rising which carries the hallmark of a bitter class struggle. In 1774 the free peasants of the interior of Anjouan combined with the slaves to take the coastal town of Domoni and then to march on Mutsamudu and threaten the Muslim élite with extinction. The rebellion was crushed, but significantly only with the aid of British forces from an East India Company vessel—a signal act of protection to the group which for so long had readily provided a cheap supply of food to the Company’s ships. The struggle was still unresolved in 1821 when a British visitor to Anjouan could write: ‘There are two distinct races of inhabitants at Johanna, the Arabs and original natives [...] more Arabs came over and formed a colony driving the original natives to the hills which they still occupy; but they are frequently at war with the Arabs.’ (*** 1830.)

European Protection and Island Politics

According to the traditions of Anjouan and Mayotte, the ‘Shirazi’ established a common sultanate over the three smallest islands of the archipelago. The ‘Shirazi’ are associated with the founding of towns, with political skills and with religious prestige and leadership, and the 16th century is represented as being one of unity and prosperity for the

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55. A manuscript in the British Museum, dating from the late 17th or early 18th century, says of the country people that ‘they are in a manner Slaves [...] for besides ye Taxes they yearly pay in Grains Cows etc, whatsoever is supplied to any ships ye come here for refreshments is taken from ye People on ye side ye Island where ye ship lyeth by ye Govern’t under whose jurisdiction it is, without pay ought for ye same, & ye for all ye Cows goats grains or fowles which ships is supplyd with yearley ye money goes intirely into the Govern’t pockett.’ (‘An Exact draught of the Island of Johanna’, BM, Additional Manuscripts, 5415 H4.)

56. For this and the increasingly frequent acts of protection by the British, see Dubins 1972.
archipelago. Contemporary or near contemporary European observers go some way to confirm this impression. In the account of Sir Thomas Roe's embassy, which called at the islands in 1615, we are told that on Anjouan there ' . . . liues an ould woeman Sultaness of them all, to whom they repayre for Justice both in Ciuill and Criminali causes. Molalia hath on yt three Subsultans, Children of the ould woeman, two men, one daughter, who Governe seurall parts of the Island.' (Foster 1899: 18.) The same account refers to one of the rulers of Moheli as being 'as well Xeriff as Sultan', thereby stressing the religious prestige of the ruler. If this common sovereignty did exist throughout the 16th century it must have had some economic foundation, some concentration of economic resources, but the records are not adequate enough to allow even a guess to be made at the nature of this control.

Ngazidja was never politically united and never formed part of the common 'Shirazi' sultanate. In 1556 it is reported as being divided between twenty warring chieftaincies and 17th-century writers repeat the same impression differing only as to the number.

In 1613 Walter Peyton says that the inhabitants of Moheli were 'in Warre with the people of Juan, and Comora Islands neere adjoyning' (Purchas 1905-1907, IV: 183) and in 1614 Van den Broecke heard of a war between Anjouan and Mayotte. Soon political unity was a thing of the past and had been replaced by a condition of more or less continuous hostility. Tradition attributes this hostility to dynastic factors, naturally enough as Comorian traditional histories, like traditional histories elsewhere in Africa, are primarily concerned with the legitimacy of, and hierarchy among, the ruling lineages. Contemporaries attribute the wars to the growth of the demand for slaves and hence the profitability of slaving forays. There is little doubt that slaves were taken on the inter-island raids but this was not the main source for Comorian merchants, and the slave trade is therefore unlikely to have been the main cause of the increasing rivalry between the islands. It is the arrival of European ships to trade directly that had the really divisive effect. Each of the islands was visited by Europeans and each competed for this lucrative commerce; Mayotte, for example, favoured the Dutch, and Anjouan the English. With direct access to European commerce, the petty rulers of the coastal towns were able to make themselves economically and politically independent of any central authority.

Inter-island hostilities were to continue sporadically into the 19th century, by which time Anjouan had once again established a paramountcy among the three smaller islands. In the 17th century, however, Moheli managed to gain a considerable degree of prosperity and

57. Foster 1899: 21. See also Martin 1974. Many early writers refer to the fact that rulers of the islands consider themselves sharif.
58. Andrada, 'Cronica del Rey', in Grandidiier 1903-20, I: 103; also Van den Broecke, ibid., II: 93-94, where the island is described as being made up of 10 warring States.
independence. In 1689 John Ovington even reported that Anjouan was subject to raids from Moheli and that the chief town was half deserted due to a recent attack which had left many dead (Grandidier 1903-20, III: 465).

The inter-island rivalries, which commerce had done a lot to encourage, presented the European ships' captains with a problem. They were continually asked for protection and aid of various kinds, in particular for supplies of arms, and these requests became difficult to refuse if captains were anxious to secure fresh provisions. Metalware and sword blades were, from the first, important items of commerce. There were no local supplies of iron ore and metal of all sorts had to be imported. Walter Peyton reported that in 1613 a Levant sword blade was worth five bullocks and two years later he said that three bullocks could be exchanged for a bar of iron weighing 20-25 pounds.\(^5^9\) As late as 1700 Captain Cornwall recorded of the Islamic population at Mutsamudu, which he affected to despise, that 'the greatest labour they are prepared to put themselves to is grinding down a hoop, or other bits of iron into a knife'.\(^6^0\) Visiting Europeans were continually begged for firearms and other weapons and also for aid in transporting the raiding parties. Fryer, writing about 1670, thus describes the development of these wars and the English role in them: 'Here, where neither care nor Toil is burthensome, are they vexed with continual War by their opposite Neighbour the Mohelian, whom formerly they used to engage on Planks at Sea, casting Stones and Darts; since, by a better Instinct, they have provided themselves of securer Vessels, and as at this time devising greater adventure with better force, and in shrewder Battles, beginning to enquire after Swords and Guns, with the first of which the English do supply them: For which, and a former Courtesy of a Vessel lent them to land some Men on the Enemies Coasts, proceeds their more than ordinary love for the English.' (Fryer 1909-15, I: 69.)

Alexander Hamilton recorded that Commander Littleton in 1701 had helped Anjouan with a raid on Moheli but indicated that this was against East India Company policy and comments: '... it is hard to say what his policy was in breaking the neutrality that the English held among the islanders.'\(^6^1\)

During the 18th century, however, British intervention grew and was increasingly confined to backing the rulers of Anjouan. As Dutch and French called less frequently at the islands, Moheli and Mayotte lost

\(^5^9\) Purchas 1905-1907, XIV: 183, 293. Beaulieu in 1620 reported that the inhabitants of Ngazijda fought with sticks, stones and sand.

\(^6^0\) Captain Cornwall, 'Observations on several voyages to India', in A New General Collection... 1745-47, III: 392.

\(^6^1\) Alexander Hamilton, in A New General Collection... 1457-47, III: 191. The Frenchman La Rouque (1716) records a visit to Anjouan between 1708 and 1710 when he was visited by the sultan who asked him for arms and powder, 'mais comme c'était pour faire la guerre à son voisin le Prince de Moili dont nous avions tout lieu d'être contens, nous nous excusâmes de luy en fournir l'ayant seulement accommodé de quelques fusils'.
their prosperity and were exploited and plundered by their more populous neighbour who had succeeded in monopolising the commerce and political protection of the British.62

European involvement in the islands’ quarrels may well have exacerbated them and increased their destructive effects. At the time, no doubt, intervention could be justified as protecting the interests of friends and allies on whom Europeans relied for important services for their ships, their stranded seamen and a vital link in their communication networks.

European protection for the islanders was caused in part also by the activities of pirates. A lot of European maritime activity equated more or less with piracy and the long-drawn struggle between the British, Dutch and Portuguese in the first part of the 17th century led to the almost indiscriminate plundering of each other’s shipping. By the middle of the century, however, piracy was taking on new dimensions. Privateers were trying to break the monopoly of the East India Company and some sailed with royal letters of marque. In 1634 there was a violent clash between pirates entrenched on the shore of Moheli and an East India Company ship, the Swan (Grey 1933: 81-86). There was also trouble between royalists and Parliament men in Anjouan in 1645.63 Piracy, however, grew more serious as the century wore on. The buccaneers were gradually squeezed out of their West Indian haunts and increasingly turned to West Africa and Madagascar where a number of pirate strongholds were created on the north-east coast. The Comoros became a favourite spot to wait for Indiamen and to go ashore to obtain news. Mayotte, unfrequented by John Company vessels, was favoured as a place to lay up a ship and careen.64

As far as they could, the Comoro islanders tried to remain neutral as this strange and savage contest developed. Inevitably, however, they became deeply involved. They had to look after crews marooned by the pirates and were forced to tolerate pirate captains bringing prizes to the islands to strip. There is some indication that they were prepared to buy from the pirates though they certainly never assumed the role of ‘fence’ to any major extent.65 In 1701 the inevitable occurred. Frustrated of prizes elsewhere, the pirate captain North led a plundering expedition against Ngazidja and Mayotte capturing the sultan of the latter and holding him to ransom (Grandidier 1903-20, III: 560-561).

62. For details of island warfare in the 18th century, see DUBINS 1972: 39-58. European involvement could sometimes lead to disaster. Ovington records that a Danish captain agreed to transport some Anjouan raiders across to Moheli but once safely at sea he sailed off with them as a slave cargo, in GRANDIDIER 1903-20, III: 463.
64. Details of the activities of the privateers can be found in GREY 1933; and DEFOE 1972.
65. GREY 1933: 283. The commodities sold, significantly enough, were slaves in which the island traders were the principal local dealers.
This pirate activity was only gradually put down through the co-operation of the East India Company and the French authorities in île de France. The last active European pirate was reputed hanged in île de France in 1730. Fifty years were to pass before piracy once again affected the islands to any serious extent and, this time, it was piracy by the coastal people of Madagascar.

The third effect of European intervention was to intensify the rivalries within the élites themselves. Although connected by constant inter-marriage, the different Muslim lineages of the Comoros indulged in fierce strife. Much of this appears to have predated the arrival of European commerce. It is difficult to believe, for example, that the feuding sultanates of Ngazidja, first reported in 1556, were influenced by their very scanty European contacts. On Anjouan, Moheli and Mayotte, the rivalry is clearly also that of different merchant towns. The traditions of Mayotte reflect the conflict of Chingoni with a town called Qualey; in Anjouan the traditions reflect the rivalries of Domoni and Sima and of Domoni and Mutsamudu. Europeans visiting the islands always tried to find a recognised centre of authority with whom to negotiate and therefore overestimated the centralisation of the power structure, but even they recognised that there was more than one ruler on Moheli and Anjouan. Much more work, however, would have to be done before the pattern of dynastic and urban rivalry becomes clear enough for the influence of the European trading ships to be assessed.

The Comoros and the Indian Ocean
at the End of the 18th Century

During the 18th century the Portuguese continued to export gold and ivory from Mozambique, though the trade passed increasingly into the hands of Indian merchants. English, and Dutch, occasionally tried to invade their monopoly by calling at Delagoa bay and the trade of the northern Swahili coast was taken over by the Omani Arabs after the fall of Fort Jesus in 1698. More significant was the development of the French maritime empire in the western Indian ocean with its centre in the naval base and rich sugar plantations of île de France. From there French settlers began to colonise the Seychelles and merchants opened up a trade in slaves with Kilwa, Querimba and the coastal States of Madagascar. British influence was confined to the Comoros. Anjouan had emerged dominant from the inter-island wars, largely with British aid, and British ships tended to call there and there alone in the 18th century. The large payments in cash from these ships supplied the Anjouan merchants with trading capital and their commercial activities became if anything wider and more varied. In a famous and often

66. See sources quoted in fn. 7.
quoted passage, Sir William Jones records a conversation with the brother of the governor of Mutsamudu in 1783. The extract shows the way in which trade with English ships had increased the ability of the Anjouan merchants to buy in the Mozambique ivory market and invest in a greater commercial turnover throughout the Indian ocean. It also shows the extent to which the other islands had become the economic satellites of Anjouan.

‘His country,’ he said, ‘was poor, and produced few articles of trade; but if they could get money, which they now preferred to playthings’—those were his words—‘they might easily,’ he added, ‘procure foreign commodities and exchange them advantageously with their neighbours in the islands and on the continent. Thus with a little money,’ he said, ‘we purchase muskets, powder, balls, cutlasses, knives, clothes, raw cotton, and other articles brought from Bombay, and with those we trade to Madagascar for the natural produce of the country or dollars, with which the French buy cattle, honey, butter and so forth, in that island. With gold, which we receive from your ships, we can procure elephants teeth from the natives of Mozambique, who barter them also for ammunition and bars of iron; and the Portuguese in that country give us cloths of various kinds in exchange for our commodities; these cloths we dispose of lucratively in the three neighbouring islands, whence we bring rice, cattle, a kind of breadfruit, which grows in Comara, and slaves, which we buy also at other places to which we trade; and we carry on this traffic in our own vessels.’ (Jones 1807: 90-91.)

However Anjouan was not destined to remain a protected satellite of British India. The 18th century closed with two developments of profound importance. In 1793, Britain and France began the long-drawn-out struggle of the Napoleonic wars and, in 1795, the first of the Sakalava raids on the Comoros occurred.67 Indirectly these developments were to lead to the dominance of first Malagasies and then French in the archipelago in the 19th century.

67. For the latest assessment of the Sakalava raids, see Dubins 1972: 59-89.

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