

**MISSIONS ATLAS PROJECT
AFRICA
UNION OF THE COMOROS**

Snapshots Section

Country Name: Union of the Comoros

Country Founded in: July 6, 1975

Population: 752,438

Government Type: Republic

Geography/location in the world: Comoros is actually comprised of a series of four islands, which lie off the coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. Reading research articles about the islands could be quite confusing since each island has a Comorian name and a French name. One island is called *Ngazidja*, but is known in French as *Grande Comore*. Another island is called *Mwali* or *Mohéli*. The third island is *Nzwani*, but in French is known as *Anjouan*. The final island is called *Mahore* or in French, *Mayotte*.

Number of people groups: 12

Picture of flag:



Religion Snapshot

Major Religion and % of population: Sunni Muslim 98%

All religions and % for each: Roman Catholic 2%

Government interaction with religion: The Constitution technically provides for the protection of religious choice; however, the unofficial state religion is Islam. Other religious groups are allowed to exist, but are not allowed to proselytize. In fact the legal code prohibits this. The Grand Mufti has an official status in the government and has influence in religious matters.

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108361.htm>

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cn.html>

Country Profile

Basic Facts

Country Name: Union of the Comoros

Demographics:

The estimated population of Comoros is 752,438. Children up to fourteen years of age account for 42.2% of the population. There are 159,282 male children between the ages of newborn to fourteen years of age. There are 158,073 female children between these same ages. Adults between the ages of fifteen and sixty-four years of age account for 54.8% of the population. There are 203,533 males in this age category and 208,591 females. In the last age category, sixty-five years and above, there are 10,474 males and 12,485 females. This 65 and over group accounts for 3.1% of the population. The median age for males is 18.5 years, and the median age for females is 19.1 years. The population growth rate is 2.766%.

The birth rate is 35.23 births for every 1,000 people. There are an estimated 4.84 children born to every woman. The infant mortality rate is 66.57 deaths for every 1,000 live births. The death rate is 7.76 deaths for every 1,000 people. The life expectancy for the total population is 63.47 years. The life expectancy for males is slightly lower at 61.07 years while the life expectancy for females is slightly higher at 65.94 years.

There are approximately 12 different people groups. Comorians identify themselves with the island of their birth. Other immigrant groups include the French, Sakalava, and Malay.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cn.html>

Language:

People use French when interacting with political officials. International businessmen also use French to communicate with clients. Arabic is used in Islamic religious ceremonies and in Koranic schools. People generally use different dialects of Comorian for daily communication with family and peers.

The Comorian language is similar to Swahili and has a large number of noun classes and an elaborate set of verb tenses and aspects. The Comorian language has also been influenced by the constant influx of traders from many different lands.

Generally, each island has its own particular dialect--*ShiNgazidja*, *ShiMwali*, *ShiNzwani*, and *ShiMahoré*.

Ottenheimer, Martin and Harriet Ottenheimer. *Historical Dictionary of the Comoro Islands*
African Historical Dictionaries ; No. 59 Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1994.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/kmtoc.html>

Gall, Timothy L. *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life Volume 1 Africa* Detroit: Gale, 1998.

Society/Culture:

Comorian culture is quite unique. Land is passed through the mother's line so the mother's family is quite influential in a person's life. This practice is called *Manyahuli*. Usually, when a couple weds, the wife's family builds a new house in the family compound in which the husband and wife will live. If the man is married to more than one wife, he will simply visit each wife at her family compound.

Men may work the land or hold outside jobs. This matrilineal transfer of land gives the women a higher amount of influence than in most Islamic nations. The women may choose to leave their husbands and will retain the land upon which their house is built. Ultimately, though, the woman's family has the most power. They will choose the husband for the daughter based upon the wealth and the prestige marriage to the man can offer to the family.

Men may marry as many as four wives. The most important type of marriage is commonly known as the Grand Marriage. In this type of marriage, the man must accumulate a great deal of wealth because he will need to present large quantities of jewelry to his bride and her family. He will also pay for the festivities surrounding the ceremony. These parties and rituals could last for three weeks or longer and will involve the entire community.

Men will often contract a simple marriage with a woman of lower birth at a younger age. This simple marriage is much less expensive and allows him the benefits of marriage without the economic demands made by the Grand Marriage. Then, when the man has attained the amount of wealth needed for the Grand Marriage, he will take a second wife. This alliance will grant him the status of respected man. In the 1970's, the government tried to abolish the practice of the Grand Marriage; however, it failed to do so. Men who travel abroad in order to raise the economic resources necessary for the Grand Marriage may choose not to return if they cannot find the monetary resources needed. They will choose to remain overseas instead of facing the humiliation of returning without the money.

Children and adults are usually divided into age sets called *Hirimu*. Members of each group help when planning marriages. They may also choose to eat together at major festivals. People may help each other when economic problems occur from a general fund of pooled money. Men who cannot pay for the Grand Marriage until later in life may lose prestige among other members of their age set.

A child's life is always dictated by the family and the responsibilities due the family. At birth, a mother will protect her child from outside influences for seven days due to her superstitious fear of the "evil eye" from people who might seek to harm the child. Usually, during these seven days the mother's family will perform several religious rituals to protect the child from harm. After the end of this period of time, the family will receive gifts in the child's name from friends and extended family.

Upon reaching the age of six, the family will send the child to the mosque to attend Koranic school in order to provide for their religious and moral education. Both boys and girls will attend this type of school. When the child has successfully finished the education offered at the mosque, a

special ceremony called the *Hitimiya* occurs. Boys are circumcised at this time. Girls will usually return home and begin being trained in household duties so that they will be ready for marriage. After this ceremony, girls are not usually allowed to leave the house without the escort of another older family member. They will don the *shiromani* or *lesso* at this time in order to cover their heads. The *shiromani* and *lesso* are types of colorful scarves.

Upon reaching their teen years, boys and girls follow very different paths. At age fifteen boys will leave the family compound of their mother and build a hut of their own with others of their age set. They will continue to socialize with their families while beginning to work to save money for their own futures. Girls' families will promise them in marriage and they will begin to fulfill the duties of being a wife. Such marriages are often arranged before the girls reach 20 years of age.

Comorians are very cognizant of their social status. Maintaining good interpersonal relationships is very important. People are polite and value harmony. Also, they will usually offer to help others when needed. People who help will not expect a formal thank you, but could expect that the favor will be returned by the receiver when the giver needs something.

Greetings are very important as part of this culture. Each person will ask the about the other's family and neighbors. Men may shake hands with each other but must refrain from touching the hand or body of a woman who is not a relative. Young men may choose to greet one another with a friendly slap on the back. Women will greet each other verbally or by shaking hands. This verbal greeting, on the part of men or women, will not involve the use of the family name, as using it is considered impolite. Younger people will show respect to their elders by addressing them as "*Kwezi*" if they know them. If the person is a stranger, the younger person may call a man "*mjomba*" (uncle) or "*mbaba*" (father). Women could be addressed as "*mdzade*" (mother).

Comorians may use three different types of calendars to calculate time. Due to the French influence during colonial days, the Gregorian calendar is largely used for planning by business and political parties. Islamic entities use the lunar calendar to determine the dates of religious festivals. The use of this calendar also calls devoted Muslims to set aside Friday mornings for special times of prayer. The third type of calendar is one traditional to the islands and may have been associated with agricultural or maritime seasons at one time. Today it is based upon a mathematical system. This last system is not used widely, now.

People celebrate both political and religious holidays. Political holidays include the commemoration of the death of President Said Mohammed Cheik on March 16th, Labor Day on May 1st, and Independence Day on July 6th. Religious holidays include typical Muslim festivals such as *Idd el Fitri* (the end of Ramadan) and *Miraj* (the celebration of the date of Mohammed's birth).

There are several different forms of artistic expression among islanders. Men generally excel at using wood to design different types of carved items. They may use their skills to create inlays on doors, tables, and cabinets. Usually these inlays are in special geometric patterns. Men also make intricate jewelry. They may use seashells, mother-of-pearl, or gold and silver to create

designs. Women focus their artistic efforts around the weaving of raffia cloth and the skill of embroidery. Raffia may be used to make baskets, mats, or purses. Weavers also generally choose to use a variety of geometric designs. Embroidery will be used to enhance articles of clothing. One fine example of embroidery exists on the *kofia*, a type of white hat worn by most men.

Music is another popular form of artistry. Men may sing by themselves or in groups or two or more. They will use the violin, the zither, or the *gabú*, a type of five-stringed instrument, to accompany their vocal efforts. Women will usually choose to sing in groups. They will use gongs, drums, or tambourines to add flavor to their singing. Some songs use a call and response cycle in which one singer pronounces a phrase and then waits to hear a reply by the other participants. Some songs are also written in stanzas.

Rituals and festivals on the islands offer further opportunities for artistic expression as well as being tied to expressions of religious ideology. *Daira* is a ceremony in which men of the Shadhiliya sect gather in a circle and chant in multiparty harmonies in order to commemorate the death of an important relative. Another ritual involves the feeding of eels in a sacred location. This eel-feeding ritual often occurs at Papani. These rites are often led by Mwalimu, people who direct ceremonies connected with spirit possession rituals.

Different types of games may be played. Card games and dominoes are popular. Soccer is the most popular team sport. *Mraha wa ntso* is a board game played with seeds in which each player attempts to capture his opponent's seeds.

Houses may be made of stone, coral, or from palm leaves. Smaller houses are more often constructed into two rooms. The front room is used for entertaining guests and is generally occupied by the males of the family. Women tend to stay in the back room, which is where the family sleeps. The women also use the courtyard, which is often attached to the back of the house away from the street, for cooking and washing. Families may join several smaller houses together to form a larger compound. Wealthier families may also choose to build multi-story edifices. The lower rooms can then be used to store important items or as stores. The upper rooms will be where the family resides. Some families have chosen to abandon these traditionally styled structures and build Westernized homes.

Islanders typically eat foods that are similar to other east African countries, but also include Arab influence. Breakfast on Grand Comore could consist of a cup of hot tea accompanied by bread and grilled breadfruit. On Anjouan and Mayotte, people will drink a soup made from hot rice. On Moheli, people drink hot tea while eating fish and grilled cassava. At lunch, most people eat madaba and rice. Madaba is made with cassava leaves. They may eat some type of potatoes and fruit, too. Rice will be served at dinner as well. Pork will not be served due to Islamic laws forbidding its consumption. Chicken and fish can be eaten. People may drink water or some type of fruit juice, but will avoid alcoholic beverages because Islamic law prohibits it.

Ottenheimer, Martin and Harriet Ottenheimer. *Historical Dictionary of the Comoro Islands*
African Historical Dictionaries ; No. 59 Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1994.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/kmtoc.html>

Gall, Timothy L. *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life Volume 1 Africa* Detroit: Gale, 1998.

Government:

The government was undergoing a time of transition as this profile was being written. Further changes may occur as Comorians continue to choose different reforms. Officially, the government is a republic with an executive, legislative, and judicial branch. Under the 2001 Constitution, the executive power was actually supposed to rotate between island leaders every few years so that no one island retained power over the others for extended periods of time. Also, each island was supposed to maintain its own local executive, legislative, and judicial systems in order to provide a greater sense of autonomy to each island.

The first president to serve as the main executive leader was *Azali Assoumani* from Grand Comore. He left office in 2006 and *Ahmed Abdallah Sambi* from Anjouan took leadership. According to the 2001 Constitution, Sambi should have been preparing to cede power to the local president of Moheli in 2010. However, Sambi has shown reluctance to do so. Under the current reforms, Sambi would remain president until 2011 when new elections would be held. The system of rotating leadership between each of the islands would be changed. In May 2009, a referendum was held to discuss Constitutional Reforms. About 52.7 of eligible voters chose to participate in the vote and about 92.7% voted in favor of the reforms.

The legislative branch of the government consists of a Federal Assembly. There are 33 representatives who work together to determine national laws. Fifteen of these are selected by local assembly leaders. The remaining 18 are chosen through popular elections. In the 2004 election, the CdIA gained 12 seats while the CRC gained six. The next elections are scheduled to be held sometime during 2009 unless the Constitutional reform changes this.

The judicial system has several levels. The highest court in the islands is called the Cour Supremes. This body consists of several different personages. Two members receive appointments from the president. Another two members are elected by the Federal Assembly. Then, local Council members also send one representative from each island. Former presidents of the republic may also serve at times.

Laws are generally based upon ideals passed down from the French while also being influenced strongly by Islamic law. The current government has not accepted the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice.

There are several different political parties. Due to the complex nature of Comorian politics and the history of constant, rapid shifts of governance, a working knowledge of different political parties can be helpful. The Convention for the Renewal of the Comoros (CRC) is led by Azali Assoumani. The Camp of the Autonomous Islands (CdIA) is actually a conglomerate of several smaller parties who banded together to protest the actions of the Union President. The Front National pour la Justice (FNJ) is led by Ahmed Rachid and is considered to be an Islamic party. The Mouvement pour la Democratie et le Progress (MDP-NGDC) is led by Abbas Djoussouf. The Parti Comorien pour la Democratie et le Progress (PCDP) has Ali Mroudjae as its current leader. Finally, the Rassemblement National pour le Development (RND) chose two leaders—Omar Tamou and Abdoulhamid Affraitane.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/CN.html>

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/IRIN/8fca4d1e16ed8d4937b6f8214879c302.htm>

Economy:

Comoros is a very poor country. In 2008, the Gross Domestic Product was \$741.4 million. The real growth rate was 0.5%. People existed on about \$1000 a year.

In 2001, agriculture accounted for about 40% of the GDP. About 80% of the people worked as agriculturalists. They grew enough food for their own family's consumption. They focused primarily upon the production of cash crops such as vanilla and ylang-ylang. Other agricultural products included cloves, perfume essences, copra, coconuts, bananas, and cassava.

Fifty-six percent of the GDP came from service related industries while the remaining 4% came from industry. Twenty percent of the workforce worked in these two areas. Industries included fishing, tourism, and perfume distillation.

In 2006, exports accounted for \$32 million. The most important exports were vanilla, ylang-ylang, cloves, and copra. In 2007, Turkey purchased 38% of the goods while France got 27.5%. About 9.2% was sent to Singapore while 4.1% went to Saudi Arabia.

In 2006, imports accounted for \$143 million. Rice and other types of food were the most common imports. Because most of the land is devoted to the production of cash crops, islanders must import most of their food. Other imports included consumer goods, petroleum products, cement, and transport equipment. About 18.2% of the imports came from France while 10.8% came from the UAE 10.8%.

There are two main banks on the islands. The Comoro International Bank has offices on the islands of Grand Comore and Anjouan. The French Commercial Bank has a branch on Mayotte. Neither have established a presence on the island of Moheli. All banks close early on Friday, which is an Islamic holy day. Usually banks are open between 7:30 and 1:00 on all other weekdays.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cn.html>

Literacy:

The literacy rate of the entire population is 56.5%. Males have a slightly higher rate of literacy at 63.6% while women have a lower rate at 49.3%.

There are basically two types of educational opportunities for children. The government offers free and supposedly compulsory education in schools based upon the French model for students ages 6 to 16. This type of schooling has primary schools and lasts for about 6 years. Once a student has completed their primary education, they can attend one set of preliminary secondary classes for three years followed by four more years of advanced studies. The second type of educational opportunity, the Koranic School at the local mosque, is by far the most commonly used by students. At the Koranic school, children learn about the writings of Mohammed and become familiar with Arabic.

Students who wish to attend some type of postsecondary school have two choices. The Official School, which has space for 200 students, offers courses in agriculture, teacher training, health sciences, and business. Students who cannot attend that school will have to travel to a university in another country to pursue their educational endeavors.

http://www.childinfo.org/files/ESAR_Comoros.pdf

http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADG205.pdf

<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/48c8ca0d44.html>

<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Africa/Comoros-EDUCATION.html>

http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/inhea/profiles/Comoros.htm

"Comoros." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 12 Jun. 2009

<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/129467/Comoros>>.

Land/Geography:

Comoros is actually comprised of a series of four islands, which lie off the coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. All of the islands are of volcanic origin. The entire area is about 863 square miles. Usually the islands just have two seasons. From November to April, a northeastern monsoon causes the temperatures to rise and the humidity to soar. From May to October, the weather is cooler and drier.

Grand Comore is the largest island. Its total area is 442 square miles. The presence of *Karthala*, an active volcano, on the southern 1/3 of the island impacts the surrounding landscape. Eruptions of *Karthala* caused havoc to settlements in 1918 and in 1977. Lava rocks and the absence of any streams or rivers impact the people's ability to produce long-term sustainable crops.

Agriculturalists that are able to grow crops usually do so in lower altitude areas. Areas of upper altitude on the southern part of the islands are typically rain forests. The northern 2/3 of the island consists of a rocky plain area locally known as *La Grille*. *Moroni*, the capital, serves as the most important seaport. It is on the western coast of the island.

Southeast of *Grand Comore* is the island of *Moheli*. This is the smallest island. A central mountain range rising 2,556 feet (790 meters) above sea level occupies a large portion of the island. *Fomboni*, which is found on the northern half of the island, is the most important town. Most of the soil on the island is conducive to agricultural pursuits because of its richness. Farmers harvest coconuts, cacao, coffee, and ylang-ylang as well as other products. Natural harbors provide opportunities for shipping industries to flourish.

Anjouan lies east of *Moheli*. The total area of the island is about 164 square miles. *Mount Ntingui* is the highest volcanic peak on the island. Lying below this area is a rich mixture of rain forest and arable land. An abundance of natural streams provided adequate water sources in the past. Today, due the high density of population, water is somewhat less abundant. Sandy beaches also stretch along the coastline providing places for tourism. *Mutsamudu*, which is the location of the island's government, has a coral reef near it which provides good opportunities for ships to enter the harbor.

Mayotte is officially an overseas territory of France. However, the Comorian government desires to claim the island. This island is about 24 miles long and about 13 miles wide. The soil is rich in some areas. A coral reef, which encircles the island, provides a protective barrier that is attractive to passing ships and to a variety of fish. Dzaoudzi is the capital of the island.

Comorian waters have a variety of marine animals. The most famous, the coelacanth, is a fish which was thought to be extinct until a live one was caught in 1938. This fish has limblike fins and provides a unique appearance.

In the 1990's the Comorian government became responsive to appeals by international ecologists to establish programs that would help preserve the rain forest and protect other types of natural fauna. The Community Development Fund helps with these endeavors.

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<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/kmtoc.html>

History

Scholars have several theories about the earliest inhabitants of the islands. Indonesians may have used the islands as layovers on their migratory route to Madagascar. Arabs may have migrated there after the death of King Solomon of Israel. Some people theorized that a Persian ruler built some villages there sometime after 1000 A.D. Different representatives of Bantu clans began to move into parts of Mozambique in the 1300's and they found that a group of Malay-Indonesian people were already occupying parts of one of the islands called Anjouan. These Bantu clans would eventually establish villages on both Anjouan and Grand Comore.

Arab sailors were making stops at the islands by the 1400's. These sailors also brought information about Islam, which would become the dominant religion of the islanders in years to come. The main Muslim influence would ultimately come from the Shirazi Arabs who migrated from Shiraz, Iran to establish a series of sultanates on Anjouan and Grand Comore. They had control of Mayotte and Moheli, at times. These newcomers built thriving trade businesses while also introducing important cultural icons such as the Persian solar calendar and stone architecture. They used the islands as bases to export rice, spices, and ambergris. They would first have opium, cotton, and other such Middle Eastern items shipped to the islands and then exchange these for the above items brought in by Eastern African traders. Slaves were also traded and would become the most profitable venture of all in years to come once the Europeans began to establish a presence on the island.

The Portuguese visited Grand Comore about 1505 and began to form trade relationships with different sultanates. The sultanates vied for who would control this new influx of trade and eventually this weakened their abilities to fight off attacks. They began to use slave labor themselves and soon saw owning slaves as a sign of status.

Beginning in the late 1700's, the Sakalava people from Madagascar raided Mayotte and carried off most of the inhabitants to be sold as slaves in French-held territories. These raids would decimate much of the original population and only stopped when another Madagascan people,

the Merina, conquered the Sakalavas. Ironically, the raiders became the raided and fled to the very islands that they had once seen as targets.

The more Comorian traders worked with slavers, the more the practice became entrenched among the sultanates. By the middle of the 19th century, about 40% of the population was slaves who either worked in the fields collecting crops or served as household help. The Shirazi remained as the ruling class while the slave class was largely peoples who had been captured somewhere along the African coast and sold into slavery on Comoros. A small minority of people who served as commoners fell into neither class and existed as free persons without the benefits allowed to the Shirazi.

During the 1700's and 1800's the French and British vied for control of the trade routes in the Indian Ocean. They would gain access to different islands by making treaties or agreements with islands they wished to use as ports. For awhile France held control over the neighboring islands of Seychelles, Reunion, and Mauritius before giving authority to Britain as a result of losses in the Napoleonic Wars. With these ports gone, France made some effort to establish a presence on Mayotte. In fact, treaties of protection were signed with rulers on the islands of Anjouan, Grand Comore, and Moheli in the late 1880's. Full control did not occur until 1912 when the last sultan gave over power. Then Comoros became part of the French Madagascar.

The French brought some benefits to the islanders while also bringing problems that would continue until independence. Slavery formally ended, but social class differences remained. Whereas the Shirazi families had once been rulers, they now were simply large landowners or public employees of the French. People who had formerly been slaves continued to work on plantations as workers. These plantations were not used for growing food, but rather exportable crops such as vanilla, cloves, ylang-ylang, and copra. Yet, most of the money gained from the success of the exports was sent to France or Madagascar with little being invested towards improving roads or education. The French did bring medicine and some educational opportunities. The effects of access to modern medicine caused the island population to grow significantly.

The road to independence began around 1946 when France declared the islands to be an overseas department and allowed representatives to sit in the French National Assembly. In 1957, people elected a Governing Council, which might have led to independence, but in a 1958 referendum, people chose to remain part of France. Different activists related to the old sultanate families continued to attempt to strongly influence the political atmosphere throughout the 1960's and until the granting of independence in 1975. These two groups would form the two most influential political parties of the day. Both parties initially sought to continue to form a good relationship with the French government because of the islands' dependence upon trade relationships and the aid money provided by the French.

One such party was first called the Parti Vert but later changed its name to the Union Democratique des Comoros (UDC) Dr. Said Mohamed Cheikh led this group and served in the Governing Council. He was one of the most well-respected politicians of his day until he died in 1970. Ahmed Abdallah, who had served in the French National Assembly, led the party after the death of Cheikh.

The other main political party was called Parti Blanc, but later became the Rassemblement Democratique du Peuple Comorien (RDPC). Said Ibrahim led this party and wanted to bring about changes such as land reform and the reduction of the prominence of cash crops.

While the two conservative parties initially wished to continue to remain part of the Francophile world, Comorians living in Tanzania, who were swayed by the independence movements they witnessed there, decided to begin a move to gain independence for their island homeland. A group, which called themselves Mouvement de la Libération Nationale des Comores—Molinaco, formed around 1962 and began to ask the Organization of African Unity to exert its influence to help Comorians gain freedom from French control. By 1967 this group had begun to actively pursue independence on the islands. Another group, Parti Socialiste des Comores—Pasoco, also pressed for independence.

The pressure brought by these alternate groups eventually caused the two conservative parties, UDC and RDPC, to also press for independence while still hoping to pacify the French government. The UDC and the RDPC formed a new group called the Parti pour l'Évolution des Comores and interacted with Molinaco while choosing to exclude Pasoco. This coalition issued a "Common Declaration" in 1973 which had support of France. However, in November 1973, riots broke out in Moroni and an important government building was burned. In December 1974, Comorians voted in another referendum whether to retain their French status or form a new government. About 95% of Comorians chose to completely separate themselves from France. The residents of Mayotte chose to remain part of France.

With France's granting of independence, new sources of stress arose for the islands that had chosen this route. Abdallah was initially the leader of the country; however, a group calling itself the United National Front performed a coup just 28 days after the establishment of his government. Abdallah fled to Anjouan and attempted to retain control, but eventually lost. The UNF appointed three men to oversee the new government, but Ali Soilih emerged as the dominant personality. France formally recognized the new government, but did not send any aid money to help the new nation. The French government also retained control of Mayotte, a move which upheld the wishes expressed by the residents of that island in the referendum.

The Soilih government would last for a little over two years. Soilih wanted to abolish French influence in the islands while bringing about other major social changes. He wanted to do away with the custom of Grand Marriages and extravagant funerals while changing the roles of women. In his plan, women would not wear veils and would have to serve in the military just like men. He also hoped to create a series of 34 new provinces. To accomplish his grand plans, Soilih recruited young, impressionable teens to his cause and formed a militia called the Moissy. This militia would attack mosques and towns that seemed to act counter to Soilih's new regime. He also burned an archive library that held records from the past 135 years.

Soilih's government soon faced pressures from many sides. The French were not providing aid monies so the state treasury was soon depleted. He was receiving limited support from Tanzania in the form of military training while gaining some aid money from countries like North Korea and Saudi Arabia. Compounding the problems of the limited monetary resources was the arrival of refugees who fled Madagascar after a volcanic eruption. Food shortages due in part to this

influx caused the government to spend even more of its meager resources on the importation of food. With all of these issues causing unrest, a group led by Bob Denard seized control of the government and ousted Soilih and his cronies. Comorians, who had suffered under the repressive tactics of the previous government, welcomed the change for the most part.

Ahmed Abdallah, who with another exile had reportedly provided funds for the coup, returned to emerge as the new leader of Comoros. Denard and other coup leaders were initially given prestigious places in the new government, but due to pressure from the OAU, France, and the UN, he was forced to leave and only was able to visit the islands occasionally. Denard and Abdallah seemed to retain friendly relations. In fact, some Comorians and international observers thought that they might have even been involved in business together.

Abdallah's new government re-wrote the constitution in 1978. The new constitution provided for strong executive powers while also granting broader legislative powers to each island. The constitution provided for a National Assembly, which used its powers to restrict the formation of political parties for twelve years. The Muslim faith became the official state religion, but people of other faiths were allowed some rights.

Abdallah's regime sought to gain control over Mayotte, but desired to establish good relations with France and the international community. With the status given Islam, Middle Eastern nations were more interested in offering help. Abdallah continued to curry favor with nations that Soilih had contacted.

Abdallah's reign would continue until 1989 when he was assassinated. At his death, Said Mohommed Djohar temporarily assumed power with the backing of France and South Africa. Legally, as head of the Supreme Court, he was to serve as interim president until new elections could be held.

Djohar held elections in 1990 as a result of people's insistence. His government experienced much unrest and was charged with corruption. Different people attempted coups, but failed. At one point, Djohar dissolved the legislature and held new elections. He showed favoritism to his family by appointing them to important government posts. His reign came to an end when Bob Denard helped to stage another coup in 1995.

Denard initially asked Ayouba Combo to take control of the government. Combo eventually ceded control to Mohammed Taki and Said Ali Kemal. Taki would win presidential elections held in 1996, but islanders would soon rebel. In 1997, people on Anjouan attempted to return to French rule, but later decided to attempt full independence. People on Moheli tried this, too. Taki tried to regain control over the islands and find a peaceful solution. He died, though, in November 1998 while on a trip overseas.

In 1999, an interim president called Massoude tried to lead the government. He was overthrown by Azali Assoumani in May. This new leader eventually chose to resolve the continuing conflict with the Fomboni Accords. The Fomboni Accords re-wrote the Constitution and allowed much more autonomy for each island. Each would have its own government with an executive,

legislative, and judicial branch. The leadership of the entire country would rotate between each island's president every few years.

As noted in the government section, the proposition offered by the Fomboni Accords does not seem to be working as intended. Each island seems to value their own interests and promote their own welfare. At the time of this writing, more conflict could ostensibly occur.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/kmtoc.html>

Worldmark Encyclopedia to the Nations Africa 12th Edition.

Christian History

There has never been a strong Christian presence on the islands. The London Missionary Society sent a representative to Anjouan around 1821, but the man left in 1822 after finding little interest among the predominantly Muslim society.

During the years of French control, Catholic priests were allowed to come to the islands. Their witness primarily occurred on Mayotte. Schools were established around 1851. Most of the attendees were from the Sakalava people or the Reunionese Creoles. Today most of the Catholic population continues to reside on Mayotte.

The African Inland Mission sent representatives in 1975, but their personnel were asked to leave in 1978. A small number of Protestant churches exist among the expatriate community. Any indigenous Comorians who choose to leave the Muslim faith could be subject to intense rejection by their family and their friends.

Ottenheimer, Martin and Harriet Ottenheimer. *Historical Dictionary of the Comoro Islands*

African Historical Dictionaries ; No. 59 Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1994.

Barrett, David. *World Christian Encyclopedia*, vol. 1

Religion

All information unless otherwise noted is gleaned from World Christian Encyclopedia Volume I, Joshua Project, and Operation World

Non Christian

Catholic—About 2% of the population are Catholic. Most of the congregants are expatriates from Reunion or are French. Originally the diocese of Ambanja was under the administration of officials in Madagascar. However, in 1975, Mayotte received its own special designation. In 2004 there were four priests and 2 parishes. There were approximately 4,300 people attending mass.

<http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dcmrs.html>

Islam—Islam is the unofficial state religion. About 98% of the population is at least nominally Muslim. Arabs first brought Islam to the islands in the 1400's. The influence of the Shirazi sultanates later firmly established Islam as the main religious system of the islands. Most people are Sunni Muslim and choose to adhere to the Shafi'i school. Three tariqa exist—*Shadiliya*,

Qadiriya, and *Rifaiya*. Arabic and Islamic tenets are taught in some middle schools. There was a report of a rise in interest in Islamic fundamentalism among youth who went to foreign countries to pursue advanced degrees.

Ottenheimer, Martin and Harriet Ottenheimer. *Historical Dictionary of the Comoro Islands* African Historical Dictionaries ; No. 59 Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1994.

Ethnoreligionists—Many of the people are nominally Muslim while continuing to practice ancestor worship or occultism. Their rituals are largely related to indigenous religions that their ancestors brought with them from Eastern Africa.

Hinduism—Indian immigrants brought Hinduism to the islands. The number of adherents is thought to be small and limited to the Indian community.

Jehovah's Witness—This denomination formed in 1989 and is largely limited to the expatriate community. In 2001, there was one congregation with ten members.

Christian/Evangelical

Eglise Adventiste du Septieme Jour—There is one congregation with twenty members.

Eglise de Jesus-Christ aux Comoros—This group primarily consists of Malagasy seasonal workers who come to the islands for temporary periods of time. In 2001 there were 2 churches and 365 members.

Eglise de l'Africa Inland Mission—This denomination first entered the country around 1975, but in 1978 personnel were asked to leave. In 1995 there were 2 churches and 84 members.

Eglises radiophoniques isolees—Isolated radio believers may exist. They may be able to hear religious programming from the island of Madagascar or a country in Eastern Africa.

People Groups

15270

Arab (632)

Arab traders began arriving on the islands in the 1400's. Many chose to intermingle with local peoples. Those who retain the distinction of being solely Arab may actually be expatriates who have migrated to the islands due to business or political alliances. They speak Arabic and thus have adequate access to Christian materials if they showed any interest. All are Muslim.

42176

Comorian Mwali (46,743)

This people group reside on the island Moheli. They speak Comorian Mwali. The people are 99.99% Muslim. About .01% of the population are evangelical Christian.

Very few Christian resources exist. The Bible has not been translated into their dialect. The *Jesus* film is inaccessible. Audio recordings can be found.

15271

Comorian Ngazidja (368,631)

This people group lives on the island of Grande Comore. They speak a language called Ngazidja Comorian. About 99.99% of the people are Muslim. Only .01% of the people are evangelical Christian.

Very few Christian resources exist. Ethnologue reported that portions of the Bible were translated in 1976, but may no longer exist. The *Jesus* film is unavailable. Audio recordings may exist.

15272

Comorian Nzwani (330,627)

The people live on the island of Anjouan and speak Comorian. They are predominantly Muslim. The number of evangelical Christians is unknown. Portions of the Bible are available, and the *Jesus* film is accessible. Audio recordings exist.

47748

Deaf Comorian (3,524)

The deaf live throughout the islands. They may communicate through signs or in writing. Not much is known about the community. They are predominantly Muslim. No Christian resources exist.

15273

French (2,536)

The French living in Comoros may be part of the expatriate community. They speak French and thus have easy access to Christian resources. About 40% of the people are non-religious. The other 60% have chosen some type of religious faith. Many of these are nominally Roman Catholic. About .42% of the people are evangelical Christians.

15274

Makua (10,134)

The Makua people migrated from Mozambique. They may speak Makhuwa-Saka or Makhuwa-Meetto. About 72% of the people are Muslim while 20% of the people practice ethnic religions. About .00025% of the people are evangelical Christians.

A few Christian resources exist. Some portions of the Bible have been translated, and audio recordings exist. The *Jesus* film is available in the Meetto dialect, but not in the Saka.

15275**Malagasy Maore (887)**

The Malagasy Maore have immigrated to Comoros from the island of Madagascar. They speak a language called Plateau Malagasy. About 10% of the people are Muslim while 20% practice ethnic religions. Another 70% have adopted some other type of religious faith. About 10.5% are evangelical Christians.

Several Christian resources exist. The entire Bible has been translated. The *Jesus* film is accessible. Tracts such as *Four Spiritual Laws* have also been printed. Audio recordings and radio broadcasts can be heard.

15276**Malay (887)**

The Malay people are descendants of immigrants from Malaysia. They speak a language called Malay. About 99.1% of the people are Muslim. Less than 1% are evangelical Christian.

Several Christian resources exist. The Bible has been completely translated and gospel tracts have been printed. The *Jesus* film has also been reproduced in their language. Audio recordings and radio broadcasts can be heard.

15277**Reunionese Creole (887)**

The Reunionese Creole are descendants of different African groups who had children with European settlers. Those living on Comoros may have immigrated permanently or may have chosen to come seasonally to help with the harvesting of different crops. They generally speak a language called Reunion Creole French which has an urban and a rural dialect.

The people are very religious. About 90% are Roman Catholics while 1% is Protestant. Only .07% are evangelical Christians.

There are few resources written in their language. The Bible has not been translated. The *Jesus* film and *Father's Love Letter* are available. Audio recordings can also be found.

<http://jmregnier.free.fr/reueng.htm>

<http://jmregnier.free.fr/reueng/dicoeng.htm>

15278**Sakalava (887)**

The Sakalava people are immigrants from Madagascar who initially raided the islands for slaves, but later came to settle after they became the targets of attacks by another people group on Madagascar. They predominantly live on Mayotte now. They speak a language called Bushi. Some alternate names for this people group include Shibushi, Kibushi, Kibuki, Shibushi Shimaore, and Antalaotra.

The Sakalava people practice several different religions. About 50% are Muslim while 20% continue to follow the religious practices of their ancestors. About 37% have chosen to adopt some form of religious practice introduced by Europeans. Among this latter group, about 70% are Roman Catholic while 20% are Protestant. About 1.85% of the people are evangelicals.

Some Christian resources exist. The *Jesus* film has been reproduced. The Bible is not available, but tracts like the *Four Spiritual Laws* have been printed. Audio recordings can be found.

15279

Swahili (1,075)

The Swahili people originally migrated from the coast of Eastern Africa. They speak a language called Swahili, which is similar to dialects of Comorian. One hundred percent of the population practice Islam. There are no evangelicals.

Christian resources are available. The Bible was translated by 1891 and subsequent revisions have been made. Many tracts like the *Four Spiritual Laws* have also been printed. The *Jesus* film is accessible. Audio recordings and radio broadcasts can be heard.

<http://orvillejenkins.com/profiles/swahili.html>

Missiological Implications

1. Evangelical Christians and churches should recognize the opportunities present in the *Union of the Comoros* by the many persons who follow folk-Islam. These people, while professing to be Muslim, still practice many elements of traditional religions. Evangelical Christianity should develop means of sharing the Good News with followers of folk Islam and adapt these methods to the situation in *Comoros*.
2. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to encourage people on Comoros who face persecution when they become believers. The Constitution allows the freedom of religious choice, but the legal code penalizes people who convert to religions other than Islam. Parents are encouraged to send their children to imams to receive religious instruction about the Koran. Parents or children who show an interest in other religious faiths could be harassed by neighbors or societal leaders who are displeased with their curiosity about other religions.
3. Evangelical Christians and churches should introduce the believers in Comoros to the possibilities of house churches and other small group techniques of witnessing and gathering as Christian groups. These methods would avoid some of the persecution.
4. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to alleviate some of the physical and health conditions that make life in Comoros difficult.
5. Evangelical Christians and churches should realize that while their direct participation in evangelism is limited, they can train local believers to share the Good News. The Islamic government allows foreigners to participate in Christian activities, but does not allow any witnessing among Muslims. Foreigners that seek to share the gospel will be deported and could be fined or temporarily imprisoned while awaiting deportation.

Pictures

http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/places/photos/photo_comoros_comoros.html

<http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/IOTD/view.php?id=5442>

<http://www.comoros.travelphotoguide.com/>



Links

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/kmtoc.html>

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108361.htm>

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cn.html>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1070727.stm

http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/places/countries/country_comoros.html

<http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/IOTD/view.php?id=5442>