

RESEARCH ARTICLE

MOLINACO, the Comorian Diaspora, and Decolonisation in East Africa's Indian Ocean

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Abstract

The marginal case of the decolonisation of Comoros has gained little attention from historians of Africa. By tracing the evolution of the Mouvement de libération nationale des Comores (MOLINACO) around East Africa's Indian Ocean basin, this article explores the possibilities and constraints of anticolonial organisation among a diaspora population whose own existence was threatened by the more exclusive political order that emerged from the process of decolonisation. In Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Kenya, and Madagascar, MOLINACO's activities were shaped and limited by contested issues of racial identity, island genealogy, partisan alignment, and international priorities among both the Comorian diaspora and their 'host' governments. Through a transterritorial approach, this article examines the difficulties for minority communities in navigating the transition from empire to nation-state, while also illustrating the challenges MOLINACO faced in its ultimately unsuccessful attempt to impose that same normative model onto the archipelago.

Keywords: Tanzania; Madagascar; Kenya; Comoros; Indian Ocean; East Africa; decolonisation; diaspora; politics; nationalism

In July 1963, a resident of Nairobi named M. A. Al-Fassy wrote to President Charles de Gaulle. 'As I am a comorian [*sic*] youth by birth and a nationalist by nature of love to my country and her people', he began, 'I would like to express my independent views and version of the trend on which our beloved country is now drifting at this juncture [*sic*] of the changing wind on the African continent.' Al-Fassy argued that, as independence swept across Africa, the Indian Ocean archipelago of Comoros had become 'an odd sheep in the herd'. He noted that where colonial administrations had refused to concede independence, 'the "force majeure" in the airtight bottle pressed out the stopper high up and got the hot liquid splashed out on the ground.' To avoid similar upheavals, Al-Fassy called on France to break with its policy of gradual constitutional change in Comoros by the swift granting of independence.¹

Al-Fassy's letter contained many of the standard tropes of anticolonial dissent: the 'winds of change' metaphor, the language of self-determination, the naturalised claims to nationhood. He soon put these ideas into practice: a year later, Al-Fassy was listed by leaders of Nairobi's small Comorian community as a member of the National Liberation Movement of Comoros (Mouvement de libération nationale des Comores, or MOLINACO).² But while Al-Fassy and MOLINACO spoke the same language of liberation and self-determination as African nationalists

¹ Archives Nationales, Paris (AN) AG/5(F)/3523, Al-Fassy to de Gaulle, 24 July 1963.

² Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, Nantes (CADN) 457PO/1/46 DAM7, Comorian Society, Nairobi, to Saïd Mohamed Cheikh, 23 June 1964.

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around the continent, these claims were contested by the French government, Comorian elites in the archipelago, members of the diaspora, and the leaders of independent African states. Through the peripheral — but underexplored — history of the struggles of Comorian anticolonialists, this article sheds light on larger intersecting questions of national liberation, diaspora politics, racial identities, and geopolitical objectives around Africa's Indian Ocean basin.

Like southern Africa's better-known liberation movements, legal and political barriers to organisation at 'home' meant that Comorian anticolonialists directed their struggle from abroad. Historians have examined the opportunities afforded by exile or migration in forming political networks, crystallising national identities, and developing broader solidarities.³ European capitals offered cosmopolitan spaces for anticolonial activism and continued to do so for African exiles and migrants after independence.⁴ Meanwhile, African cities became havens for both liberation movements fighting white minority rule and dissident politicians fleeing oppression in neighbouring states.⁵ MOLINACO's activists were not 'exiles' in the conventional sense, since many had migrated prior to entering political life or were born outside of Comoros. Several MOLINACO cadres played active roles in nationalist politics in East Africa prior to founding the movement, while disillusioned Comorian migrants drew inspiration from the region's political parties to hone critiques of the archipelago's colonial regime and its local allies.

The existence of a sizeable Comorian diaspora scattered around Africa's Indian Ocean littoral might be expected to have been a boon for MOLINACO. But the movement's entreaties to this community were complicated by the Comorians' ambiguous position in coastal society. This can only be understood by paying heed to the limitations of the uncritical use of 'cosmopolitanism' for understanding the region's political culture. As historians have demonstrated, the dawn of European empire did not put an end to older transoceanic cultures of exchange. Instead, the Indian Ocean's peoples used the infrastructure of empire to forge new relationships across the waves.⁶ But these encounters were not the frictionless consequences of a shared 'cosmopolitan' Indian Ocean metaculture. Rather, they were 'always bound up with more place-bound social concerns', which became particularly strained by the upheavals and uncertainties of decolonisation.⁷ As Jonathon Glassman has powerfully demonstrated in the case of Zanzibar, 'cosmopolitanism' was not necessarily antithetical to 'nativism'; both were instrumentalised by nationalist politicians for

³For a critical reassessment of 'exile', see N. R. Carpenter and B. N. Lawrance (eds.), *Africans in Exile: Mobility, Law, and Identity* (Bloomington, IN, 2018). See especially C. A. Williams, *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa: A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps* (Cambridge, 2015).

⁴M. Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (New York, 2015); J.-P. Dedieu and A. Mbodj-Pouye, 'The fabric of transnational political activism: "Révolution Afrique" and West African radical militants in France in the 1970s', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 60:4 (2018), 1172–1208.

⁵J. J. Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (Oxford, 2016); J.-P. Dedieu, 'Dissidence, dictatorship, and democracy: the struggles of Malian exiles in Africa and beyond, 1968–91', *The Journal of African History*, 61:2 (2020), 241–61; G. Roberts, *Revolutionary State-Making in Dar es Salaam: African Liberation and the Global Cold War, 1961–1974* (Cambridge, 2021); M. Terretta, 'Cameroonian nationalists go global: from forest *maquis* to a pan-African Accra', *The Journal of African History*, 51:2 (2010), 189–212.

⁶S. Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); A. Sheriff and E. Ho (eds.), *The Indian Ocean: Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies* (London, 2014). On East Africa, see F. Declich (ed.), *Translocal Connections across the Indian Ocean: Swahili-Speaking Networks on the Move* (Leiden, 2018); T. F. McDow, *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean* (Athens, OH, 2018); J. Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley, 2008).

⁷F. Becker and J. Cabrita, 'Introduction: performing citizenship and enacting exclusion on Africa's Indian Ocean littoral', *The Journal of African History*, 55:2 (2014), 170. See also I. Hofmeyr, P. Kaarsholm, and B. F. Frederiksen, 'Introduction: print cultures, nationalisms and publics of the Indian Ocean', *Africa*, 81:1 (2011), 1–22; R. Roupail, 'Disaster in a "plural society": cyclones, decolonization, and modern Afro-Mauritian identity', *The Journal of African History*, 62:1 (2021), 79–97; E. Simpson and K. Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (New York, 2008).

exclusionary ends.⁸ In this vein, Nile Green warns against evoking ‘cosmopolitan “South-South” dreamscapes’ and argues that historians ‘must explore not only the genealogy of Bandung-era solidarity, but also the intellectual roots and reflections of conflict, contradiction, and differentiation’.⁹ In extending Indian Ocean history into the time of decolonisation, historians must remain vigilant to the tensions between inclusive transnational projects — such as pan-African liberation — and the more exclusive forms of political organisation and postcolonial belonging which complicated them.¹⁰

To some extent, East Africa’s Comorian diaspora shared the experience of the region’s other racial minorities. The South Asian diaspora interpreted independence as a threat to their privileged status within the racial hierarchies of imperialism, which now appeared to render them vulnerable to majoritarian nationalisms.¹¹ Comorians in East Africa had not enjoyed the same level of privilege under colonial rule, yet many had drawn upon racial and civilizational arguments to justify their ‘non-native’ status. In so doing, they set themselves apart from the ‘African’ majority. Yet this identity was ambiguous and contested. Comorians played an active role in the region’s African nationalist parties, while MOLINACO was a self-styled African liberation movement. The Comorian diaspora thus simultaneously comprised minorities fearful of their futures in a world of African nation-states and self-fashioned African nationalists who embraced this same politics of majority rule. MOLINACO was not only forced to confront the implications of this contradiction in establishing its legitimacy as an *African* liberation movement, but also struggled to gain support from a diaspora who saw instead the benefits of continued allegiance to France, at least in terms of the consular protection and access to travel documentation it afforded them. MOLINACO also encountered obstacles in encouraging African states to support Comorian decolonisation, as independent governments weighed up their compunction to pursue anticolonial liberation against developing constructive relations with France. In multiple ways, MOLINACO’s liberation struggle was therefore shaped by the ‘precarious havens’ in which its cadres circulated, to borrow Jean-Philippe Dedieu’s phrase.¹² Extraterritorial organisation offered opportunities for practicing politics that were banned at ‘home’, but was complicated by the anxieties of postcolonial minorities shouldering the weight of their own recent history.

The case of Comoros also invites us to return to the debate about the territorial configurations which emerged from the process of decolonisation in Africa. As Lydia Walker reminds us, ‘national independence was not a flipped switch, but a set of negotiations with no pre-determined end result’.¹³ By the time MOLINACO launched its liberation struggle, the idea of the territorially-bounded nation-state as the normative basis for anticolonial movements was largely established.¹⁴ In East Africa, independence led to the shoring-up of national sovereignty at the expense of projects of regional integration.¹⁵ Like other ‘peripheral’ African liberation movements, MOLINACO utilised the principles of national self-determination to advance its cause on the global and continental

⁸J. Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington, IN, 2011).

⁹N. Green, ‘The waves of heterotopia: towards a vernacular intellectual history of the Indian Ocean’, *American Historical Review*, 123:3 (2018), 872–3. On ‘Bandung-era’ solidarity, see C. J. Lee (ed.), *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH, 2010).

¹⁰J. Prestholdt, ‘Locating the Indian Ocean: notes on the postcolonial representation of space’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 9:3 (2015), 440–67.

¹¹S. Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); J. R. Brennan, *Taifa: Making Race and Nation in Urban Tanzania* (Athens, OH, 2012); M. Frenz, *Community, Memory, and Migration in a Globalizing World: The Goan Experience, c. 1890–1980* (New Delhi, 2014).

¹²Dedieu, ‘Dissidence’, 244.

¹³L. Walker, ‘Decolonization in the 1960s: on legitimate and illegitimate nationalist claims-making’, *Past and Present*, 242 (2019), 233.

¹⁴A. Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019), 71–106.

¹⁵C. Vaughan, ‘The politics of regionalism and federation in East Africa, 1958–1964’, *Historical Journal*, 62:2 (2019), 519–40.

stage.¹⁶ However, from MOLINACO's perspective, the eventual 'liberation' of Comoros was incomplete, as the island of Mayotte remained a French overseas territory after 1975. This territorial fragmentation owed partly to French neocolonial machinations, but also raises questions about the underlying weaknesses of Comorian nationalism. Mayotte's popular rejection of independence, which went against the grain of territorial national self-determination, represented concerns about its position in a unified Comorian state.¹⁷ Moving away from the case of Mayotte, this article argues that the evolution of Comorian nationalism also requires an appreciation of the mixed record of extraterritorial organisation. The same normative visions which MOLINACO derived from its continental vantage point and leaned upon for external support limited its appeal to the archipelago's different insular constituencies.

The article begins by explaining the emergence of a Comorian diaspora in Africa's Indian Ocean basin. It shows how Comorian intellectuals drew on their ambiguous origins to carve out advantageous niches in colonial hierarchies. It then highlights how the rise of nationalism and the approach of independence created uncertainties for these minority communities. In these circumstances, a small group of Comorians in East Africa formed MOLINACO. The rest of the article explores MOLINACO's struggle to build a transoceanic network in the face of opposition not only from France, but also from Comorian supporters of the status quo. The contested racial identity of the Comorian diaspora and divisions within this community hampered these efforts. Finally, this article turns to MOLINACO's missed opportunity — *rendez-vous manqué* — in Madagascar, where the postcolonial state's pro-French stance prevented the movement from establishing itself among a large diaspora community. Reflecting the peripatetic activities of Comorian anticolonialists across territories and empires, the article explores this history via a transoceanic archive, involving research in continental East Africa, metropolitan France and Britain, and the archipelago itself.¹⁸

The making of the Comorian diaspora in East Africa

The Comoros archipelago consists of four main islands: Ngazidja (in French, Grande Comore), Ndzuani (Anjouan), Mwali (Mohéli), and Maore (Mayotte).¹⁹ Ngazidja — the largest, most populous, and northwesternmost of the islands — lies around 300 kilometres from Mozambique and 670 kilometres from Dar es Salaam. The southeastern tip of the archipelago in Mayotte is around 350 kilometres from Mahajanga in Madagascar. The genealogy of the archipelago's inhabitants is complex and uncertain. It combines older waves of Bantu-speaking migrants from continental Africa and Austronesians from across the Indian Ocean with later arrivals from Arabia. During the nineteenth century, France bolstered its presence in the southwest Indian Ocean by taking advantage of disputes between the islands' sultans to bring Comoros under its control. It purchased Mayotte from a Malagasy king in 1841, then imposed protectorates over Ngazidja, Ndzuani, and Mwali in 1886. France declared Comoros a colony in 1908. Between 1912 and 1946, Comoros was governed as an administrative region of Madagascar; thereafter, it became an 'overseas territory'. French colonialism brought little investment or development to the islands. Their tiny landmass was exploited by plantation agriculture, controlled by colonial concessions.²⁰

¹⁶A. Campos, 'The decolonization of Equatorial Guinea: the relevance of the international factor', *The Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003), 95–116.

¹⁷M. Idriss, *Le combat pour Mayotte française (1958–1976)* (Paris, 2018).

¹⁸The financial resources, language education, and travel documents required to produce this research are privileges not available to all. These constraints go some way to explaining the marginalisation of Comoros from African history and the national(ist) framing of much of the existing literature.

¹⁹For simplicity, I use the contemporary Shikomori for 'Ngazidja', 'Ndzuani', and 'Mwali', but 'Mayotte' to reflect the island's status as a French department.

²⁰J. Martin, *Comores: Quatre îles entre pirates et planteurs*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1983); I. Walker, *Islands in a Cosmopolitan Sea: A History of the Comoros* (London, 2019).

The emergence of a Comorian diaspora in Africa was built on the archipelago's deep history of participation in the trading networks and religious exchanges of the Indian Ocean world. After the entrance of European traders into the region in the sixteenth century, Comoros became an important port of call.²¹ Sufi scholars of Hadrami descent but born in Comoros became a significant intellectual presence along Africa's eastern coast, with Zanzibar forming a centre for their scholarship.²² The Comorian community in Zanzibar grew rapidly after the dawn of Omani rule in 1840, due to the pull factor of an economic boom and the push factors of first political violence in Ngazidja and then the imposition of French colonialism. By 1948, there were 3,267 Comorians in Zanzibar out of a total population of 264,162. Comorians were generally wealthier and better educated than Zanzibar's 'African' majority and roughly comparable to the 'Arab' minority. Many worked in the colonial bureaucracy.²³ After some debate, the British accepted that all Comorian migrants and their descendants in Zanzibar were French subjects, which afforded them a degree of legal protection. The French also subsidised a Comorian School.²⁴ From Zanzibar, Comorians fanned out into continental Africa. Comorians began to migrate to Kenya in significant numbers from the 1930s, and by 1963 they numbered around 800.²⁵ Less is known about Comorian migration to Tanganyika. A late colonial survey estimated that there were 900 Comorians in the territory, especially in the towns of Tanga and Dar es Salaam.²⁶ An even smaller Comorian population resided in Uganda. A network of Comorian Associations maintained connections between these communities, centred on the nodal point of Zanzibar.

Patterns of migration were important factors in shaping sociopolitical affinities among this East African diaspora. Almost all Comorians in Zanzibar were from Ngazidja, with very few from Ndzuani and none from Mayotte or Mwali. Indeed, the term *wangazidja* was used as a Swahili demonym for this community. But they did not form a homogenous political community. From the 1920s onwards, a largely generational split opened up between the so-called *yamini* and *shimali*. The *yamini*, largely younger Comorians born in Zanzibar, distanced themselves from the customs of the archipelago. The older-generation *shimali*, who were born in Comoros and then migrated to Zanzibar, sought to protect these traditions, especially the *aada* marriage ceremony. Later, both groups incorporated new arrivals in Zanzibar from the archipelago.²⁷ In Kenya and Tanzania, the more important distinction was between the older Shikomori-speaking Comorians (*wageni*) and Zanzibar-born Comorians (*wazalia*), who moved to Nairobi in increasing numbers after the Second World War. Space here precludes full exploration of the unstable and complex nature of these differences. But, as the anthropologist Gill Shepherd demonstrated in her study of Kenya's Comorians, they were vital in structuring relationships within the diaspora. In turn, this shaped the possibilities and limitations of MOLINACO's future activities.²⁸

These fluid social categorisations within the Comorian diaspora meant little to colonial administrators. In British-ruled East Africa, people were divided into 'native' and 'non-native' categories.

²¹M. Newitt, 'The Comoro Islands in Indian Ocean trade before the 19th century', *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 23:89–90 (1983), 139–65.

²²A. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860–1925* (London, 2003); R. Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa* (Edinburgh, 2016), 380–455.

²³M. F. Lofchie, *Zanzibar: Background to Revolution* (Princeton, 1965), 71, 89, 91–2.

²⁴M. A. Saleh, 'La communauté zanzibari d'origine comorienne: premiers jalons d'une recherche en cours', *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, 9 (1995), 203–10; M. A. Saleh, 'L'enjeu des traditions dans la communauté comorienne de Zanzibar', in F. Le Guennec and D. Parkin (eds.), *Autorité et pouvoir chez les Swahili* (Paris, 1998), 221–46; I. Walker, 'Identity and citizenship among the Comorians of Zanzibar', in Sheriff and Ho, *Indian Ocean*, 209–37; I. Walker, 'The Comorians, the British, the French and the Arabs: struggle for status in the Protectorate of Zanzibar', *ZIFF Journal* (2007), 97–106.

²⁵G. Shepherd, 'The Comorians in Kenya: the establishment and loss of an economic niche' (unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1982).

²⁶J. P. Moffett (ed.), *Handbook of Tanganyika* (Dar es Salaam, 1958), 255, 302.

²⁷Saleh, 'L'enjeu'; Walker, 'Identity and citizenship', 254–7.

²⁸Shepherd, 'Comorians in Kenya'.

The former contained all ‘Africans’; the latter all Europeans and Indians. But these rigid legal categories were confounded by the region’s demographic diversity. Groups like Arabs, Abyssinians, Nubians, and Somalis petitioned the colonial authorities for their designation as ‘non-natives’ or ‘natives’, according to the benefits that might be accrued from such classification.²⁹ During the interwar years, Comorians in Kenya, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar claimed ‘non-native’ status in order to access certain legal and commercial privileges.³⁰ In justifying this status, Comorians deployed a range of imprecise genealogical and civilisational arguments to demonstrate that they were distinct from the ‘African’ population, even as they were somatically similar to them. The Comorians received assistance in these endeavours from French diplomats. In 1931, for example, the French consular agent in Tanganyika persuaded the British that, by comparison with the Swahili population, the Comorians’ ‘homes lie further from the African Coast, their Asiatic origin, partly Arab partly Malay, is clear’.³¹ British administrators, unfamiliar with Comorian history, struggled to formulate a coherent answer across territories and time.

Comorians had a stronger vested interest in such discussions. The most notable of these interventions was made in 1936 by Ibuni Saleh in a pamphlet entitled *A Short History of the Comorians in Zanzibar*. Saleh argued that the origins of the Comorian people lay not in Africa, but in the Middle East and Melanesia. While he accepted that Comorians came ‘from African Islands’, Saleh argued that they were ‘not always regarded as native “Africans” in the real sense of that term’. He justified this by a series of chauvinistic racial remarks. Comorians’ superior sense of civilisation, he stated, was ‘reminiscent of the strain of Arab blood which is running in their veins’.³² Although it was targeted at the colonial government, Saleh’s pamphlet harked back to older ideas about ‘civilisation’ in coastal East Africa. The Swahili word *ustaarabu*, derived from the concept of ‘becoming Arab’ and translated as ‘civilisation’, served as a marker of cultural superiority which elevated Arab identity while remaining attainable for other racial groups via processes of assimilation.³³ Saleh’s argument gained traction on the mainland. In 1948, Comorians in Nairobi substantiated their own claims to ‘non-native’ status by sending the British authorities a copy of his *Short History*.³⁴

These debates about the place of Comorians within East Africa’s colonial order were distinct from the experience of the much larger diaspora in Madagascar. In 1905, there were just 1,000 Comorians in Madagascar, but their number grew rapidly over subsequent decades due to demographic pressure in the archipelago.³⁵ The vast majority settled on the island’s northern coast, especially in the city of Mahajanga. By the time Madagascar became independent in 1960, Comorians comprised around half of Mahajanga’s 68,000 inhabitants — a figure larger than any town in the archipelago itself. As Tasha Rijke-Epstein demonstrates, older waves of Comorian migrants and their mixed Malagasy-Comorian descendants established themselves as *zanatany* (‘native of the place’). They came to dominate life in Mahajanga and were perceived to be favoured for municipal employment by the French authorities. This led to growing tensions between the *zanatany* and

²⁹Brennan, *Taifa*, 21–6; A. I. Salim, ‘Native or non-native? The problem of identity and social stratification of the Arab-Swahili of Kenya’, *Hadiith*, 6 (1976), 65–85; K. Weitzberg, *We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Kenya* (Athens, OH, 2017), 37–64.

³⁰Shepherd, ‘Comorians in Kenya’.

³¹Tanzania National Archives, Dar es Salaam (TNA) K3/2068/I/32, French Consular Agent to Acting Chief Secretary, Dar es Salaam, 13 Oct. 1931.

³²I. Saleh, *A Short History of the Comorians in Zanzibar* (Dar es Salaam, 1936). Comorian claims to ‘Arab’ identity were not always accepted by Zanzibar’s ‘Arab’ community: see Walker, ‘Comorians’, 102–3.

³³Glassman, *War of Words*, 38–9, 86–8; Brennan, *Taifa*, 122–8.

³⁴Kenya National Archives, Nairobi, OPIE/1/1324/17, Mohamed Athman to Chief Secretary, Nairobi, 4 Oct. 1948.

³⁵T. A. Mohamed, ‘Entre Anjouanais et Grands Comoriens à Majunga (1908–1960)’, in F. V. Rajaonah (ed.), *Cultures citadines dans l’Océan indien occidental (XVIII^e–XXI^e siècles): Pluralisme, échanges, inventivité* (Paris, 2011), 457–66; M. M. Said, ‘Contribution à l’étude des minorités étrangères à Madagascar: les Comoriens de Majunga’, *Identity, Culture and Politics*, 8:1–2 (2007), 101–30.

more recent Malagasy migrants to the city. Yet, as in continental Africa, the Comorians did not form a single community.³⁶ In the 1930s and 1940s, sporadic unrest over religious festivals and sporting fixtures flared up between groups from Ngazidja and Ndzuani. These interisland tensions meant that the 'Comorian' population in Madagascar had a very different complexion to its equivalent in continental East Africa, which was composed almost entirely of *wangazidja*.³⁷

Comorians and nationalist politics in East Africa

East Africa's ethnoracial minorities looked on with trepidation as independence loomed on the horizon. As Engseng Ho observes, diasporic circulations and cosmopolitan identities were at odds with the territorially and sometimes racially bounded bases of nationalist movements. As ideas of 'indigenous nation and culture . . . developed representational forms and gained socio-political mass, diasporic persons who straddled the widening gap between internal and external found themselves having to decide where they belonged, if indeed the choice was theirs to make'.³⁸ Jeremy Prestholdt shows how Arab-Swahili communities in coastal Kenya, which maintained tight connections with Zanzibar, feared domination by upcountry nationalist parties and so turned to their own political movements, which often drew on autochthonous arguments.³⁹ The Comorian populations in East Africa had fewer options: they were mostly relatively recent arrivals, with shallower claims to belonging.

The small Comorian population in Tanganyika split its political sympathies. Some, as we will see, were active members of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). But the leadership of the Comorian Association, which had long supported claims to Comorians' 'non-native' status, chose instead to back the European-dominated United Tanganyika Party, whose multiracialism was anathema to TANU.⁴⁰ In Zanzibar, the Comorian community became caught in the crossfire of increasingly polarised racial politics. The advent of multiparty elections in the late 1950s transformed Zanzibar's ethnic associations into vehicles for partisan mobilisation. Although divisions were never clear-cut, the Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP) was associated with the islands' 'Arab' elites. Its main rival, the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP), drew on histories of enslavement and socioeconomic inequality to appeal to the 'African' population. Although the ZNP distanced itself from explicit racialism, its own rhetoric was grounded in an autochthonous identity that sought to exclude mainlanders from an independent Zanzibar. As Glassman has shown, Zanzibar's racial politics were not solely the outcome of colonial administrative practices, but were stoked by partisan intellectuals.⁴¹

In this context, an Inter-Territorial Conference of the Comorian Associations took place in Zanzibar in April 1960. Representatives from branches in Unguja, Pemba, Nairobi, and Dar es Salaam participated. The conference affirmed that the Comorian community placed 'no obstacles whatsoever' to the involvement of Comorians in politics in any East African territory and deplored actions which would 'endanger or hinder the progress and advancement of these countries'. The statement reflected the insecurities of the Comorian minorities in an environment in which issues

³⁶T. Rijke-Epstein, 'The politics of filth: sanitation, work, and competing moralities in urban Madagascar, 1890s–1977', *The Journal of African History*, 60:2 (2019), 229–56.

³⁷Mohamed, 'Entre Anjouanais'. On different migration strategies in Ngazidja and Ndzuani, see S. Blanchy, 'Intégrations et exclusions: la production différenciée des hiérarchies sociales aux Comores', *Études Rurales*, 194 (2014), 47–62.

³⁸E. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, 2006), 247.

³⁹J. Prestholdt, 'Politics of the soil: separatism, autochthony, and decolonization at the Kenyan coast', *The Journal of African History*, 55:2 (2014), 249–70. See also J. R. Brennan, 'Lowering the Sultan's flag: sovereignty and decolonization in coastal Kenya', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50:4 (2008), 831–61.

⁴⁰Sule Harith, the Comorian Association's president, was victim of an apparently politically-motivated assault by members of the short-lived Bantu African Association. The National Archives of the UK, London (UKNA) FCO 141/17802, Commissioner of Police to Chief Secretary, Dar es Salaam, 27 July 1956.

⁴¹Glassman, *War of Words*.

of race and belonging were becoming increasingly fraught. This notice was placed in both pro-ASP and pro-ZNP newspapers, indicating a desire to speak across Zanzibar's political divide.⁴² The conference also opened the way for Comorians to enter partisan politics in Zanzibar. Ibuni Saleh, the Comorian Association's vice president, joined the ZNP — as might have been expected from the author of the *Short History*. Many Zanzibari Comorians followed his example.⁴³

The ASP had an ambivalent relationship with Zanzibar's Comorian community. Even though the party admonished their political choices past and present, it appealed to Comorians for votes. The party's leadership distrusted the Comorians due to their historic eschewal of 'African' identity. In early 1960, the ASP attacked the African National Congress (ANC) of Tanganyika, a racist party, for having selected a Comorian, Kaikai Said Kaikai, as its publicity secretary. 'Here in Zanzibar there is not even one Comorian who accepts being called an African and the same is true across all East Africa,' wrote an ASP supporter to the ANC's leader. He demanded that Kaikai visit Zanzibar to encourage Comorians there to support the ASP and prove their African identity.⁴⁴ In April, the ASP offered to support several Comorian candidates in the next elections in return for the Comorian Association's endorsement. The Association declined this bargain, clearly wishing to maintain official neutrality from partisan politics.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, a small number of Comorians did join the ASP, enabling the party to claim that it represented a more inclusive type of African nationalism. When the ASP announced the candidature of Ali Mohamed Othman, a Comorian, for elections scheduled for January 1961, the party stated that it would put up any candidate who supported its aims, whether 'Indian, Arab, European or Comorian [Mngazija]'.⁴⁶

The ASP's double-edged rhetoric towards the Comorian community was echoed by its mainland allies in TANU. At a rally in Zanzibar in May 1960, TANU's Bibi Titi Mohammed told ASP supporters that someone in the press and in radio broadcasts had told Tanganyikans (i.e., Africans) not to come to Zanzibar. 'But this man is a Comorian and in Tanganyika there are thousands of Comorians, so what should we do with them?', she said. 'I think this man has forgotten that he is an African.'⁴⁷ This formed part of a graphic speech which invoked memories of slavery and shamed 'black people' for selling their votes to Arab 'bloodsuckers'.⁴⁸ At the same time, Bibi Titi courted Comorian votes by arguing that they too were the victims of Arab discrimination. While Arabs educated in Europe held good government jobs in Zanzibar, she claimed, Comorians returning from a similar education abroad only became teachers.⁴⁹ In April 1962, the TANU newspaper *Uhuru* denounced Comorians as a 'selfish people' who refused to consider themselves Africans and supported the ZNP.⁵⁰ These frictions demonstrated how the Comorian community's predicament was both bound up in contemporary political choices and burdened by the weight of historical decisions. The earlier claims by Comorian leaders to 'non-native' status impelled them towards alignment with the Arab-dominated ZNP. Yet the ASP and TANU were not consistently hostile towards the Comorian community. They held the gate open for Comorians to enter the nationalist fold by

⁴² *Afrika Kwetu* (Zanzibar), 21 Apr. 1960; *Mwongozi* (Zanzibar), 22 Apr. 1960.

⁴³ A. M. al-Barwani, *Conflicts and Harmony in Zanzibar: Memoirs* (Dubai, 1997), 148–50.

⁴⁴ TNA 561/32/I, Sekibo to Mtemvu, n.d. [early Feb. 1960]; J. R. Brennan, 'The short history of political opposition and multi-party democracy in Tanganyika, 1958–64', in G. H. Maddox and J. L. Giblin (eds.), *In Search of a Nation: Histories of Authority and Dissidence in Tanzania* (Oxford, 2007), 257.

⁴⁵ UKNA CO 822/2068, Zanzibar Protectorate Central Intelligence Committee, monthly report, Apr. 1960.

⁴⁶ *Afrika Kwetu* (Zanzibar), 1 Dec. 1960.

⁴⁷ *Afrika Kwetu* (Zanzibar), 4 May 1961.

⁴⁸ Glassman, *War of Words*, 159–60.

⁴⁹ Bodleian Library, Oxford, MSS.Brit.Emp.s.390, box 3, folder 2, extract from *Sauti ya Afro Shirazi* (Zanzibar), 5 May 1961.

⁵⁰ CADN 193PO/1/7 C2, de Bourdeille to Ministère des affaires étrangères, Direction d'Afrique-Levant (hereafter MAE-DAL), 19 Apr. 1962.

including them within the definition of 'African', while those who chose to support the Arab-dominated ZNP marked themselves as outsiders.

Comorians living on either side of the Zanzibar channel were not just the target of these rhetorical charges, but were actively involved in African nationalist politics. In November 1962, the Zanzibar Association of Dar es Salaam (a de facto ASP branch) attacked Ibuni Saleh for referring to himself as a Comorian, rather than a Zanzibari.⁵¹ The Zanzibar Association was well acquainted with the issue of Comorian identity. Among its leaders was Ali Mwinyi Tambwe, who had been born in Ngazidja, attended school in Zanzibar, and then moved to the mainland, where activity in Muslim politics led to his involvement in TANU. Tambwe's behaviour upset Dar es Salaam's Comorian Association, which called for his expulsion from Tanganyika.⁵² Ali Mohamed Saghiri, the secretary-general of the Zanzibar Association, was born in Tanganyika of Comorian descent. Kaikai Said Kaikai, the ANC cadre who had drawn criticism from the ASP, was another Comorian active in Tanganyikan politics. These Comorian politicians embodied the transterritorial dimension of anti-colonial mobilisation in East Africa, as their cosmopolitan backgrounds made them useful go-betweens for the mainland parties in brokering relationships with their Zanzibari counterparts. For example, Tambwe sat on TANU's committee for Zanzibari matters and acted as its representative in Zanzibar ahead of elections in 1961 and 1963.⁵³ Far from being minorities exposed to the exclusionary forces of racialised majoritarianism, these *wazalia* considered themselves African nationalists. Later, they translated their political capital and ideological orientation into the cause of Comorian nationalism, as Tambwe, Saghiri, and Kaikai all became key figures within MOLINACO.⁵⁴

The origins of MOLINACO

While continental East Africa surged towards *uhuru*, developments in Comoros suggested that independence there would be some time in arriving. Reforms announced in 1961 did invest greater authority in local elites. An elected Chamber of Deputies assumed control over the archipelago's internal affairs. Saïd Mohamed Cheikh, who had previously served as Comoros' deputy in the National Assembly in Paris, became president of a Council of Governors.⁵⁵ However, as other African territories gained independence, Comorian politicians chafed for more autonomy. They argued that Comoros required regional diplomatic representation in order to attend to the interests of the diaspora in Madagascar and East Africa.⁵⁶ Stung by this criticism and tempted by the additional powers that the recognition of a 'Comorian personality' entailed in the international sphere, Cheikh pressed for further concessions. But his requests for diplomatic representation, a national flag, and a national anthem were rebuffed in 1963 by de Gaulle, who argued that these markers of statehood were only commensurate with sovereign independence. De Gaulle intimated that independence might lead to the severance of French aid. Cheikh backed down. The islands remained classified as an 'overseas territory'.⁵⁷

⁵¹Ngurumo (Dar es Salaam), 21 Nov. 1962.

⁵²UKNA FCO 141/17916, Commissioner of Police to Chief Secretary, Dar es Salaam, 1 Nov. 1955; M. Said, *The Life and Time of Abdulwahid Sykes (1924–1968): The Untold Story of the Muslim Struggle against British Colonialism in Tanganyika* (London, 1998), 47–9, 136.

⁵³UKNA CO 822/2068, Zanzibar Protectorate Central Intelligence Committee, monthly report, Jan. 1961; UKNA CO 822/2068, Zanzibar Special Branch Headquarters, 'Supplementary intelligence summary', Apr.–May 1961; I. G. Shivji, *Pan-Africanism or Pragmatism? Lessons of the Tanganyika-Zanzibar Union* (Dar es Salaam, 2008), 32.

⁵⁴In 1967, French intelligence listed Kaikai as MOLINACO's president, Saghiri as its propaganda secretary, and Tambwe as a member of a 'secret committee'. CADN 673PO/1/386, 'Organisation du "Mouvement de libération nationale des Comores" (MOLINACO)', 21 June 1967.

⁵⁵M. Ibrahim, *Saïd Mohamed Cheikh (1904–1970): Parcours d'un conservateur* (Moroni, Comoros, 2008).

⁵⁶AN AG/5(F)/3523, Afraitane, Chamber of Deputies, 26 Nov. 1962.

⁵⁷AN AG/5(F)/3523, 'Entretien du Général de Gaulle avec M. Saïd Mohamed Cheikh', 18 Jan. 1963; Ibrahim, *Saïd Mohamed Cheikh*, 156–7.

Members of the Comorian diaspora harboured more radical ideas. Their experiences of nationalist politics in East Africa provided them with blueprints for anticolonial organisation and connections with powerbrokers in postcolonial regimes. In May 1962, Abdou Bakari Boina, a teacher from Ngazidja, arrived in Zanzibar to take up a position at the Comorian School. Prior to his departure, Boina had been involved in early expressions of dissent to the Comorian government. In Zanzibar, Boina attracted the interest of young Comorians, including several ASP supporters, who were dismayed at the state of affairs in the archipelago. In late 1962, these Comorians — *wazalia* descended from Ngazidja families — secretly founded MOLINACO. They searched for a leader: the young Zanzibari-Comorians themselves had little experience of life in Ngazidja, while Boina's employment as a French government schoolteacher prevented him from taking charge. They eventually convinced Ali Mohamed Shami, a Ngazidja merchant who was in Zanzibar for medical treatment, to become president. Since Zanzibar was still under British colonial rule, open political organisation against France was impossible there. Instead, MOLINACO's founders turned to Comorian members of TANU — most likely Ali Mwinyi Tambwe — who facilitated the establishment of the movement's offices in Dar es Salaam, which was emerging as a haven for exiled anticolonialists from across Africa.⁵⁸

MOLINACO evaded French surveillance until its participation in the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference in Moshi, Tanganyika, in February 1963. Shami issued a tract which stated that MOLINACO had been formed 'in the name of the Comorian people living in the Comoros archipelago and in other countries around the world' in a struggle for 'total and unconditional independence'. Shami appealed to participants in Moshi for material, moral, and financial support in this cause.⁵⁹ However, MOLINACO did not appreciate all the offers it received. Shortly after the conference, the ZNP issued a statement of solidarity with the 'freedom fighters' and 'our Comorian brothers and sisters'.⁶⁰ MOLINACO rejected this entreaty of friendship in a scathing response. It alleged that the ZNP had blocked the formation of a Comorian liberation movement in Zanzibar and that Ibuni Saleh had publicly condemned MOLINACO. Then it turned towards Zanzibar's racial politics. 'We warn the Arabs in Zanzibar to refrain from interfering in the affairs of Comoro Islands', the statement continued. 'We know how much they have done and are still doing to oppress the Africans of Comoro in various fields and walks of life.'⁶¹ By invoking these racial divisions, MOLINACO simultaneously demonstrated its commitment to the ASP-TANU compact and presented itself as an *African* liberation movement — a point to which we will return.

After the Moshi Conference, Shami spent much of 1963 outside of Tanganyika, drumming up international support for MOLINACO. In May, he attended the Addis Ababa conference which founded the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). (Saïd Mohamed Cheikh's request for a delegation to represent Comoros at the conference and serve as a counterweight to MOLINACO was rejected by France). Shami then solicited support in Egypt, China, and the Soviet Union.⁶² However, in his absence, Shami was ousted as president by a 'Tanganyikan' faction led by Ali Mohamed Saghir, which had gained control of the movement's offices. On his return to Dar es Salaam, Shami approached the French embassy for help, claiming to be a moderate force within a dangerous radical movement. Even more desperately, he went to Zanzibar, where he sought to obtain the backing of the ZNP.⁶³ Shami eventually returned to Comoros. Doubts remained about

⁵⁸A. Ouledi, *Abdou Bakari Boina: Une figure emblématique du MOLINACO* (Moroni, Comoros, 2016), 29–38; F. Hassan et al., 'Éclats et rappels d'un temps de lutte', *Le Supplément du Muzdalifa House*, 6 (2015). On Dar es Salaam and African liberation, see Roberts, *Revolutionary State-Making*.

⁵⁹Shami, 19 Feb. 1963, reproduced in Ouledi, *Abdou Bakari Boina*, 150–1.

⁶⁰*Mwongozi* (Zanzibar), 1 Mar. 1963.

⁶¹CADN 193PO/1/21 AII17, MOLINACO, 'A reflection of [sic] the recent attitude to this movement shown by Zanzibar Nationalist Party', 4 Mar. 1963.

⁶²Ouledi, *Abdou Bakari Boina*, 40–5.

⁶³CADN 193PO/1/21 AII17, de Bourdeille to MAE-DAL, 18 Oct. and 30 Nov. 1963.

whether MOLINACO had the capacity or credentials to spearhead a liberation struggle. The French embassy heard murmurs emanating from Tanganyikan political circles that MOLINACO, dominated by East African-born Comorians, was without meaningful connections with the archipelago. Oscar Kambona, chairman of the OAU's newly-formed Liberation Committee and Tanganyika's foreign minister, reportedly complained that MOLINACO lacked both authoritative leadership and enough 'authentic Comorians' to be effective.⁶⁴

The uncertain place of Comorians in East Africa's postcolonial order was underlined by the revolution in Zanzibar. On the night of 11–12 January, just a month after independence, a group of Afro-Shirazi Youth League members overthrew the ZNP-led government. The coupmakers were joined by members of the Umma Party, which had been founded by the ZNP's former general secretary, Abdulrahman Mohamed 'Babu', who was of part-Comorian descent. A Marxist revolutionary, Babu had broken with the ZNP leadership on the grounds that the party was too associated with Arab interests. Many of Umma's members were young and relatively poor Comorians, for whom Babu's radicalism and antiracialism held obvious appeal.⁶⁵ The seizure of power was immediately followed by an ASP-led wave of racial violence, primarily against the islands' Arab population. The precise number of deaths remains unclear, with more realistic estimates of 3,000 to 10,000. Thousands more Arabs fled into exile.⁶⁶ In April, as concerns mounted in the Tanganyikan government about the drift of the revolutionary regime towards the communist world, Zanzibar united with the mainland to form the state which became Tanzania.⁶⁷

The revolution was a moment of traumatic rupture for much of Zanzibar's Comorian population. According to the historian Toibibou Ali Mohamed, 15 Comorians were killed on the night of the seizure of power alone, with another 30 injured. Those closely associated with the ZNP, such as Ibuni Saleh, were imprisoned. Comorians who had served in the sultan's bureaucracy were subject to particular oppression. In November, the Zanzibari government presented France with a list of 106 Comorians for urgent repatriation. Faced with this persecution, hundreds of Comorians departed over the following years.⁶⁸ Among them was Abdou Bakari Boina, the schoolteacher who had been instrumental in establishing MOLINACO. He was also among the few Comorians who had supported the ASP. After the revolution, Boina moved to Tanganyika. He became MOLINACO's secretary-general, the mainstay of the movement's operations in Dar es Salaam, and a well-travelled member of the global anticolonial conference circuit. Raised in Ngazidja, Boina also provided close links with the archipelago. This partially allayed concerns that MOLINACO was dominated by Comorians born in East Africa.⁶⁹

The Zanzibar Revolution had an immediate impact on the political imagination of the French colonialists and Comorian elites. The involvement of Babu's Umma comrades in the revolution conjured up the spectre of racial violence between Comorians in the archipelago.⁷⁰ 'The revolution in Zanzibar has appalled government circles because of their ties to the Sultan and the Arab elements of that state,' reported the French police.⁷¹ The authorities regarded the Comorian refugees who arrived in the archipelago from Zanzibar with suspicion, especially because they believed that some had Afro-Shirazi connections.⁷² Saïd Mohamed Cheikh publicly warned that 'events in Zanzibar should give us pause for reflection.' He attacked the machinations of 'false ideologues who would bring

⁶⁴CADN 193PO/1/21 AII17, Benoit to MAE-DAL, 16 Apr. 1964.

⁶⁵Lofchie, *Background*, 262; conversations with Ahmed Rajab, London, 19 Sept. 2018.

⁶⁶Glassman, *War of Words*, 374n1.

⁶⁷Shivji, *Pan-Africanism or Pragmatism?*

⁶⁸T. A. Mohamed, 'Les Comoriens de Zanzibar durant la "Révolution Okello" (1964–1972)', *Africanistes*, 76:2 (2006), 137–54.

⁶⁹Ouledi, *Abdou Bakari Boina*.

⁷⁰Shepherd, 'Comorians in Kenya', 63.

⁷¹CNDRS box 120, Pietratoni, 8 Feb. 1964.

⁷²CNDRS box 120, Pietratoni, 2 May 1964; Mohamed, 'Les Comoriens'.

about disorder in a country where they are now considered to be foreigners'.⁷³ Although he did not mention MOLINACO, in labelling these 'ideologues' as 'foreigners', he sought to delegitimise members of the movement as not being authentic representatives of the Comorian people.⁷⁴ Cheikh's concerns appeared to be vindicated in August, when a group of men in Ngazidja formed the Socialist Party for the Liberation of Comoros (Parti socialiste pour la libération des Comores, or PSLC). Several had travelled between Ngazidja, Zanzibar, and Tanganyika, where they had established connections with MOLINACO and the OAU Liberation Committee. The Comorian authorities swiftly banned the party and imprisoned its leaders. Cheikh declared that 'those who desire independence only aim to sow poverty, to reap power in disorder and revolution', threatening to use 'machine guns' against them.⁷⁵ The crushing of the PSLC made clear the limits to anticolonial organisation inside Comoros itself. For the meantime, at least, mobilisation would have to take place abroad.

The struggles of a transoceanic African national liberation movement

From the outset, MOLINACO had looked to the Comorian diaspora for support. In 1963, its women's section called for the unity of all Comorians in East Africa.⁷⁶ From its headquarters in Dar es Salaam, MOLINACO established a regional network of branches in Nairobi, Mombasa, Zanzibar, and Kampala. But though many members of the diaspora embraced MOLINACO, others were more sceptical. A similar story went for its supporters among Africa's independent governments, which adopted an ambivalent stance towards the liberation movement. In addition, the nationalism advocated by MOLINACO's foreign-born *wangazidja* did not map onto political agendas in the archipelago itself. Exile brought MOLINACO space for organisation and opportunities for patronage, but also meant the movement was afflicted by tensions among the Comorian diaspora and the national governments upon which it depended.

Not all Comorians in East Africa were sympathetic to MOLINACO or even supportive of independence from France. In an uncertain political environment, Comorians continued to value the benefits of retaining a French passport, which facilitated travel and provided a degree of consular protection. In Dar es Salaam, the Comorian Association quickly distanced itself from MOLINACO.⁷⁷ These fears were amplified by the experience of the Zanzibar Revolution. Although the branches of Comorian Association in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar were shut down, the Kenyan branch continued to function and pledged its support for Saïd Mohamed Cheikh.⁷⁸ In response, Mohamed Ali Athman, a member of MOLINACO's Nairobi branch, condemned French efforts to use Comorians in East Africa as 'tools to break the movement'.⁷⁹ There were strong connections between the *wageni* of the Comorian Association and the French embassy in Nairobi, which used the former for gathering intelligence on the anticolonialists. But, as Gill Shepherd has shown, these divisions represented a manifestation of a deeper struggle between Kenya's older Shikomori-speaking *wageni* and Swahili-speaking *wazalia* from Zanzibar who supported MOLINACO. From 1968, these two groups engaged in a bitter struggle for control of the clubhouse premises of the Comorian Association.⁸⁰

If MOLINACO was viewed with suspicion by older Comorians, a younger generation saw the movement as an opportunity for self-advancement through accessing a university education abroad.

⁷³Quoted in T. Flobert, *Les Comores: Évolution juridique et socio-politique* (Aix-en-Provence, 1976), 311.

⁷⁴Ibrahim, Saïd Mohamed Cheikh, 162.

⁷⁵M. Ibrahim, 'La dissolution du Parti Socialiste pour la Libération des Comores (1964)', *Tarehi*, 7 (2003), 21.

⁷⁶*Mwafrika* (Dar es Salaam), 22 Aug. 1963.

⁷⁷CADN 193PO/1/21 AII17, de Bourdeille to MAE-DAL, 21 May 1963.

⁷⁸CADN 457/PO/1/46 DAM7, Comorian Society, Nairobi to Saïd Mohamed Cheikh, 23 June 1964.

⁷⁹*Nationalist* (Dar es Salaam), 5 Feb. 1965. This was disingenuous: numerous documents (CADN 457PO/1/46 DAM7) show that Athman used his position inside MOLINACO for leverage with the French embassy.

⁸⁰Shepherd, 'Comorians in Kenya', 323–8.

A stream of Comorians travelled to Dar es Salaam, often clandestinely via Madagascan ports, in the hope of receiving scholarships offered by foreign powers, especially in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Not all of these expectations were fulfilled. For example, in 1965 a Comorian claimed to the French embassy that a promised scholarship had been unforthcoming and he had instead been treated as a political refugee. He dubbed MOLINACO a 'scam' and requested repatriation to the archipelago.⁸¹ Yet many Comorians did obtain scholarships and speak positively today about their experiences in the Eastern Bloc.⁸² Some, like Ali Mohammed Hassan, who studied in Moscow, were reincorporated into the movement's leadership structure upon graduation.⁸³ Farukh Abdallah initially travelled to Tanzania in the hope of a scholarship in 1973, but instead staffed the office with Abdou Bakari Boina and Ali Mohammed Hassan.⁸⁴ Rejected by many older Comorians, MOLINACO therefore secured support from newer arrivals by harnessing the gatekeeping power of distributing scholarships made possible by the global Cold War.⁸⁵

MOLINACO also turned to its fellow liberation movements in Dar es Salaam for quotidian assistance as well as political support. Boina recalled how Joaquim Chissano, a FRELIMO member and the future president of Mozambique, translated MOLINACO memorandums from French to English.⁸⁶ The backing of the OAU Liberation Committee was also vital, especially as MOLINACO was a shoestring organisation, even by the standards of the anticolonial movements. In recognition of the impossibility of waging war against France, the Liberation Committee broke with usual practice by providing financial assistance to MOLINACO to organise within the archipelago. More generally, the international legitimacy bestowed upon MOLINACO through its official recognition by the Liberation Committee was essential for promoting the Comorian cause on the continental and global stage. Yet the most important actor within this world of liberation politics for MOLINACO was the Tanzanian state. MOLINACO was dependent on the backing of the local authorities for maintaining its offices, the granting of refugee status to scholarship-seeking students, and the provision of passports which enabled its representatives to travel to OAU conferences and petition the United Nations. Like it did for other movements, Tanzania offered MOLINACO scheduled slots on its external broadcasting services for disseminating its message across the Indian Ocean. These radio broadcasts were a crucial tool for MOLINACO in politicising Comorians in the archipelago.⁸⁷

However, Tanzania had to balance its support for Comorian self-determination with the development of bilateral relations with France. Despite its justified reputation as a leading champion of African liberation, Tanzania placed little direct pressure on France over the future of Comoros. Prior to a state visit by President Julius Nyerere to Paris in June 1965, a French briefing paper noted the potentially sticky issue of MOLINACO.⁸⁸ But in conversations with de Gaulle, Nyerere avoided the matter, even as he spoke about African liberation more generally. He was more pragmatically concerned with exploring French development assistance to Tanzania.⁸⁹ At his next meeting with de Gaulle four years later, Nyerere again refrained from raising the issue of Comoros as the

⁸¹CADN 193PO/1/21 AII17, de Bourdeille to MAE-DAL, 1 June 1965. For similar experiences of Mozambican refugees, see J. T. Tague, 'In the city of waiting: education and Mozambican liberation exiles in Dar es Salaam, 1960–1975', in Carpenter and Lawrance, *Africans in Exile*, 137–52.

⁸²Interview with Faharoudine Abdourahim, who studied in Ukraine, Moroni, 2 July 2018; interview with Rajab Soilihi, who studied in Moscow, Mitsamiouli, 25 Mar. 2019.

⁸³Interview with Ali Mohamed Hassan, MOLINACO assistant secretary-general, Moroni, 28 June 2018.

⁸⁴Interview with Farukh Abdallah, MOLINACO member, Mitsamiouli, 25 Mar. 2019.

⁸⁵The history of Comorian students in the Eastern Bloc remains to be written. On those in France, see A. Ouledi, *L'Association des stagiaires et étudiants des Comores [ASEC]: Rêves et illusions d'une génération* (Moroni, Comoros, 2012).

⁸⁶*La Gazette des Comores* (Moroni), 3 July 2017.

⁸⁷Ouledi, *Abdou Bakari Boina*, 61.

⁸⁸Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, Paris (CADP) 75QO/7, TA-6-2, 'Visite à Paris de Président Nyerere, 1965'.

⁸⁹CADP 75QO/7, TA-6-2, Nyerere-Pompidou and Nyerere-de Gaulle meetings, 25 June 1965.

two men found common cause in their support for the Biafran secession.⁹⁰ Not all liberation struggles were equal: the peripheral nature of the Comorian situation meant that it was relegated to the margins of the anticolonial agenda. Even in the case of Tanzania, the principle of liberation had to be weighed against other factors. MOLINACO's supporters drew attention to these inconsistencies. One complained to TANU's newspaper that Africa could not 'condemn Wilson, Salazar, Smith and the like and bypass De Gaulle who is doing exactly the same in Comoro Islands'.⁹¹

Yet even the idea that Comoros should be included in the same category as Rhodesia or the Portuguese colonies was not universally accepted in Africa. In mobilising support, MOLINACO confronted a perception that Comoros was not an 'African' territory, Comorians were not 'African' people, and therefore MOLINACO could not be an 'African' liberation movement. As we have seen, under colonialism Comorians in East Africa had argued for their classifications as 'non-natives'. MOLINACO's leaders were attuned to this problem and therefore regularly underlined the African character of Comoros. Like earlier petitions, their statements drew on imprecise historical, geographic, linguistic, and racial claims — but made the opposite argument. Ali Mohamed Saghir told the Tanzanian tabloid *Ngurumo* that Comoros had belonged to Africa's history since 'ancient times' and that the spoken language was part of the Bantu group. He assured that although there was a 'mixture of various blood' in Comoros, these were all of African origin.⁹² MOLINACO's treasurer in Nairobi, writing to Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta, clarified that Comoros belonged to the '*Bahari la Mashariki ya Africa*' (Eastern African Ocean) before they became islands in the '*Bahari la Mashariki ya France*' (Eastern French Ocean). The author's unusual phrasing was significant: in abandoning the standard Swahili *Bahari ya Uhindi* (Indian Ocean), he stressed that Comoros was situated in African waters.⁹³ In these examples, MOLINACO's leaders located Comoros in the geographic and racial spaces of continental Africa. Yet the emphasis they placed on the matter suggests a sense of insecurity about it.

These claims to an 'African' identity by MOLINACO activists stood in stark contrast to the situation in Zanzibar, where persecution of the Comorian community reached new heights in 1968. In November, President Abeid Karume announced that Comorians who had not exchanged their French citizenship for Tanzanian nationality would be henceforth treated as foreigners. 'Comorians are not citizens of Zanzibar, they are not Africans', he said. Karume attacked Comorians for their 'reactionary' attitude, their alleged involvement in intrigues to return the deposed sultan to power in Zanzibar, and their refusal to identify with their 'African brothers'. The ASP's youth wing called for Comorians to 'go home'. In justifying this initiative, a Zanzibari minister quoted from Ibuni Saleh's 1936 pamphlet as evidence that Comorians had been the sultan's 'faithful servants'.⁹⁴ There was an obvious discrepancy between the ASP's categorisation of Comorians as not being African and the existence of a Comorian liberation movement which received OAU support. 'How have these people [MOLINACO] got their membership and why are they allowed to have their office in Tanzania if they are not Africans?', asked the reader of a Kenyan newspaper. 'This is another proof that shows Comorians to be our brothers and neighbours as well. They are Africans like us.'⁹⁵

While Comorians attempted to navigate the challenges of postcolonial citizenship in East Africa, MOLINACO's nationalists set about building a movement on the ideological foundations of pan-African liberation. MOLINACO's aspirations reflected the normative language of national self-determination that characterised the global politics of anticolonial liberation of the time. In 1960,

⁹⁰Historical Archives of the European Union, European University Institute, Florence, MAEF-36.58/59-64, 'Entretien entre le Général de Gaulle et Monsieur Nyerere', 16 Jan. 1969.

⁹¹*Nationalist* (Dar es Salaam), 29 Mar. 1968.

⁹²*Ngurumo* (Dar es Salaam), 18 Sep. 1964.

⁹³CADN 457/PO/1/46 DAM7, Mbamba to Kenyatta, 23 Feb. 1964.

⁹⁴*Nationalist* (Dar es Salaam), 16 Nov. 1968; *Standard* (Dar es Salaam), 20 Nov. 1968; Mohamed, 'Les Comoriens'.

⁹⁵*Reporter* (Nairobi), 10 Jan. 1969.

the United Nations passed its landmark resolution on self-determination, defined as ‘an inalienable right to complete freedom, the exercise of their sovereignty and the integrity of their national territory’.⁹⁶ This principle was then enshrined in the OAU’s charter. MOLINACO presented itself within this cadre of modular sovereign nationalism. First, it stressed that only complete independence as a sovereign state was acceptable — not the partial self-government accepted by Saïd Mohamed Cheikh. A country could be either a colony or independent — there was no such thing as ‘semi-freedom’.⁹⁷ Second, MOLINACO emphasised that a liberated Comoros would join Africa’s postcolonial order of sovereign states. Following a meeting of East and Central African states in Khartoum in 1970, a Swahili bulletin stated that ‘it is clear that our country is in East Africa, but since this is a summit of freemen [*waungwana*] and Comorians have not yet attained this status, we cannot attend’.⁹⁸ Finally, MOLINACO argued that the archipelago must become independent as a unitary nation-state which encompassed all four islands. Shami’s initial ‘appeal to Comorians’ demanded ‘integral and unconditional independence’.⁹⁹ These principles — full sovereign independence and territorial integrity, within a continental order of nation-states — were critical for MOLINACO’s legitimacy in the world of African anticolonial politics.

Other Comorian politicians disagreed. In particular, MOLINACO’s insistence on the archipelago’s territorial integrity set it at odds with activists in Mayotte, who worried that an independent Comoros would lead to their domination by the larger islands of Ngazidja and Ndzuanî. Here, the archipelago’s natural frontiers facilitated the construction of collective identities which predated the advance of nationalism and made the pursuit of alternative paths to statehood both conceivable and practicable. The Maorais People’s Movement (Mouvement populaire mahorais, or MPM) pivoted towards support for Mayotte becoming a department of France, rather than acceding to independence as part of a Comorian state. When MOLINACO reached out to the MPM on the basis that both movements were opposed to the colonial government, its entreaties were rebuffed: the vision of a unified, independent Comoros advocated by MOLINACO, itself dominated by *wangazidja*, represented precisely the future which the MPM feared. As Mamaye Idriss argues, the history of the MPM forces us away from naturalised assumptions around national liberation at the end of empire.¹⁰⁰ Whereas MOLINACO worked within the uncompromising cadre of national liberation from Dar es Salaam, the MPM was much more ideologically flexible and tightly embedded in island society. It ultimately proved far more successful at navigating the colonial endgame than MOLINACO’s revolutionaries.

Madagascar: *Rendez-vous manqué*

MOLINACO’s leaders acknowledged that the Comorian diaspora in Madagascar represented the best opportunity for mobilising support outside of the archipelago. After all, the Comorian community in Mahajanga alone was around nine times larger than its equivalent in East Africa. However, MOLINACO failed to develop effective networks in *La Grande Île*. The Malagasy government’s strong relationship with France and concern about links between Comorian nationalists and local opposition parties led to a crackdown on MOLINACO’s activities. Like in continental Africa, the nationalists were also confronted with the reticence of local Comorian communities, which were aware of the precariousness of their own position and aligned their interests with the Malagasy government.

If Tanzania was among Africa’s states most committed to the liberation cause, then Madagascar occupied the opposite end of the scale. After independence in 1960, President Philibert Tsiranana

⁹⁶Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 90.

⁹⁷CADN 673PO/1/386, MOLINACO, ‘La Voix des Comores’, 16 Oct. 1965.

⁹⁸TNA 589/BM/19, ‘Sauti ya MOLINACO’, 14 Feb. 1970. My translation.

⁹⁹Shami, 19 Feb. 1963, reproduced in Ouledi, *Abdou Bakari Boina*, 150–1.

¹⁰⁰Idriss, *Le combat*.

maintained close relations with France. French officials staffed the postcolonial bureaucracy, while French capital continued to dominate the economy. Tsiranana engaged with his continental neighbours primarily through the African and Malagasy Common Organisation (Organisation commune africaine et malgache, or OCAM), a bloc of francophone countries which served a primarily economic function but justified its existence through a commitment to French civilisation. In an approach reminiscent of Comorian intellectuals in colonial East Africa, Tsiranana insisted that Madagascar's identity was fundamentally different from that of the African landmass. Instead, he cited the mixed genealogical makeup of the Malagasy people to emphasise their Afro-Asian character.¹⁰¹ More shocking for most continental governments, Tsiranana cultivated economic relations with apartheid South Africa.¹⁰²

Tsiranana's pro-French position led him to support the status quo in Comoros. In June 1963, MOLINACO's vice president, Youssouf Abdoulhalik, wrote to Tsiranana, requesting assistance and permission for Comorians in Madagascar to establish local branches of the movement.¹⁰³ It brought the opposite response: the Malagasy authorities banned MOLINACO and expelled its leading advocates. Instead, Tsiranana lent support and legitimacy to Saïd Mohamed Cheikh's government in Moroni. In April 1965, MOLINACO wrote to the OAU secretary-general in protest of the Comorian government's decision to invite Tsiranana to the archipelago.¹⁰⁴ The OAU subsequently asked Tsiranana not to visit Comoros, comparing the situation there to the Portuguese colonies.¹⁰⁵ This request went unheeded, to satisfaction in Paris. 'Tsiranana's trip to Comoros has played out very well', noted Jacques Foccart, de Gaulle's right-hand man for African affairs. '[Tsiranana] basically wishes for France to maintain its presence in Comoros and he will do everything to promote it.'¹⁰⁶ This included cracking down on MOLINACO's repeated attempts to implant itself in Madagascar. MOLINACO's leadership recognised the dangers this entailed for nationalist sympathisers. In 1970, MOLINACO instructed Comorians in Madagascar who were interested in joining the movement to write to the headquarters in Tanzania for information, as it was unsafe to make the names of the leaders of its clandestine Malagasy branch known in public.¹⁰⁷

Like in East Africa, Comorians in Madagascar felt a sense of vulnerability as postcolonial minorities, especially as they were the only sizeable Muslim group in the island. In mid-1963, the French consul in Mahajanga reported that local Comorian leaders were worried about the growing influence of MOLINACO's propagandists and were pressing for their expulsion.¹⁰⁸ Rather than support the nationalists, they emphasised their loyalty to Tsiranana's regime. Tsiranana himself had launched his political career in Mahajanga and many Comorians supported his Social Democratic Party (Parti social-démocrate, or PSD). In fact, the PSD had been founded in 1956 as the 'Social Democratic Party of Madagascar and Comoros', even though the archipelago had been governed separately for a decade by this time. Tsiranana presented himself as a protector of Comorian interests in upholding accords signed between France and Madagascar at independence. In Moroni in 1965, he stated that 'the French are our number one friends and so our Comorian brothers from Comoros are therefore our friends twice over . . . The Comorians constitute the nineteenth tribe of Madagascar where they live as genuine children of *La Grande Île*.'¹⁰⁹ We should also

¹⁰¹D. Nativel, 'Sous l'œil de Paris: l'Afrique dans la diplomatie de la Première République Malgache (1960–1972)', in D. Nativel and F. V. Rajaonah (eds.), *Madagascar et l'Afrique: Entre identité insulaire et appartenances historiques* (Paris, 2007), 297–318.

¹⁰²S. Randrianja, 'Les relations entre l'Afrique du Sud et Madagascar (1967–1971)', in Nativel and Rajaonah, *Madagascar et l'Afrique*, 319–44.

¹⁰³Ouledi, *Abdou Bakari Boina*, 45–6.

¹⁰⁴*Nationalist* (Dar es Salaam), 29 Apr. 1965.

¹⁰⁵AN AG/5(F)/3523, 'Note à l'attention du Général de Gaulle', 13 May 1965.

¹⁰⁶J. Foccart, *Tous les soirs avec de Gaulle: Journal de l'Élysée, I, 1965–1967* (Paris, 1997), 152.

¹⁰⁷TNA 589/BM/19, MOLINACO, 'Visiwa vya Comoro sio nchi masikini', 20 June 1970.

¹⁰⁸CADN 673PO/1/386, Veyrent to French Ambassador, Antananarivo, 22 Nov. 1963.

¹⁰⁹AN AG/5(F)/3523, 'Note à l'attention du Général de Gaulle', 13 May 1965.

bear in mind that MOLINACO was dominated by East African-born Comorians from Ngazidja, which surely made the movement less attractive for many Ndzuani-descended Comorians living in Madagascar. The island's large Comorian population therefore saw little to gain from unsettling the status quo.

Just as in East Africa, Comorian nationalists in Madagascar were also members of local radical movements. Several Comorian anticolonialists in Mahajanga belonged to the pro-Soviet opposition party, the Congress Party for the Independence of Madagascar (Antoko'ny Kongresi'ny Fahaleovantenan'i Madagasikara, or AKFM).¹¹⁰ MOLINACO also cooperated with the Chinese-aligned party Madagascar for the Malagasy (Madagasikara otronin'ny Malagasy, or MONIMA). Yet these associations — for reasons of both Cold War orientation and internal politics — only encouraged suppression from the Malagasy authorities and French intelligence. In 1970, while passing through Dar es Salaam on return from a visit to China, MONIMA's leader, Monja Jaona, met Abdou Bakari Boina. They agreed that MONIMA's newspaper would carry MOLINACO material.¹¹¹ This triggered a crackdown: when France complained to Tsiranana about the appearance of MOLINACO communiqués in the opposition press, the Malagasy authorities confiscated newspapers on the pretext that they contained 'anti-government' articles.¹¹² In any case, the geographic spread of these opposition movements made them unpromising allies for MOLINACO. The AKFM had little presence beyond Antananarivo, whereas MONIMA was based in southern Madagascar; the northern coast, where the vast majority of the Comorian population lived, was very much PSD country.¹¹³ Whereas MOLINACO gained support from TANU and the revolutionary circles of Dar es Salaam, in Madagascar its allies proved as much a hindrance as an asset.

The Tsiranana government's opposition affected MOLINACO's ability to not only operate from Madagascan soil but also to mobilise international opinion at the OAU and UN. On multiple occasions, Madagascar led other African and Third World states in blocking resolutions on Comoros. The marginal position of the Comorian situation combined with states' desires for constructive relations with France outweighed the liberation question.¹¹⁴ Even after the OAU finally passed a resolution calling for the inclusion of Comoros on the UN's list of non-self-governing territories in Algiers in 1968, Tsiranana remained defiant. Like Saïd Mohamed Cheikh, he dismissed the ability of the revolutionaries in East Africa to speak for the Comorian population. 'In Algiers I raised the case of the so-called Comorians who claim to be the champions of the archipelago', Tsiranana told the Malagasy parliament. 'They should go there and confer with their brothers, the real Comorians, and then discuss with France.'¹¹⁵ Independent African states were powerful gatekeepers in determining not just which liberation movements received support, but also which territories were recognised as being under colonial occupation at the continent's fringes.

MOLINACO's struggle to establish a foothold in Madagascar did not end with a change in regime. In 1972, protests by students and trade unions forced Tsiranana from power.¹¹⁶ The new government changed tack: it broke off the 'dialogue' with South Africa, opened relations with Eastern Europe, left the franc zone, and closed France's naval base at Diego Suarez. However, MOLINACO still found that the Malagasy authorities were unreceptive to the official establishment

¹¹⁰CADN 193PO/1/21 AII17, Gey de de Bourdeille, 3 Dec. 1963.

¹¹¹CADN 673PO/1/385, 'Note sur le MONIMA', 17 Mar. 1971.

¹¹²CADN 673PO/1/385, Plantey to Tsiranana, 12 Feb. 1971; CADN 673PO/1/385, Plantey to MAE, Direction des Affaires africaines et malgaches, 15 Mar. 1971.

¹¹³L. Rabearimanana, 'Le pouvoir et l'opposition à Madagascar sous la Première République (1960–1972)', *Revue Historique des Mascareignes*, 4 (2002), 17–30.

¹¹⁴Flobert, *Les Comores*, 314.

¹¹⁵*Courrier de Madagascar* (Antananarivo), 24 Oct. 1968.

¹¹⁶F. Blum, 'Madagascar 1972: l'autre indépendance. Une révolution contre les accords de coopération', *Le Mouvement Social*, 236 (2011), 61–87.

of a branch on the island. In May 1974, Boina again requested authorisation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to operate officially in Madagascar. 'From Dar es Salaam, we are very far from the islands', he wrote, adding that 'our establishment in Tanzania took place at a time when the situation did not make it possible in Madagascar.'¹¹⁷ But by the time of this final plea, MOLINACO was largely a spent force, having been overtaken by events in the archipelago.

Conclusion

In January 1968, a student strike in Moroni led to the opening of political space in Comoros. Pro-independence parties were legalised and the anticolonial movement gathered momentum, especially after the death of Saïd Mohamed Cheikh in 1970. But MOLINACO's success in advancing the case for decolonisation on the global stage did not translate into meaningful electoral strength in the archipelago. Created in the aftermath of the student strikes, the Socialist Party of Comoros (Parti socialiste des Comores, or PASOCO) entered into a close relationship with MOLINACO, before the two groups split in acrimonious circumstances. In 1971, MOLINACO established its own Party for the Evolution of Comoros (Parti pour l'Évolution des Comores), but it was crowded out by a kaleidoscopic array of groups, including the well-organised PASOCO. Rather than present the diaspora as a threat, Comorian elites now portrayed it as a source of neighbourly welfare. 'We are Comorians of African origin, we are not short of friends', one politician stated, pointing to the Comorian population in Madagascar and Tanzania. 'If we take independence, we're not going to die of hunger.'¹¹⁸

Amid jockeying over the legal path to decolonisation, the Comorian government made a unilateral declaration of independence in 1975.¹¹⁹ But unilateral did not mean unanimous: Mayotte retained its status as a French territory, as Paris controversially honoured a consultative referendum held the previous year on an island-by-island basis, rather than taking the archipelago as a single unit. Meanwhile, Comorians living in Madagascar experienced a more tragic rupture. A combination of economic crisis and the new government's 'Malgachisation' policy focused the grievances of recent Malagasy migrants in Mahajanga on the city's Comorian population. Around 1,000 Comorians were killed in the violence of the 1976–7 *rotaka*; another 15,000 fled to the archipelago.¹²⁰ Whereas the Mayotte affair demonstrated the failure of MOLINACO's conception of modular nationalism when applied to an archipelago, the *rotaka* serves as a reminder of the fraught experiences of East Africa's diasporic minorities in the era of decolonisation.

By following the mixed successes of Comorian nationalists around East Africa's Indian Ocean basin, rather than solely their campaigns at the OAU or UN, we gain a better understanding as to why the nation-state's triumph in international law did not automatically translate into its political success. Whereas 'exile' provided Africa's better-known liberation movements with opportunities brought about by geographic dislocation, MOLINACO worked among a diaspora which was already embedded into the societies of decolonising states — if precariously so. These anxious communities delivered uneven responses to MOLINACO, which were conditioned by issues of generation and race, local histories, and insular differences. Due to historic migration patterns, the East Africa-based (and, in many cases, East Africa-born) cadres of MOLINACO mostly traced their roots back to a single island; even in Ngazidja, they could be dismissed as *de facto* foreigners. For many Comorians (though not all, as the Zanzibari case shows), French nationality represented protection against their potential domination as a minority within an independent African nation-

¹¹⁷ Boina to Ratsiraka, 11 May 1974, copy in author's possession. I am grateful to Ahmed Ouledi for sharing this document with me.

¹¹⁸ CNDRS box 148, 'Renseignements généraux', 16 Mar. 1972.

¹¹⁹ M. Ibrahim, 'Les Comores: la marche vers l'indépendance (1972–1975)', *Ya Mkobe*, 8–9 (2002), 23–33.

¹²⁰ M. Celton, 'Les affrontements entre Malgaches et Comoriens en 1976 à Majunga: Événement isolé ou échec de l'intégration d'une minorité ethnique immigrée?', *Études Océan Indien*, 38–39 (2007), 169–319.

state — a category which ultimately included the population of Mayotte. Postcolonial governments also weighed pressing the peripheral case for Comorian independence against cultivating relations with France. Again, their responses were ambivalent, even among the most hardline advocates of African liberation. In pushing beyond colonial-era histories of the Indian Ocean coast, the overlooked case of Comoros illuminates the challenges faced by Africa's marginalised diasporas in navigating the end of empire and the methods they employed to secure their own futures in a world of nation-states.

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