

# BOOK REVIEW

**Iain Walker. *Islands in a Cosmopolitan Sea: A History of the Comoros.*** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. xxi + 293 pp. Maps. Photographs. Illustrations. Notes. Suggestions for Further Readings. Index. \$59.95. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-19-007130-1.

During my PhD research days in the Zanzibar National Archives, I was surprised to learn that the European imperial powers had maintained posts on the Comoros Islands, a small archipelago situated between Madagascar and Mozambique. Iain Walker's book *Islands in a Cosmopolitan Sea: A History of the Comoros* provides the historical context that explains not only how these islands figured into imperial chess games over spheres of influence, but also how they acted more broadly as a "fulcrum" of western Indian Ocean trade networks as opposed to a mere "outpost" (23).

Walker provides a much-needed overview of the history of the Comoros Islands in the English language. While the author does not build the monograph around a central argument, he does suggest three guiding frameworks. First, despite the fact that the four islands of the Comoros archipelago share some common historical experiences and cultural traditions, it is important to recognize that they have developed unique identities. Second, the peoples of the Comoros were far from being isolated from the wider world. Finally, and somewhat related to the second, Comorians have a long history of incorporating foreign customs such as Islam and age-groups into their communities while still maintaining their own, unique traditions, such as matrilineage.

I found the ways in which the Comoros Islands contrasted with mainland East African history fascinating. For example, Walker examines how the Portuguese encounter in the sixteenth century was not destructive for Comorians as it was for the Swahili. Denied access to food and water supplies by the Swahili because of their brutal attacks, the Portuguese struck a far more conciliatory and ingratiating tone with the Comorians for fruit, meat, and fresh water. Walker highlights another contrast that occurred after World War II: as East African colonies organized themselves to negotiate or fight for their independence, Comorians voted to remain a part of the French empire until 1975 (with the exception of the island of Mayotte).

Comorians also share in common some of Africa's greatest tragedies: the slave trade and European imperialism. The former decimated the

population of the islands from the 1780s through the 1830s at the hands of the Malagasy, the indigenous inhabitants of Madagascar, who sold the Comorians onto French plantations in the Mascarenes and beyond. French colonial rule, beginning as early as 1843 on Mayotte, never developed the islands for the benefit of its inhabitants; in fact, French and French creole settlers took over much of the best fertile land to enrich themselves. Furthermore, the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 led to the demise of the Comoros Islands' historic tradition of supplying European trading ships with food and water, since the ships no longer had to circumnavigate the African continent. For three and a half centuries, this supply industry had provided an independent livelihood for most Comorians. However, caught between the threats of Malagasy slave raiders, the French takeover of their lands, and the removal of their role in supplying the western Indian Ocean trading network, thousands of Comorian emigrated elsewhere, such as Zanzibar and later France, in hopes of finding better opportunities.

Whenever I open a new monograph, I like to examine the bibliography first. This book lacks one, and so the reader must search through the endnotes and suggested readings. These resources, while they have their own logic, are not adequate substitutes for the centralized ease of a bibliography. That said, Walker uses multiple archives from the United Kingdom, France, Zanzibar, and Madagascar, as well as local newspapers from the Comoros. Travelogues, diaries, and ship journals fill out the rest. This book also relies upon a number of monographs written in French.

Overall, Walker has produced a tightly organized, straightforward chronological history. The rich descriptions about the *ada* custom—involving weddings, bride price, excess, and access to community status—would complement select readings from Glassman's *Feasts and Riots* (Heinemann 1995). Walker also opens a window into the Comorian world of global consumption and international political intrigue that, at times, reminds one of Prestholdt's *Domesticating the World* (California World 2007). This book would be a great acquisition for anyone interested in filling in gaps in knowledge of the western Indian Ocean world.

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### For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Alpers, Edward A. 2000. "Recollecting Africa: Diasporic Memory in the Indian Ocean World." *African Studies Review* 43 (1): 83–99. doi:10.2307/524722.

Dubins, Barbara. 1969. "The Comoro Islands: A Bibliographical Essay." *African Studies Bulletin* 12 (2): 131–37. doi:10.1017/S0002020600037677.

Vergès, Françoise. 2001. "Looking East, Heading South." *African Studies Review* 44 (2): 141–49. doi:10.2307/525578.