

Strategies of Citizenship and Belonging in the Comoro Islands and in Tanzania

Iain Walker¹

¹University of Oxford, COMPAS, Oxford, UK

iain.walker@compas.ox.ac.uk

The Comoro Islands are part of the Swahili cultural zone and Comorians have long participated in the trading networks of the western Indian Ocean: a substantial community of Comorians, filling a range of economic roles, has existed in Zanzibar since the early 19th century. As a result of the French colonisation of their islands, for much of the 20th century members of this community enjoyed the status of French subjects. This status helped them to constitute a collective identity as one of several communities in Zanzibar. Following independence, however, the allegiance of Zanzibaris of Comorian origin was frequently questioned and on several occasions doubt has been cast on their status as Zanzibaris, and as Tanzanian citizens. Although few Comorian Zanzibaris have retained French citizenship, Comorian nationality law recognises the right to Comorian citizenship for those of Comorian ancestry who wish to claim it. Tanzanian legislation does not currently permit dual citizenship; however, a number of Zanzibaris have nevertheless assumed Comorian citizenship; and in view of proposed imminent changes to Tanzanian citizenship laws that will permit dual citizenship, it is likely that more Zanzibaris will avail themselves of the opportunity. This is a strategy that is particularly useful in view of the growing economic links between Comoros and Tanzania

This paper analyses the collective and individual forms of identity of Zanzibaris of Comorian origin in the light of 60 years of shifting statuses: the mass uptake of Zanzibari nationality prior to independence; the contestations of the revolutionary period and the accompanying recourse to French nationality by those for whom it was still an option; and the contemporary possibilities of obtaining and benefitting from Comorian status, particularly in view of changes in the law. Are there any real advantages to obtaining Comorian citizenship, or does the history of Zanzibari ambivalence regarding the allegiance of Comorian Zanzibaris circumscribe such moves? How do Comorian Zanzibaris consolidate their identities within a plural society without drawing on what may be perceived as “foreign” sources of group identity? How does the formal character of citizenship and nationality impinge on more social and culturally inflected modes of belonging? This paper looks at the interstices and the articulations of formal and informal modes of belonging in Zanzibar and in the Comoros and the strategies employed by members of a community that retains a coherent collective sense of identity