

Constraints and Creativity in Comorian Enterprise

Bob Whitman White
Department of Anthropology
McGill University, Montréal
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ABSTRACT

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In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to small-scale enterprise in developing countries because of its potential to foster economic growth and simultaneously reduce poverty in regional economies. In an attempt to understand more about the relationship between entrepreneurship and social change in economies in Africa, this research examines the beliefs and practices of six small-scale entrepreneurs in the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros. Surveys show that indigenous entrepreneurs consider fellow community members a hindrance to their activities; the government and access to capital are seen as less constraining. Case studies focus on entrepreneurial innovation in order to distinguish entrepreneurs from "businessmen" and to paint a picture of the African entrepreneur as vanguard instead of victim.

Contreintes et créativité dans l'entreprise Comorienne

Depuis plusieurs années, les petites entreprises occupent de plus en plus une place importante en recherche sociale concernant les pays en voie de développement. Afin de mieux comprendre les rapports entre "l'entrepreneuriat" et le développement social, cette recherche traite l'innovation dans les petites entreprises et les cas de six entrepreneurs dans la République Fédérale Islamique des Comores. Les données montrent que les exigences de la communauté envers les entrepreneurs constituent les plus grands obstacles à leurs activités. Leurs histoires nous permettent de distinguer entre "homme d'affaire" et "entrepreneur" et de donner une image positive des entrepreneurs Africains.

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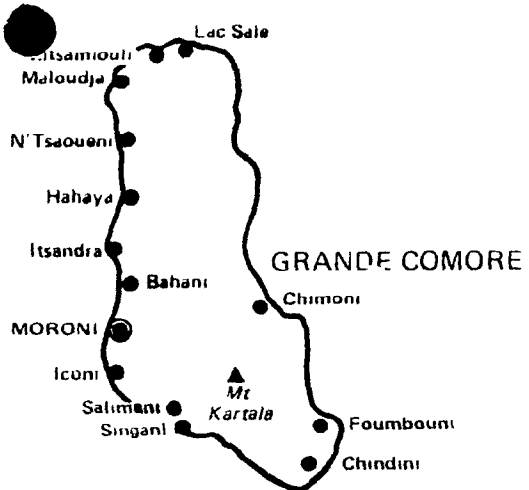
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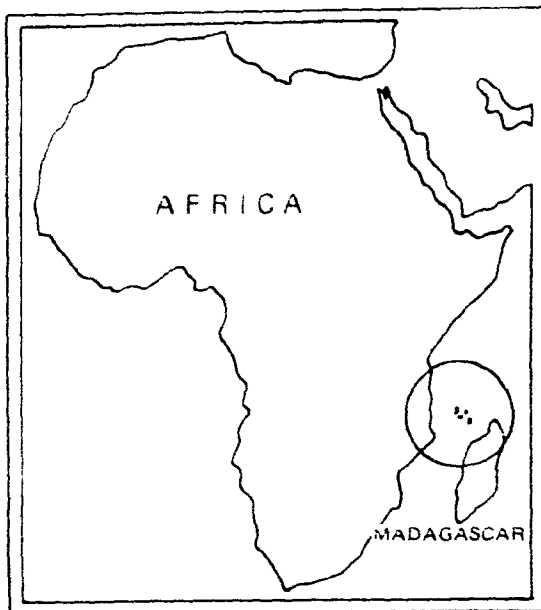
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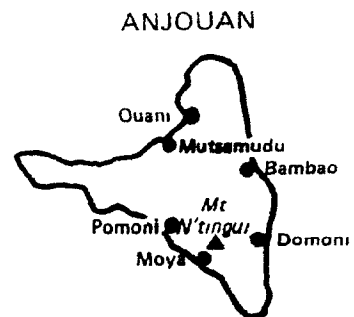
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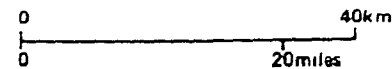
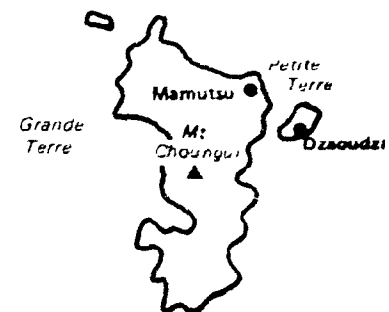
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Introduction

Of all the developing regions in the world, Sub-Saharan Africa has had the least success with regard to material or economic development. Many African governments are authoritarian and inefficient, failing to provide their citizens with adequate employment, education and health care. These conditions combine with widespread inter-ethnic conflict and history's greatest assortment of colonial legacies to make the region nothing short of a political mess. The situation seems even worse given that some countries from developing areas outside of Africa are beginning to show signs of substantial progress (World Bank 1990: 39-55). More so than in any other region of the developing world, inefficient governments, constrained economies and harsh climates constitute an environment in which earning an adequate income is a difficult venture.

But this is not the whole story. Despite nearly impossible circumstances, African economies are alive with local initiative and ingenuity. Markets and industries are witnessing the emergence of large numbers of small and micro-enterprises which create jobs and lead to new social and economic combinations in local and economies. For social scientists concerned with the reduction of poverty in developing areas, understanding how people use intellectual capacity to find new sources of income is of increasing importance. One way of doing this is by looking more closely at a group of people who fuel local economies with hard work and new ideas: African entrepreneurs.

Goals of the Research

A considerable amount of research has been devoted to studies of entrepreneurship, especially in the fields of management, sociology, economics and anthropology. In many cases, an attempt is made to explain entrepreneurial success. However, this is not the case with the literature on Africa. African entrepreneurs are usually portrayed as uneducated, inexperienced and/or obstructed (Nafziger 1977; Hart 1972; Marris and Somerset 1972; Harris 1966; Schatz 1977; Kilby 1969; Akeredolu-Ale 1975; Kennedy 1988). One goal of

the present research is to demonstrate the dynamic nature of economic activity in an African setting, despite institutional constraints to its development.¹ In the case of the Comoros, a small island nation located off the east coast of Africa, there are excellent examples of people who are creating jobs and opening markets through initiatives in private enterprise.²

The second goal of this research is to show that entrepreneurial activity occurs at various levels in African economies. Most scholarly writing on African entrepreneurship focuses on the industrial sector and the failure of indigenous entrepreneurs to develop medium-sized manufacturing firms (see especially Natziger 1977, Harris 1966, Kilby 1969). There are studies which examine entrepreneurial activity in local and regional trading networks,³ but very few studies look at the activities of entrepreneurs in small and micro-enterprise, a sector which is filled with entrepreneurial activity.⁴ The precarious nature of small enterprise, rooted in community level social relations, yet strongly influenced by capitalist development, makes for a particularly fascinating context within which to study entrepreneurial innovation.

In the current international climate, increasing emphasis is given to the promotion of private sector activity in developing economies (structural readjustment programs, privatization schemes, multinational investments). This means that entrepreneurs are finding themselves on the receiving end of government policy and, perhaps less often, government aid. If policies aimed at entrepreneurs and small-scale enterprise are to be effective, they must be designed with local conditions in mind. By examining local perceptions of problems and priorities, I address the third goal of this research: to show the value of local knowledge in planning and policy initiatives which affect small enterprise and entrepreneurs.

There are several theoretical approaches which influence the goals I have set out for this research. During the early years after independence in many African countries, writing on development was dominated by theories of modernization. The 1970s and 80s

1 This dynamism, although less common in the literature, is discussed in MacGaffey (1987, 1991) and in Beveridge and Oberschall (1979).

2 For video case studies see Folkerth & White (1993).

3 See for example MacGaffey (1987) and Bauer (1963).

4 Categorizations of businesses most often correspond to size. "Micro" enterprise refers to an operation of one or two people. The term "small" is used to mean a business with more than two people but less than ten. "Medium" usually corresponds to businesses with between 15 and 50 employees. These numbers vary according to the source and in some cases other criteria such as level of income or permanency of location are considered important.

witnessed the emergence of dependency theoretical frameworks, which, in response to modernization theories, rendered obvious the dependent and often exploitative nature of Euro-African relations during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Without denying the importance of these frameworks to our historical understanding of contemporary Africa, I attempt in this research to move past a dependency approach since it does little to acknowledge endogenous factors in development and does not provide a cohesive framework for social action. This approach is clearly elaborated in the work of Donald Attwood (1992), Janet MacGaffey (1987, 1991), Keith Hart (1982) and Goran Hyden (1983). In addition, these scholars emphasize ingenuity and initiative in their analysis of local organizational forms. I borrow from the optimism in these studies to tell stories of entrepreneurial activity in the Comoros. Also important to the theoretical perspective of this study is the work of Fredrik Barth (1963, 1967). Barth's approach to the study of entrepreneurs is one which acknowledges human agency in the development process without neglecting the importance of the cultural and social institutions that affect entrepreneurial behavior. This perspective is particularly helpful for examining the relationship between entrepreneurship and social change.

Methods & Findings

The fieldwork for this research was conducted from June to September of 1992 on the island of Grande Comore in the Comoros Islands, where I served as a Peace Corps volunteer from 1988-1990. Research was conducted through intensive case studies of entrepreneurs, who were selected according to the following criteria: 1) evidence of some innovative process or practice and 2) willingness on the part of the entrepreneur to talk about his⁵ work and life. Interview sessions were conducted in numerous settings and varied in length from one to three hours. The questions I asked fell into the following categories: family history, personal history, the business, innovation and entrepreneurial perceptions. All findings are based on notes taken during the interviews.

⁵See page 29 for an explanation of my use of the masculine pronoun.

As with any research based on short-term fieldwork, the findings for this study are necessarily tentative. There are, however, some interesting aspects, particular to the Comoros and characteristic of the continent, which emerge from the research. The literature on African entrepreneurship (discussed in detail in chapter 2) concentrates primarily on three aspects which can affect entrepreneurial activity – family, education and capital. These aspects were found to be relevant (to differing degrees) to entrepreneurs in the Comoros, but other aspects also presented themselves. Comorian entrepreneurs seemed most concerned with fellow community members as constraints to their business. Access to capital was not seen as a serious obstacle, but the obligation to give credit was, and the actions of the state were not considered a formidable threat to entrepreneurial activity. Not all of the findings pertaining to entrepreneurial perceptions run counter to generalizations made in the literature, but there is certainly enough variation between the two to speak of an indigenous agenda for promoting African entrepreneurship.

This thesis is divided into five sections. Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of the field of entrepreneurial studies with special attention to studies of entrepreneurs in developing economies. Chapter 2 discusses five prominent studies of African entrepreneurs and re-examines the analytical frameworks used. These authors' models of entrepreneurship are re-worked in a new synthesis which uses the *constraints and creativity* opposition as part of a new approach to understanding local conditions. After chapter 3 (a brief examination of the research context and design), I present five case studies of entrepreneurial innovation (Chapter 4), followed by findings in chapter 5. The final section draws some conclusions from the research and proposes areas for further research.

CHAPTER ONE

Background

Studies of Entrepreneurs

The first appearance of the word "entrepreneur" (sic) occurs in the 14th century (Hebert & Link 1982: 13), but the formal study of entrepreneurship does not become common until early economists take up the subject in the 17th century. For the purposes of this research, a brief discussion of the prominent scholars who have contributed to entrepreneurial studies since that time is enough to reveal some key questions and issues.⁶

Much classical economic literature discusses the role of individuals in the development of capitalism, but economists such as Ricardo and Smith made no distinction between entrepreneurs and capitalists. Richard Cantillon (1680-1734), a French economist, was the first to isolate a consideration of the entrepreneur in economic theory. Cantillon saw the entrepreneur as one who buys at a certain price and sells at an uncertain price. Today, Cantillon's theories are generally considered rudimentary, but his work laid the foundation for further studies in entrepreneurship (Hart 1972: 3). The later work of J.B. Say (1767-1832) is considered more comprehensive partly because of its insistence on the separation of entrepreneurial and capitalist functions. Say viewed the entrepreneur as a catalyst and a mediator, constantly assessing consumer needs and introducing new ideas into the productive process. The capitalist, in his view, was less responsive to consumers and less likely to challenge traditional economic practices. Few further developments occurred in entrepreneurial studies before neoclassical economists took up the subject some time later.

The neoclassical framework, despite the attention it gave to entrepreneurs, did not allow for an analysis which showed a relationship between entrepreneurship and economic change; within this framework entrepreneurs were rarely more than owners of enterprise or industry (Hart 1972: 5). This somewhat static notion of entrepreneur was due largely to

⁶ Texts which give good histories of the study of entrepreneurship include Hebert & Link (1982) and Natziger (1977). See Greenfield and Strickon (1979) and Hart (1972) for a more anthropological perspective.

the neoclassical preoccupation with the firm, and was first called into question by the economist Frank Knight (1885-1972). One of Knight's most important contributions was his clarification of the concept of risk. Previous scholars had discussed risk, but it was Knight's isolation of this concept that called attention to the bearing of risk as one of the "uncertainties" of entrepreneurial activity and that helped lead to a more dynamic conception of the entrepreneur in economic theory.

Up to this point, mainstream economic theory had been principally concerned with models of equilibrium -- that is, theories that set out to explain how economic systems maintain stability over time. But a new emphasis on risk required further consideration of the role of individual decision makers and implied that some consideration of economic change was essential to a comprehensive theory of economy. Many of these elements can be seen in the work of Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950), a seminal writer in the literature on entrepreneurship. His aim, put simply, was to explain economic change over time, and he attempted to do this by introducing the idea of innovation into a systematic consideration of entrepreneurial activity. For Schumpeter, innovation referred to any one of five primary functions:

- the introduction of a new good
- the introduction of a new method of production
- the opening of a new market
- the conquest of a new source of raw materials
- the introduction of a new organization of industry

(Schumpeter 1939)

The creation of new technology is not central to Schumpeter's notion of innovation. The Schumpeterian entrepreneur forms new combinations of labor and capital to respond to the needs of the market. Thus, Schumpeter viewed entrepreneurs as catalysts, able not only to identify economic opportunity, but also to pursue opportunity and put it into practice. Although Schumpeter's ideas have been very influential in contemporary thinking on entrepreneurship, his theory is sometimes criticized for failing to formulate an hypothesis which can be easily tested (Hart 1972: 12). Schumpeter's contributions led to further study

not only in economics, but also in other fields such as business history, psychology, sociology and eventually anthropology.

A H. Cole (1889-1974), historian of entrepreneurship and founder of entrepreneurial studies at Harvard, attempted to broaden the study of entrepreneurship by including a wide range of management functions in his definition. In his work he introduced the notion of competitive imitation, whereby entrepreneurs remain competitive by copying and combining the ideas of others (Cole 1959). This idea also appears in Schumpeter's work, though to a lesser degree, so that many consider the ideas of Cole and Schumpeter different only in scope. The process of competitive imitation is especially relevant to entrepreneurial activity in Africa, much of which relies on Western technology and imported industrial equipment.

Work in the field of social psychology, especially by David McClelland and Everett Hagen, first became important to entrepreneurial studies in the early 1960s.⁷ McClelland's hypothesis (1961) states that economic development and entrepreneurial activity in a given society can be explained by what he calls a need for achievement, or *nAch*. According to McClelland, this characteristic can be found in different ethnic groups to varying degrees and can be quantified to determine which groups will be most receptive to entrepreneurial training. Hagen's work (1962) is based on a similar hypothesis. He suggests that groups who display this need for achievement are those ethnic groups who have traditionally suffered from positions of social marginality or low status, for example the Dissenters in England, the Samurai in Japan, the Parsees in India, and the Jews in many countries.

The work of economist Theodore Schultz is also widely referenced in the literature on entrepreneurship. The Human Capital approach advocated by Schultz is an individualist approach which attempts more fully to understand the role of entrepreneurs in market and non-market activities. According to Hebert and Link, Schultz makes two important contributions to entrepreneurial studies. First, he redefines entrepreneurship to mean the "ability to deal with disequilibria," extending the notion to include non-market activity such as household decisions and allocation of time. Second, he calls attention to a positive correlation between education and people's ability to perceive and react to disequilibria in

⁷ The work of McClelland and Hagen is referenced frequently in the fields of sociology, psychology and management, but has been criticized for employing an analysis which is universalistic and static. For a critique of this approach see Akeredolu-Ale (1975), Greenfield & Strickon (1981), Hart (1972).

local markets (1982: 103). Schultz's emphasis on disequilibria to explain entrepreneurial innovation differs somewhat from the work of Schumpeter, who is more concerned with the technological process than with the complexity of local environments and relations. The notion of human capital put forth by Schultz is particularly relevant to this research, which views indigenous knowledge and local initiative as necessary aspects of economic and human development.

Studies of Entrepreneurs in Developing Economies

In rapidly growing economies which are characterized by imperfect markets and incipient capitalist development, people who define new economic possibilities and act on judgements of opportunity are obviously important to an understanding of local context. Thus, the study of entrepreneurship in developing countries has received considerable attention in recent years.⁸ Peter Kilby, in his book Entrepreneurship and Economic Development, gives a comprehensive categorization of functions which entrepreneurs in developing countries must perform. These functions are broken down into four spheres of activity: exchange relations, political administration, management control and technology implementation (Kilby 1971: 27-8). Most economic theorists consider only the first two of these aspects important for the study of entrepreneurs, but in many developing countries uneven development and imperfect markets require that entrepreneurs perform all four functions themselves.

A number of anthropologists have also written about the role of entrepreneurs in local economies; the work of Fredrik Barth and Clifford Geertz can be cited as good examples.⁹ Barth's The Role of the Entrepreneur in Social Change in Northern Norway (1963) includes the work of four researchers who write on the role of entrepreneurs in a number of small fishing communities in Northern Norway. The case studies give examples of various entrepreneurial initiatives within the local fishing industry and are intended to show "the course of local enterprises and their ramifying social repercussions" (Barth 1963: 5).

⁸ Nafziger (1977) gives a brief summary of the research on entrepreneurship in developing countries.

⁹ For the sake of brevity I have not included a complete discussion of the anthropological literature on entrepreneurs. For more writing on this subject see Greenfield & Strickon (1986), Greenfield, Strickon & Aubey (1979) and Salisbury (1970).

Although Barth's study does not take place in a developing country, his work is important to studies of entrepreneurs in developing areas because of its emphasis on the relationship between entrepreneurship and social change.¹⁰

According to Barth, "an entrepreneur is someone who takes the initiative in administering resources, and pursues an expansive economic policy," serving as a link between economies at different stages of development (Barth 1963: 5). The entrepreneurs in this study are seen as "cultural brokers" who differ from more culturally conservative members of society in their willingness to take risks and their efforts to maximize profit in one form or another (ibid: 7). Unlike Schumpeter, who is concerned primarily with innovations in economic practice, Barth shows how entrepreneurial innovation can affect both economic and cultural practices. His study is important not only because it makes clear the social costs and benefits of entrepreneurial activity within a local economy, but also because of the extent to which it manages to contextualize local entrepreneurs within their communities.

Clifford Geertz' Peddlers and Princes (1963) also examines local context. He compares entrepreneurial activity in two Indonesian towns, one dominated by bazaar-style market traders and the other by patron-client relations and the presence of local princely families. Geertz claims that for economic development to occur in "pre-takeoff" economies such as that of Indonesia, two elements must be present: competition and accumulation. Entrepreneurs must be able to compete effectively in the market and they must have access to economic organizations which permit the accumulation of capital. In one town, Modjokuto, the bazaar-style trading patterns are conducive to competition, but not to the accumulation of capital or wealth. In the other, Tabanan, princely ruling families form entrepreneurial groups which show evidence of accumulation, but the prominence of these ruling families in the region restricts competition. Neither economy has signs of both accumulation and competition and therefore neither achieves economic "take-off." Geertz' analysis, which focuses on entrepreneurial groups, pays less attention than Barth's to the role of individual agency or diversity among entrepreneurs, but his rich description of market traders and his emphasis on entrepreneurial innovation make his work relevant to the study of entrepreneurship in Africa.

10 Elsewhere Barth (1967) has written on entrepreneurial initiative in the Sudan.

James Acheson, writing on transaction costs and specialization in small firms, looks to the nature of the enterprise as a major determinant in economic growth (Acheson 1986: 45). According to Acheson, it is the small, relatively unspecialized nature of firms in developing countries which keeps them from experiencing economic growth, since specialization permits economies of scale, increases in quality and decreases in consumer prices. This point is important to make with regards to the literature on Africa precisely because so few writers call attention to diversity among African entrepreneurs and enterprises.

Other scholars also take the firm as a unit of analysis. In an eloquent study conducted in the Seychelles, Burton Benedict (1979) shows how intra-family relations can affect entrepreneurial activity. Factors he considers important are the degree to which family members are expected to contribute to the business, the stability of agnatic relations, and the level of contact with other ethnic groups. Benedict's findings are relevant to studies of African entrepreneurs because he has shown how family can both help and hinder entrepreneurial growth. In addition, Creole, Chinese and Asian families like those discussed in his article are also common in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Defining Entrepreneurship

This brief overview shows that there is a great deal of diversity in studies concerning entrepreneurs. Consequently, it is difficult to speak of any one specific definition of entrepreneurship. The literature which deals specifically with African entrepreneurs (discussed below) is equally ambiguous. According to one study, entrepreneurs are those who "break away from petty trading and take a risk" (Marris & Somerset 1972: 13). Other studies focus on entrepreneurial activity in family business or in the industrial sector. Some scholars use the term "entrepreneur" to mean anyone who owns a business. Despite this variation, there are three factors which are generally considered essential to a definition of entrepreneurship: the bearing of risk, organization/management and innovation (Hart 1972: 26). Studies of entrepreneurs have used these aspects in various combinations to define entrepreneurial activity. With the intention of understanding entrepreneurs in an African context, my definition constitutes a new combination.

Schumpeter refers to entrepreneurial innovation as the "fundamental phenomenon of economic development" (1961: 54). In this research I have given an intentional emphasis to entrepreneurial innovation because of its instructive potential for the study of social and economic change in developing economies. Examining innovation in developing economies will not only give valuable information about local models of doing business, but it will also serve to show how individual entrepreneurs push at the borders of traditional economic practices and, by extension, social values. Furthermore, research which examines entrepreneurial innovation has the potential to portray African society in a more positive light than most images of Africa in mainstream western media (apartheid, ethnic conflict and famine are among the most common).

Innovation may also enable a more precise definition of "entrepreneur," since it is this aspect which distinguishes "entrepreneurs" from "businessmen."¹¹ *Businesspeople* weave together the elements which constitute an enterprise and they almost always assume some sort of risk. Entrepreneurs, however, are different from businesspeople because in addition to bearing risk, they introduce some form of innovation to the economic process. Furthermore, entrepreneurs vary with regards to innovation; some are more innovative than others either because their innovation is more novel or simply because they introduce more innovations into their enterprise.¹²

Since technological innovation is less common in developing countries than the borrowing of technology, the former should be de-emphasized. Furthermore, the managerial function should be highlighted, as a large part of the entrepreneur's job in a developing economy involves bringing together labor, production and consumers within a system of highly imperfect markets and infrastructure.¹³ Thus innovation, although it

11 Many studies use these terms interchangeably; see for example MacGaffey (1987) and Nafziger (1977). The African Entrepreneur (Marris & Somerset 1972) was originally published under the title African Businessmen (1971). Some definitions include only owners of mid-sized manufacturing firms and very few studies talk about entrepreneurs other than those who participate in production or fixed retailing. I will argue elsewhere that the use of the term "entrepreneur" should be wider (to include different levels of production, the business of distribution, and all social classes) and at the same time narrower (to distinguish "entrepreneurs" from "businessmen").

12 See G. Hart (1972: 31) on "routine" and "N+" entrepreneurship, terms which she uses to distinguish between different degrees of innovation.

13 Hart refers to these skills as "gap filling" and "input completing" (1972: 79).

does not rule out the possibility of technical innovation, usually refers to innovation in management or marketing.¹⁴

With this in mind, I define entrepreneurs as those involved in the production and/or distribution of goods or services, regardless of firm size, whose activity manifests the following traits: 1) **innovation**, both managerial and technical, and 2) **the bearing of risk**.

¹⁴ It may also be argued that borrowing technology from the industrialized countries requires innovation since very few machines or processes can be used in developing countries without alteration or adaptation of some form or another.

CHAPTER TWO

Models of African Entrepreneurs

Those who are in favor of capitalism start off with a definition of the entrepreneur as hero which automatically puts their work behind serious consideration of those who are against capitalism and would define the entrepreneur as a clever thief.

(Akeredolu-Ale 1975: 23)

The following analysis, a partial survey of the literature on African entrepreneurship as well as a critical analysis of theoretical frameworks brought to bear on this topic, will focus on two questions:

- 1) How do various scholars treat the subject of entrepreneurship in Africa?
- 2) Which approaches (or elements thereof) seem best suited to the study of entrepreneurship in Africa?

For the purposes of this chapter I have chosen five of the most prominent examples of research which focus on the relationship between entrepreneurship and social change in Africa. The studies, which discuss vastly different regions and market sectors within the African sub-continent, also display considerable variation in analytical frameworks. Since this chapter attempts to examine the various analytical viewpoints or "models"¹⁵ used to talk about African entrepreneurs, this diversity among the texts is not necessarily a drawback.

There is, however, one important commonality among the studies which makes them important to this research: they all discuss factors which the authors believe have either helped or hindered the development of private enterprise in Africa. In each case, entrepreneurship is central to the discussion. Simply stated, my objective in conducting this analysis was to examine how social scientists view the role of entrepreneurship in Africa. Do they see it as a problem or a solution? Is it constrained or creative? According

¹⁵ Here I am using the term "model" in the same way it is used in the field of sociolinguistics, to mean a culturally patterned set of ideas and impressions which, when combined, function as a 'cultural model' for understanding otherness. See Holland and Quinn (1987) for more on this subject.

to the literature, what do entrepreneurs know, and what part do they play in regional and national economic development? Answers to these questions have important implications for the policies and programs which are implemented on behalf of small-scale entrepreneurs throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

After examining the various models of African entrepreneurs (entrepreneur as hero, entrepreneur as evil, entrepreneur as victim, entrepreneur as commodity), I will use two axes to look at how the studies differ (individualist/structuralist and qualitative/quantitative). Finally, I will propose the constraints and creativity framework, which may allow a fuller understanding of African entrepreneurial activity than that which can be gained from previous studies.

Entrepreneur as Hero

[Kisangani] is a thriving business centre; all sorts of people are running successful and substantial enterprises, despite the shortages of goods, the deterioration of infrastructure and rampant bribery and corruption... (MacGaffey 1987: 1).

In her book Entrepreneurs and Parasites, Janet MacGaffey discusses entrepreneurial activity in northeastern Zaire to show how entrepreneurial growth and capital accumulation can occur even in "conditions that appear so inimical to its development" (ibid). Her study focuses on two entrepreneurial groups, Nande long-distance traders and businesswomen in Kisangani, and attempts to show how the formation of an indigenous capitalist class occurs in this part of Africa.

For MacGaffey, social mobility among these groups occurs primarily as a result of the hard work and ingenuity¹⁶ of people who operate outside of the state's control (chapter 6). MacGaffey argues that these people are achieving middle class wealth and status using profits from informal economic activity. The purpose of MacGaffey's study is to document the existence of this indigenous entrepreneurial class and to trace the

16 MacGaffey does not concentrate on the concept of innovation as such. Innovation in her study refers to the creative solutions employed by entrepreneurs against institutional barriers such as corruption and government obstruction to enterprise and thus is presented as more of a response than an entrepreneurial initiative. In the definition I have set out, entrepreneurial innovation can refer to the production or the management function.

development of their "struggle" for indigenous capitalism. MacGaffey opposes a view which focuses on institutional barriers to entrepreneurship. Instead, she argues, the economic and political state of crisis in independent Zaire has created "potential opportunities for those with initiative, enterprise and a measure of good fortune" (MacGaffey 1987. 211).¹⁷

The entrepreneurs in MacGaffey's study are heroes because they are doing more than simply succeeding in business. They are investing in productive enterprise and, in the process, accumulating enough wealth to 'constitute' themselves as a new indigenous capitalist class. According to MacGaffey, they are "taking on the attributes of a capitalist class and ensuring their reproduction as a class" (ibid 66). By 'becoming' middle class, these entrepreneurs are also acting as agents of social change. MacGaffey's case studies are intended to show how this class formation actually occurs; they discuss several important aspects of African entrepreneurship which are not discussed elsewhere in the literature, such as the strategies employed by female entrepreneurs and cooperation among entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneur as Evil

Sara Berry's Fathers Work for Their Sons sets out "to understand why accumulation has often taken unproductive forms and how this has affected the structure of class interests and social conflict in western Nigeria" (1985: 7). Berry uses two cocoa-farming villages as the backdrop for her study. She describes cocoa production as a precondition to the economic activity of the farmers' children, who have left agriculture for the pursuit of an income in the city. The entrepreneurial activity of the children leads to accumulation of wealth and, according to Berry, conflict. Although Berry's study is not concerned primarily with the significance of entrepreneurship, the groups about which she writes are entrepreneurial, and their entrepreneurial activity is a necessary part of Berry's argument.¹⁸

17 In a later work (1991), MacGaffey and a group of Zairean anthropologists look at entrepreneurial initiatives in the "second economy" and Zaire's huge smuggling networks.

18 Berry uses the term "entrepreneur" to refer to rural cocoa farmers as well as their children who engage in economic activity in urban settings.

According to Berry, the standard paradigm, which asserts that in a capitalist economy entrepreneurial accumulation leads to greater efficiency, does not hold true in Western Nigeria.¹⁹ She argues that British colonial policy in this region did not strip Africans of their access to land (as in many parts of East Africa) and thus it enabled a proliferation of small businesses and farms. Furthermore, marketing activities (such as gathering information, securing and maintaining a client base, and obtaining credit) would draw entrepreneurs away from the enterprise itself, where they were desperately needed to supervise inefficient laborers and production (Berry 11). This proliferation of inefficient small enterprises leads to "unproductive competition"²⁰ among entrepreneurs, since retained earnings are not being re-invested in production.

According to Berry, entrepreneurial activity in Nigeria is not only inefficient, but also a source of conflict. Her interviews show that cocoa farmers use earnings in part to support and educate younger members of their extended family. Unfortunately, the money used for education, which enables farmers' children to migrate to urban areas and become accumulating entrepreneurs, only "serves to differentiate children from their parents" (Berry 79). Berry argues that education increases young people's ability to accumulate wealth and therefore increases their social standing relative to their parents. Children with new-found wealth and status are able to influence community decisions and politics - an arena which was previously the domain of the elders.

In this way, parents are "exploited" by their children (ibid: 83). Cocoa farmers "find themselves confronted and even dominated, by a[n] entrepreneurial class they have helped, in part, to create" (ibid 81). The thrust of this argument is made possible by applying the Marxist notion of exploitation to familial relations; fathers now 'work' for their sons. Although Berry does not elaborate any further on the nature of these 'exploitative' relations, implicit in her analysis is the idea that entrepreneurs and their activities are a source of social conflict and class struggle.

19 See Nafziger (1977) for a brief discussion of the treatment of the entrepreneur in Marxist economic analysis.

20 Berry's study makes the point that accumulation occurs, but is often diverted from the enterprise to activities which will ensure or advance social status within a particular community (1985: 7). Compare this with Geertz' (1963) discussion of accumulation.

Entrepreneur as Victim

The African Entrepreneur (1972), by Peter Marris and Anthony Somerset, is a fascinating case for the analysis of social scientific writing on African entrepreneurship. Marris and Somerset's study begins with a discussion of the importance of entrepreneurship to development and is followed by a brief history of indigenous trading patterns in Kenya. The second section of the book deals with the specifics of indigenous enterprise, management, family and business, customers and competition. Unlike Berry and MacGaffey, who examine the consequences of entrepreneurial activity, Marris and Somerset are primarily concerned with African enterprise and how it functions. The authors make use of the extensive surveys that were conducted and quote directly from research participants to illustrate the trends which emerge from their research on small enterprise.

Throughout the study an attempt is made to generalize about what is particular to African enterprise. In a chapter entitled "The African Business Creed," the authors present a number of important observations about Kenyan entrepreneurs. the idea that "the success in business owed more to character...than to special talents" (86), the idea that an African model of management resembles more closely a classroom than a corporate or family unit (112), and the need for autonomy evident among Kenyan entrepreneurs. The wealth of details in this study about entrepreneurs' beliefs and practices is refreshing in comparison with much of the relative literature, which tends to pay more attention to the role of government or class than it does to the entrepreneurs themselves.

For Marris and Somerset, entrepreneurship is important because of what it can offer the development process. But fostering indigenous entrepreneurs also has political ramifications, since entrepreneurship is "an aspect of the transfer of power for which Independence stands" (Marris & Somerset 1972: 16). Much of the study, however, reflects a view that Kenyans are passive recipients of a colonial legacy which must be Africanized in order for any real development to occur. It is perhaps this view of Kenyan society that informs the authors' thesis: social pressures (the need for employment, increased status and political access) *push* Africans into entrepreneurial activity. Most entrepreneurs previously held acceptable salaried positions but did not have sufficient

education to advance in their jobs. According to Marris and Somerset, they were "frustrated" and were thus "pushed" into entrepreneurship because of social pressures to succeed.²¹ Thus, entrepreneurial activity, and by extension economic development, occur only as a result of some set of external forces which frustrate people into becoming entrepreneurs.²²

Entrepreneur as Commodity

The entrepreneur, from the perspective of the economic analyst, is a factor of production — a factor that combines the resources used in the production of a good or service.

(Nafziger 1977: 81)

In his book African Capitalism, Wayne Nafziger describes the Nigerian shoe industry to show that the promotion of indigenous entrepreneurs should be an essential part of any policy pertaining to economic development in Africa. Nafziger's study is primarily concerned with the relationship between entrepreneurial inputs and the success of the resulting enterprise; he sets out to show which factors affect entrepreneurial activity and to what extent. According to Nafziger, the entrepreneur is a factor of production (or a resource) which can be discussed in terms of supply and demand. The limits of available technology and the existing market determine the demand for entrepreneurs, while the supply depends on the number of people who are willing and able to become entrepreneurs. Together, these elements make up what Nafziger calls the "market for entrepreneurs," and entrepreneurs are nothing short of a commodity.²³

Gillian Hart, in The African Entrepreneur, also attempts to elucidate some of the problems affecting the development of indigenous entrepreneurship in Africa, and, like Nafziger, uses a model for studying entrepreneurs that is based on the concept of supply and demand. Hart's study concentrates on entrepreneurship in the Transkei and Ciskei of South Africa, where her research was carried out. She examines the factors which affect the supply

²¹ This argument is similar to that put forth by Everett Hagen (1962)

²² The book is filled with references to this effect (Marris & Somerset 1971: 69, 73, 75, 89, 175, 225).

²³ Perhaps one reason that Nafziger is able to speak of the "market for entrepreneurs" is the fact that he uses the terms "entrepreneur" and "businessman" interchangeably. The latter category, presumably the larger of the two, may be easier to identify and quantify than the former.

of entrepreneurs (family background, occupational experience and education) and those which affect the demand (credit, capital, competition and market size). According to Hart, the study's various and numerous objectives can only be accomplished with the help of a new theoretical framework. This attempt to develop an "operational concept of entrepreneurship" is based on a distinction between the economic and non-economic variables which affect the supply of and demand for entrepreneurs (Hart 1972: 35).²⁴

The analyses given by Nafziger and Hart are very similar in their insistence on the notion of supply and demand.²⁵ According to this view, if we can understand what affects the supply and demand of entrepreneurs in developing economies, we can then manipulate these factors to increase the number of entrepreneurs, which will inevitably lead to economic development. This model sees entrepreneurs not as a diverse group of individuals with varying commercial and social interests, but as a precious national resource, which if fostered, will lead to local and regional economic growth.

Discussion: Building a Better Framework

What is striking about the literature on African entrepreneurship is the variety of theoretical approaches used to treat the subject. Some studies are individualist and others structuralist; some view African entrepreneurs as victims, some as vanguards; some view African enterprise overall as constrained, some as creative. These factors make an attempt to assess or synthesize the material on African entrepreneurship somewhat challenging, but a closer look at these studies calls attention to two variables in particular, the consideration of which can help build a better framework for understanding African entrepreneurs: 1) differences in individualist and structuralist frameworks and 2) differences in qualitative and quantitative approaches. In an attempt to build on previous work, this section discusses the principal approaches in the studies presented above and attempts to show

²⁴ Economic variables such as available technology and imperfectness of markets correspond to the demand component and are considered exogenous to the individual entrepreneur. Non-economic factors such as individuals' abilities, motivations, and opportunity costs are termed the "potential entrepreneurial supply" and, according to Hart, are dependent on the socio-cultural milieu.

²⁵ Nafziger and Hart also rely heavily on quantitative data to generalize about entrepreneurs. It may be argued that insights in this area cannot readily be quantified in terms of demand. As can be expected, some of the tables and graphs they offer are more effective than others. I discuss related issues below.

how they vary along these axes. Finally, I will propose the constraints and creativity framework as an analytic tool to address these methodological issues.

Individualist and Structuralist

Individualist theories take the individual as the basic unit of analysis to explain social change. The structuralist view asks questions about social, political and economic institutions in order to understand the dynamics of a particular society.²⁶ William Davis (1986), writing about entrepreneurial strategies in Northern Luzon, argues that neither an individualist nor a structuralist approach is sufficient by itself to discuss processes of economic and social change. He argues that a structuralist theoretical approach such as Marxism is important to social science because of 1) the attention it pays to the way in which institutions constitute entrepreneurial activity and 2) its ability to deal with power relations and inequality in societies. At the same time, however, individualist strategies are valuable because they do not assume homogeneity among the members of a given class or the static nature of class borders. In addition, individualist approaches help us understand how institutions are affected by individual agency and how individual actors make decisions, both important aspects of policymaking initiatives.

The studies of Barth and Geertz can serve as good examples of these differing approaches within the literature on entrepreneurship. Barth, although partially concerned with what he calls the "social costs of entrepreneurship," writes primarily about the individual and the effect of his/her actions on regional communities and economies. Geertz seems more concerned with the effect that societal or institutional structures have on entrepreneurial behavior. He discusses what he calls the "entrepreneurial group" to make the point that entrepreneurial behavior is socially determined.²⁷ Neither of these approaches alone seems able to convey the complexity of relationships between economic development and social change.

26 A theoretical distinction using these terms is articulated in Attwood (1992). William Davis uses the terms "super-organic" and "actor-oriented" to describe a similar conceptual separation (Davis 1986: 167) and a number of writers within economic anthropology refer to "structuralist" and "decision-making" approaches (see Greenfield & Strickon 1986).

27 Five of Geertz' six concluding points discuss his "entrepreneurial group" (1963: 147-152).

MacGaffey (1987) makes use of both approaches. She concentrates on the importance of individual initiative and its effects on class and other social groupings, but she also discusses the role and functioning of government and gender-based institutions in Zaire. MacGaffey's study manages to highlight human agency without ignoring institutional formations which inevitably influence individuals' decision-making processes. Certainly this combination of theoretical approaches goes further toward representing the reality of African entrepreneurs than the use of either approach alone.²⁸

Qualitative and Quantitative

In his book Raising Cane, Donald Attwood presents a political economic analysis of the development of peasant-run sugar cooperatives in contemporary western India. His purpose is to "understand the historical and social background of the cooperative leaders, the cause and results of their innovations, and the paradoxes of this peasant-owned sugar industry" (Attwood 1992: 4). In order to do this, Attwood combines two approaches. First, he collects qualitative information on a variety of "enterprising peasant families" (including the stories of individual family leaders) in Malegaon, a village in the Maharashtra state of India where he conducted research. Second, he gathers and compiles quantitative data on 130 households in the region, some of which increased their wealth and social status through involvement in sugar production. According to Attwood, the two approaches are complementary, the former providing information on cultural values, organizational patterns and change processes, the latter on larger trends and patterns which might be neglected by anecdotal material (Attwood 1992: 123).

The five studies used in this chapter to present models of entrepreneurs show a great deal of variation on this question. As with individualist and structuralist frameworks, the combination of these two approaches can greatly increase our understanding of the nature of African entrepreneurship. Berry's work is the least quantitative in nature. Although her argument is supported by skillful writing, it would benefit from a quantitative analysis such as that of Nafziger, who makes excellent use of statistical data to discuss similarities between large numbers of entrepreneurs. Hart's study, on the other hand, could benefit

²⁸ For future research it may be interesting to compare structural and agency frameworks using entrepreneurial innovation as a relational factor.

from more attention to the individual stories of the people who participate in her research.²⁹ The most effective use of the two approaches can be seen in Marris and Somerset's research, which manages to strike a healthy balance between ethnographic description and statistical representation of entrepreneurial perceptions. Quantitative analysis, besides serving as a cross-checking device for qualitative information, can provide valuable information to policymakers about local needs and behavior. The use of this integrative approach in the context of African entrepreneurial studies may serve to bridge the gap between anthropological and economic writing on Africa to which this survey attempts to call attention.

The Constraints and Creativity Framework

Even a cursory look at the literature makes clear the wide array of factors which have been used by scholars to explain the success and/or failure of African entrepreneurs: education, social class, access to capital, access to information, professional experience, government policy, economic environment, competition; the list goes on. There is, however, one important commonality throughout the literature. All of the studies discuss factors which the authors believe have either helped or hindered the development of African enterprise or African entrepreneurs. This commonality forms the basis for an analytical framework which I have used to understand the dynamics of entrepreneurship in the Comoros Islands. By examining the possible range of constraints to entrepreneurial activity and the creative responses used to overcome these constraints, my research attempts to flesh out a framework which is latent in the literature and whose elaboration may increase understanding of African enterprise. For the purposes of my research I have used the constraints and creativity opposition³⁰ as a framing device which, although not

29 Hart numbers her "informants" from 1 to 88 and refers to them by their number

30 Not only in the literature but within my own writing and thinking I have noticed a preponderance of terms which take this form: push/pull, constraint/creativity, inhibitor/facilitator, help/hinder, help/hurt, prevent/promote, accelerate/inhibit, victim/vanguard, enabler/constrainer etc. Implicit in this attempt to understand functional complexity is the Western notion of progress. In this view, entrepreneurs have constraints on their advancement and those individuals that overcome these obstacles are truly interesting and worthy of study, they somehow propel our society forward. Greenfield and Strickon (1981) give an exposition of the metaphor of growth in Western thought which is particularly pertinent to this discussion

comprehensive or complete, allows us to understand the dynamics of a situation faced by people trying to earn an income through entrepreneurial activity. This framework attempts to address the aforementioned axes in two ways. First, it considers factors which are elements of both structuralist and individualist frameworks, including individual skills/limitations and institutional formations. Second, it proposes a method of quantifying entrepreneurial perceptions. This method, if used with a larger and more reliable sample group, may fill in gaps of understanding left by the use of qualitative analysis alone. In the following chapters it will become clear how local knowledge can be used to identify and prioritize problems which influence entrepreneurial activity.

My primary objective in conducting this analysis of the literature was to examine how social scientists problematize entrepreneurship in Africa. Do they view it as a problem or a solution? Are entrepreneurs constrained or creative? Answers to these questions have important implications for the policies and programs which are implemented on behalf of small-scale entrepreneurs throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and they may enable a comparison between the discourse of development and the discourse of entrepreneurs in a particular local setting (see *Conclusions*). Of the five studies considered for analysis, two discuss African enterprise as a problem (Nafziger, Berry), either because it is insufficient in supply or because it leads to social conflict. Two studies portray entrepreneurs as a potential source of economic development if given the proper conditions under which to operate (Hart, Marris & Somerset), and one (MacGaffey) views entrepreneurial activity as a solution. Four of the studies (Nafziger, Berry, Hart, Marris & Somerset) portray African entrepreneurs as constrained or constraining and one (MacGaffey) portrays them as creative. My research, which set out to look at entrepreneurial innovation in a local economy, is biased toward a view that African enterprise is creative, dynamic and best viewed as a solution, not a problem.³¹

and Gudeman (1986; 1990) demonstrates how metaphors can be used to understand knowledge in and of local economies.

31 This is not to say that the latter and the former are mutually exclusive; necessity is the mother of invention. I am merely making the point that positive images of Africa are lacking in scholarly writing and in Western mainstream media. My optimistic stance is intended, in part, to speak out against these trends.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Context and Design

The Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros

Located at the northern tip of the Mozambique Channel, the Comoros Islands have for many centuries been an important entrepôt in the intersection of the African and Indian Ocean overseas trade routes. The first waves of foreign traders to pass through this region are commonly referred to as the "Shirazi." They began arriving in the 7th and 8th centuries and are said to have been from somewhere on the Arabian peninsula or from Persia. The historical accuracy of the term "Shirazi" is heavily debated by scholars since so little is known about these first outsiders (Nurse and Spear 1985; Spear 1984; Pouwells 1984). Nevertheless, it is safe to say that these traders were Arabic or Persian and it is through their migration and continued contact with local populations that Islam became widespread, probably during the 12th and 13th centuries. Much less is known about the Bantu-speaking peoples that inhabited the islands previous to Shirazi settlement, although many scholars have made attempts to emphasize the importance of these groups to an historical understanding of Swahili ethnicity.³²

The arrival and settlement of the Shirazi caused considerable changes in political and social formations throughout the region.³³ According to Youssouf Said Soihhi, "Une organisation en sultanats se substitue à l'ancienne chefferie traditionnelle Bantoue: ces sultanats remettent en cause l'autonomie des villages soumis à leur autorité politique" (1988: 24). A new political structure included three distinct classes in Comorian society: the ***kabayila***, a class formed from the inter-marriage of Arabs and local chiefs, the **freemen**, the original inhabitants of the island, usually farmers or fishers, and the **slaves**, originating from the East African coast. This formation was characterized by a "unité

32 Most notable are the work of Nurse & Spear (1985), Spear (1984), and Abdallah Khalid (1977)

33 Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari's work (1981), translated and edited by J.W.T. Allen, discusses in considerable detail the exact nature of prolonged contact between Arab traders and the indigenous Bantu groups which later became known as the Swahili. Unfortunately, the exact dates of initial contact between Comorians and these outsiders is unknown

culturelle et religieuse et d'autre part, par un dualisme entre une économie de subsistance et une économie féodale" (Soilihi 1988: 27). Comorian farmers and rent-seeking élites led separate yet inter-connected social and economic lives. Despite the region's involvement in pre-colonial world markets (most likely for spices, slaves and foodstuffs), little changed in terms of local production or social relations until the French began to assert authority over the islands in the late 1800s (ibid: 30).

The French colonial period is divided into three stages: the purchase and occupation of Mayotte (one of the archipelago's four islands) in 1841; the establishment of a protectorate from 1886 to 1912, and the annexation which lasted from 1912 until Independence in 1975. The latter two periods saw significant changes in land tenure and labor organization as colonial interests attempted to monopolize land and labor on the islands.³⁴ By the late 1960s, an independence movement began to surface and in December of 1974 the vast majority of Comorians (95%) voted in favor of declaring unilateral independence from France. A National Assembly was formed to elect Ahmed Abdallah as first Head of State, but before he could finish his first year in office, an opposition coup d'état ousted him from power. For the next year and a half, the socialist visionary Ali Soilihi attempted to implement revolutionary policies which would make the Comoros self-sufficient in food production and independent from the world economic system. This experiment began to fail as the Soilihi regime came under increasing fire for human rights violations and in 1978 Abdallah returned with a mercenary troop (led by French mercenary Bob Denard) to assassinate Ali Soilihi and regain the position of Comorian Head of State. Denard and his men were asked to stay on as the military advisors and leaders of the prestigious Presidential Guard. Abdallah ruled the country more or less peacefully until 1989, when after disputes with Denard over a renewed contract, Denard assassinated Abdallah, leaving a power vacuum which eventually led to the Comoros' first multi-party elections in March 1990. The Comorian electorate voted Said Mohammed Djohar, former minister of justice, into the presidential palace. The early 1990s have witnessed numerous cabinet changes and the proliferation of political parties

34 In 1864, more than a third of the island of Mayotte was under the control of French plantation owners, who, like their contemporaries on the other islands, implemented coercive labor arrangements and monopolized trading networks in the region (Soilihi 1988: 38). Humblot, the Comoros most notorious "colon," was given rights to 47.8% of the total surface of Grande Comore in a treaty with a local sultan in 1885 (ibid: 37). By the end of the decade, he controlled 85% of the island of Mohéli (ibid: 40).

which are attempting to make political space for themselves in this new "democratic" age

The structure of the Comorian economy has changed little since the pre-colonial period.³⁵ There is virtually no local industry and the economy is based on the export of three or four locally produced commodities (vanilla, clove, ylang-ylang and some spices). In 1990, 41% of the GDP came from the agricultural sector and the Comoros still imports much of what it consumes. In 1986, rice and petroleum alone accounted for almost 25% of the country's imports (E.I.U. 1992: 36). Besides international aid received in the form of trade subsidies, food aid, and long-term debt financing, much of what the Comoros imports is paid for with export earnings. The public sector provides for only 8,500 jobs, and private sector jobs are rare. Unemployment is estimated at 36% (EIU 1992: 41). Most Comorians combine a number of economic activities such as fishing, farming, and petty trading to make ends meet. Other common forms of income-generating activity include soliciting money from relatives abroad and the sale of items obtained illegally from one of the country's two deep-sea ports (items include cigarettes, clothes, hi-fi and audio-visual equipment, and alcohol).

In May of 1990, the United Nations Development Program organized a consortium of non-government agencies (including the UNDP, the World Bank, CARE, the EEC and the ILO) to implement a structural adjustment program (SAP) similar to those introduced in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa beginning in the 1980s. As with most World Bank/IMF SAPs, the overall goals are to make government institutions more efficient (by reducing the number of civil servants and encouraging market-driven economic policy), while at the same time promoting activity in the private sector. The International Labor Organization has been given the responsibility of developing a functioning Chamber of Commerce to promote small-scale enterprise and larger industrial investment, but as of September 1992 no public statements had been issued on this project. There is also some evidence that import/export activity is increasing since the government has lowered tariffs on certain categories of goods (EIU 1992: 35). In addition, the World Bank, members of the EEC and the Comorian government are negotiating terms for the repayment of the huge national debt. The Comorian SAP has caused a great deal of grumbling in the Comorian public and in the press, but the country has not yet witnessed any organized protest to such

35 The Comorian Franc (CFA) is tied to the French Franc as a part of the African Franc Zone

programs. Interviews conducted with local entrepreneurs show that the Comorian government has not created an environment conducive to local enterprise, but it does not seem to be guilty of actively obstructing small-scale enterprise or informal sector activity, as in the cases of Peru and Brazil.³⁶

Culturally and historically, the Comoros has much in common with East Africa, but most Comorians see themselves as a part of the Indian Ocean or the world of Islam. The vast majority (96%) practice Sunni Islam within the Sha'afi judico-religious tradition. Linguistically, the Comoros is very closely related to parts of the East African coast, although the four varieties of ShiComori (a distant relative of KiSwahili) are not mutually intelligible with Swahili languages spoken on the mainland. Some linguists believe that the relatively complex noun classes in Comorian are vestiges of Old Swahili and give this as evidence that the islands were first populated by Africans who left the mainland before the simplification of KiSwahili began sometime before the 12th century.³⁷

Some Comments on Research Methods

The methods used in this study draw primarily from a life history approach to ethnographic field research and will be presented in the form of intensive case studies.³⁸ The research lends itself to the case study approach because it focuses on the role of the individual in the economic decision-making process. Furthermore, intensive ethnography provides certain valuable insights into what might be culturally distinctive about the Comoros and Comorian enterprise. After the research participants were selected, a series of interviews was conducted in order to understand particular information about the

³⁶ Local cash crop producers have better access to international markets since import/export restrictions were reduced beginning in 1991 and since the death of former president/business tycoon Ahmed Abdallah, who monopolized the Comorian commodity export trade during his presidency.

³⁷ Personal communication, Mwanaicha Cheikh, Centre National de Documentation et Recherches Scientifiques, Moroni, August 1992.

³⁸ This research included the production of a 38-minute video on the same subject (Folkerth & White 1993). Three of the six entrepreneurs were asked to participate in the video, which looks at collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking as well as the issues concerning entrepreneurship and economic development in the Comoros. During the filming, I attempted to conduct my interviews as they were normally conducted, but I am convinced that the presence of a second researcher (especially a female) and a camera must have in some way affected the participants' responses. In most cases, the filmed interviews were based on discussions that took place prior to the filming process.

background, business and perceptions of each of the entrepreneurs. Based on information from these interviews, an attempt is made to call attention to patterns in the beliefs and practices of a set of Comorian entrepreneurs. The following is a brief discussion of the selection and interview process which was used in the field.

Given the definition of entrepreneur I am using in this study, the most important criterion for participation in the research was evidence of some innovation which distinguished the entrepreneur from non-innovators.³⁹ I limited my search to small scale enterprise which did not exceed more than a few employees. I was also concerned with selecting participants who were willing and able to talk about their situation and their business. In each of the six cases, I found entrepreneurs who were interested in my project for various reasons and who were the "first" to offer a particular service or process in the Comorian economy on the island of Grand Comore. The nature of the innovation was not important except that it should affect a significant percentage of the consumer population. This percentage was not calculated systematically. As a rule of thumb, if 1 in 10 people knew about the innovation or had made a purchase connected with it, I considered the innovation significant, but other factors also influenced my decision. One possible participant, for example, was well-known for the street food he served, which was prepared in a particular way and always included a side order of salad. This vendor was able to attract large numbers of customers (both Comorian and foreign), but his innovations were not as important or as well-known as that of DeGaulle, who some years earlier was the first person to ever serve street food in the Comoros.

The selection process was also limited by a number of situational factors. First, the length of my field research was limited to three months. As such, I had limited time to find participants and begin working with them. This turned out to be less of a constraint than I had originally thought since I began working with the first two entrepreneurs as I continued to keep an eye out for other potential participants. I ruled out five potential participants for reasons such as scheduling problems, doubt about importance of the innovation and lack of interest on the part of the entrepreneur. Second, with limited time and limited access to

39 I experienced considerable difficulty with the term "entrepreneur" in Comorian French. Despite the fact that this word comes from French, in many French-speaking countries it has a more specific meaning than it does in North American English. In the Comoros, it refers to those who "undertake" construction projects, i.e. contractors, engineers, plumbers, electricians etc. I eventually replaced this term with "homme d'affaire" or "commerçant" in my interviews.

commercial networks, the entrepreneurs with whom I chose to work were those whose enterprises were highly visible in the local economy (I live and worked primarily in the capital city, Moroni).

Third, I attempted to involve at least one female participant in my study, but this did not happen. To a certain extent this shortcoming is due to the fact that 95% of Comorians are Sunni Muslims, and that women do not play an active role in the public sphere of which I was a part. However, I do admit that finding male participants was much *easier* than finding female participants and this probably had a significant effect on the selection process. I found several examples of Comorian businesswomen (usually in food preparation and sales) but very few examples of innovating female entrepreneurs. Two such cases were women from Anjouan, the Comoros' second largest island, who were only on Grand Comore "en passage," and a third I discovered only two weeks before leaving. Future studies will require more time and wider sample groups to integrate female participants into my research.

Despite my efforts to obtain a quality sample, it was impossible within the parameters of this research to know how prevalent entrepreneurs are in the Comoros or to what degree the entrepreneurs I chose can be considered representative. The innovation criteria enabled me to limit the sample substantially, by eliminating all those involved in business who could not be credited with a significant technological or managerial innovation (I have discussed above the criteria for identifying significant innovations) but I admit that this alone may not provide enough information for me to say that the entrepreneurs in this study are a distinct group of people, different from other groups in the Comoros. In fact, apart from innovation, the entrepreneurs have relatively little in common (see *Summary of Research Participants*, Chapter 4).⁴⁰

The interviews were held at the convenience of the participants and every attempt was made to choose an interview setting where the participant would feel comfortable. Of the six participants, four conducted business in Moroni, one commuted between his home town and Moroni (Sabata), and one conducted business only within his region in the

40 Clifford Geertz' (1963) discussion focuses on "entrepreneurial groups" in Indonesia. In the three years total I have spent living and working on the island of Grande Comore, I never encountered or heard of any such groupings. In fact, it was suggested to me by a small business consultant working there in 1990 that the failure of Comorian entrepreneurs to work together is the greatest obstacle to their advancement. Schumpeter argues that entrepreneurs "do not form a social class in the technical sense..." (1961: 78).

southern part of the island (Mabuku). In the latter two cases, I conducted interviews in Moroni and at their residences "au village."

With one participant (DeGaulle), I was asked to conduct the interviews in a small shop in Moroni which was usually crowded and busy. I accepted this request because the entrepreneur was not prepared to leave the shop unless it was closed, and he had no intention of closing his shop for interviews. I conducted the majority of the interviews in his shop, sometimes seated in a chair, sometimes on a sack of flour, but always with an audience. He ran his business with the help of one person who delivered items purchased and one who served customers, he himself sat behind a desk and handled the money. In addition to regular employees there were always friends or relatives of the entrepreneur who couldn't resist observing and interrupting our interviews. I learned too late that interviews conducted in such a setting were less reliable due to distractions and I decided to use these data to contribute to the findings section but not as one of the formal case studies. With one participant (Base-Com), I was able to meet on the business premises late at night, when business was slow, and apart from occasional sleepiness this setting seemed acceptable. In the remaining four cases, the interview setting was not a problem. With three participants I met at my house or theirs, at a time when we would not be disturbed (either between 1:00 and 4:00 p.m. or at night after 11:00 p.m.). I met with the last participant in his favorite bar at lunch time or for drinks at night (Sharif).

The question fields that served as a guide for interviews were the following: the entrepreneur, the establishment of the enterprise, the daily routine, the innovation, and the entrepreneur's perceptions. Especially in the beginning, I had a very un-systematic approach to these questions. With broad categories in mind, I attempted to get the participant to talk and I took notes. Initially, I asked him to tell me a little bit about his family. Some chose to start with the immediate family and some began many generations earlier. I was most interested in points which related to socio-economic status or factors which may have encouraged entrepreneurship. Next I asked the entrepreneur to discuss his personal history. This included education, work experience, travel, important events, and people which may have influenced his development (see Chapter 4, *Summary of Research Participants*). I then asked for the specific story of how the current business got started and more information on its daily operations. Closely related was a series of questions on the particular innovation which had called my attention to the entrepreneur's case.

The final stage of the interview process was different from the four preliminary stages, as it required more reflection on the part of the entrepreneur. Each participant was asked to discuss and rank the elements which in his view either help or hinder his business. These interviews took place after all other interviews had been completed and after I felt sufficiently comfortable with the entrepreneur and my knowledge of his business. In each case we spent from 2-5 hours on this stage of the research. This allowed enough time for the entrepreneur to feel comfortable with the format and content of the interview, which was considerably more structured than previous interviews.

A Note on Constructing Others' Identities

As anthropologists we spend most of our time trying to tell the stories of other cultures. Traditionally, ethnographic research involved the collection of data concerning customs and social structures in "traditional" societies. Data were compiled and analyzed in such a way as to give the impression that the ethnographer, a neutral observer, was simply *explaining* the culture group that he/she had observed in the field. Recent debates in the human sciences, however, have called into question the very possibility of neutral representations of other cultures.⁴¹ According to this debate, the ethnographer cannot conduct research without employing his/her own cultural categories to "understand" what he/she is observing. In light of this insight, ethnographic research is called into question, since it is no longer coherent to maintain the particular conception of neutrality characteristic of ethnographic methods in traditional social anthropology.

This is not to say that we cannot speak about the societies which we spend lifetimes studying. It merely highlights the point that representation in anthropology is a political act.⁴² As such, we must assume the responsibility that comes with 'representing cultures' by calling attention to the interpretive nature of our work and by qualifying the representations that we put forth. In keeping with these ideas, my research does not claim to present a complete or completely accurate picture of Comorian entrepreneurs, much less

⁴¹ See for example Clifford & Marcus (1986), Marcus & Fischer (1986), Rabinow & Sullivan (1979), and Taylor (1983)

⁴² Johannes Fabian (1983) elaborates this idea.

of Comorian culture. Instead, following Geertz (1973), I am attempting to "read" specific aspects of a culture from over the shoulder of a subset of Comorians who are introducing innovations into the local economy.

For the purposes of this study, then, what have I done with the information that was gathered in the interview process? As I sat down to write the individual case studies, I realised how far the information had travelled. This is taken directly from my notes.

it's really interesting how they [the entrepreneurs] get represented:

- i go to another country, travel far away, look for a story
- i ask them to talk about a particular subject, say family for instance
- i take notes, usually on what i thought was important and/or interesting
- i translate as i take notes
- i leave my books sit for a few months
- i enter the best of my notes in a file in my computer and
- i shift things around in the file as i begin to identify themes
- i sometimes change what was said from third person to first
- i sometimes change the entrepreneur's words for easy reading
- i sometimes use quotes that i only discovered during the logging⁴³
- i put ideas together in a way that he didn't but that seems logical to me

Initially, one of the objectives of this research was to somehow "get at" a Comorian way of doing business. In order to do this, I planned to use a cultural model approach, which looks at lexical patterns and metaphors in speech to identify the cultural conventions which make up a particular group's worldview.⁴⁴ But as I began my research I realized this was too large a task. Instead, I focused on the primary objective, which was to determine how Comorian entrepreneurs perceive their situation, i.e. what are problems and what things are not. In order to do this I reviewed the data collected through a series of personal interviews and, armed with considerable knowledge of Comorian culture, identified certain recurring patterns, or *signposts*, of entrepreneurial activity in the Comoros.

⁴³ The video logging process (viewing for editing purposes) made me aware that I misinterpreted some comments that were taken from my notes. In a few instances, logging made me aware of ideas or points that did not appear in my notes.

⁴⁴ See Holland and Quinn (1987) for more on the cultural models approach to analysis. The work of Stephen Gudeman (1986), who calls attention to local knowledge by showing the extent to which our understanding of economics and economies is culturally modelled, is also a good example of this approach.

CHAPTER FOUR
Five Comorian Entrepreneurs



Summary of Research Participants

Name	Business/ Innovation	Age/Sex	Education	Family Wealth	Mar. Status	Travel	Languages
Ahmed	First Private English School	35/Male	3 yrs. high school; 4 yrs. agricultural training	medium wealth from a medium-sized village	married; 1 child	Tanzania (2 yrs.) Uganda (1 yr.)	Comorian French English Kiswahili
Hassane	First Fishermen To Market Fish in Mountain Villages	29/Male	high school; did not pass exit exam; fishing school	medium wealth from a relatively poor fishing village	married; no children	Madagascar (3 months);	Comorian French
Ali	First 24-hour Tire Repair Service	30/Male	several years Koranic school; no further formal education	poor family from medium-sized village	engaged to be married	on business: Madagascar, Reunion, France, Mauritius, Saudi Arabia	Comorian French
Sharif	First Private Radio Station	36/Male	high school; 1 year of law school; trained as mechanic	very wealthy and well-known	married; wife lives in France; no children	Madagascar (1 year) Libya (3 mos.) France (3 yrs.+)	Comorian French
Sabata	First Full-Time Tour Guide for Professionals	38/Male	finished French primary school	medium wealth from medium-sized village	married; no children	Tanzania (5 years +) several months: Zanzibar ; Kenya; Madagascar	Comorian French Kiswahili English Malagasy Japanese

ENGLISH SCHOOL OF THE COMOROS

We Lead and Others Follow 45

Growing Up

Ahmed carries with him his father's first teaching assignment. **My father was a primary school teacher and very proud of it. He never got into politics. He was a teacher and not a politician.**⁴⁶ Ahmed is 35 years old, the first of five children, and married with one child of his own. He continues about his father. **We used to spend a lot of time together. I would sit in on the classes he taught...my father always discouraged me from going into farming. He wanted me to teach. He was kind of a dictator with my mother because he wanted her to learn to read and write. He was always pushing her to read. Maybe she did it to make him happy...I see my mother every Saturday, but we are diverging because she doesn't want me to continue my studies...You have to send things to your mother to keep her happy. He smiles a big smile and I start to laugh. Shuah, he says, Money, clothes, appliances -- when something is sent to a mother, the whole village will know.**

Ahmed was a good student in primary school but when he entered junior high school he began to have problems; he says he became very involved in sports. In 1973 he failed the year and felt bad to see that his friends were moving on while he had to repeat. In 1975 the Comorian independence movement caused sweeping political changes, and schools were closed for the remainder of the year. Like many students, Ahmed had lost another year and he began to feel very discouraged.

45 The following case studies are presented in the order that they were conducted over the three month period. Some names and dates have been changed to protect those who participated in the research. The sixth case study, DeGaulle--Comorian Fast Food, is not included; data from his interviews will be used in the chapter on findings. I have chosen to use **bold** for the entrepreneur's "voice." I decided against using quotes since the interviews were not taped and since the entrepreneurs' words are mediated by my note-taking and translation. The use of ellipses is intended to connect ideas which are related but were not presented at the same time or in the same sequence. Taken together, this form of presentation is intended to call attention to the research process as well as the process of representation which occurs in ethnographic fieldwork.

46 Ahmed was the only participant with whom I conducted interviews in English.

By 1981 he had finished his second to last year of high school but chose to continue his studies by correspondence. At about the same time, he began teaching in a primary school so that he could pay for his course; but teachers in the Comoros are paid on a highly irregular basis, and nine months without a salary meant that he couldn't keep up with the overseas fees. In 1982 he was approached by the PTA in his town and asked to become headmaster of the junior high school there. As headmaster he was not earning a bigger salary, but at least he was paid on a regular basis. From 1982-1985 he stayed in this job, and he was relatively happy, but he still felt a need to continue his education.

He made several attempts at the secondary school exit exam (the term used in the French educational system is "BAC") and applied to various agricultural training programs, but nothing seemed to work. Ahmed says his luck changed when he heard about a foreigner who was running the agricultural research center near Moroni and was having problems communicating with Comorian workers. He asked for a job and was given a position as a manual laborer. **Effectively, he didn't know that I had an education and experience as a teacher. When he found out, he called me into his office for a chat. He wanted to know why I was moving dirt for a living if I was a teacher. I told him I wasn't interested in politics, I just wanted to further my experience.** Ahmed made comments to this effect on more than one occasion. He seemed intent on convincing me that he had no political ambitions. I found Comorians in general reluctant to discuss their political affiliations. I guess the coconut trees have ears. **He liked me. Soon I was teaching him an hour of French every day for 1000 CFA/hour.⁴⁷ He was a good man, he nominated me for an agriculture scholarship and in 1986 I went to Tanzania to study. The scholarship wasn't enough, so I used to teach on the side.**

After two years in Tanzania, Ahmed arranged another scholarship, this time in Uganda. When he returned home in 1991 he had two certificates in agriculture, four years of teaching experience and he was fluent in English. He says he tried diligently to get a job in the Comoros, but despite his credentials, he was not offered a position. He met with ministry officials, representatives from local NGOs and project supervisors, but nothing came of his efforts. **I did lots of running back and forth between the ministries**

⁴⁷ At the time the research was conducted, one Canadian dollar was worth approximately 250 CFA; one American dollar was worth approximately 300 CFA.

and no results: In the Comoros, politics. No politics, no job. This is where ESC begins.

The Business

When it became obvious to Ahmed that he would not be able to use his expertise in agriculture, he turned to what he knew next best: English. His idea was to open a school which would specialize in English, the first of its kind in the Comoros. He would call it ESC--the English School of the Comoros. **You know the government failed to provide me with a job in the field for which I was prepared so I must make use of my knowledge and experience somehow, this I why I opened ESC. But I also want to make a contribution to my country. Opening a school is like building a mosque, and ESC is different from other schools because it's only English.** The first private school in the Comoros was started in the mid-1980's and led to a series of private school openings. Ahmed wants to be a part of this increasing trend toward privatization in education, since he believes that private schools take pressure off of inefficient, overcrowded government-run schools.

To put the plan in motion, Ahmed began talking with his friend and classmate Mohammed. Mohammed also received a scholarship and the two became friends while studying together in Tanzania. They stayed friends after returning to the Comoros, and Ahmed approached Mohammed with his idea because he thought Mohammed might make a good English teacher. At first, there wasn't much planning. They agreed that the first few months would be a trial period.

Right now we have one class that meets four days a week and has from 8-12 students. Some students come more often than others. We hold classes from 5:00 till 7:00 because many of our students work during the day. If we get more students we will have a second class... One problem I noticed with Ahmed's classes was the difference in the students' level of English. I thought he should get more students and divide them into two classes, but Ahmed was not actively recruiting at that time. Needless to say, this problem complicated the learning process. **We want our students to benefit from learning by doing, so we emphasize a very practical methodology for learning.** Ahmed is a fascinating

teacher. Despite the fact that he has no formal training, his approach is very communicative. When he switches into teacher mode, he sounds as if he was reading from a well-rehearsed script. His students have no books. They are allowed to take notes, but Ahmed's emphasis is on speaking. **I must encourage the students to speak out, they must speak to each other and correct each other's speech.** No student goes unnoticed; the clowns get singled out and the timid students get special attention. **At ESC the students can learn practically... I teach them a poem and this helps them to learn the rhythm of the language.**

Ahmed and Mohammed invested 25,000 CFA in start-up materials (chalk, board, paper, books, etc) and 80,000 CFA for the first month's rent. They rented a house outside of Moroni which serves as their home and their classroom. The landlord agreed to rent to them on a trial basis and he included twelve chairs and two tables of different heights. **If we succeed we will pay. If we don't succeed, we will not pay.** Ahmed did not spell out the terms of their agreement any more than that. Most of the money for start-up came from Mohammed's savings. Ahmed's accounting is hardly systematic. His financial records consist of two pieces of notebook paper with scratchy handwriting which lists the money spent. He does not take a salary. Any money that he is able to secure from his new customers goes toward rent and electricity. They both agreed that money is a concern, but not a priority. **If we put only money as a priority, then it will become a problem. Money is not a problem, it is a solution.** **The cost is 10,000 CFA per month but if there is a student who cannot pay the whole thing, sometimes we negotiate.** At one point I figured that only 35% of his students were able to pay in advance. In effect, ESC taught English on credit. Their first student never actually paid at all. **He was our first student. It was important to give the impression that we have a real school.** I asked Ahmed what he thought the chances were that he would be able to make a profit. **Profit?** He laughs. **With one class, the profit is to sleep in this house without lunch and dinner.** In his hometown he wouldn't have to pay to sleep, but the capital city was probably the only place his business could function. He worked and slept in Moroni and his wife stayed in the village. I think she must have been suspicious since he was spending all his time at work and still not making any money.

Getting Students

One morning while waiting for Ahmed, Mohammed and I talked about how the business idea developed. He told me about their attempts to get students. The first step was a flier. At first it was a **handwritten notice** because Ahmed is **"menfoutiste"** (careless). We called it **"Quick English."** I took the flier that Ahmed had prepared home with me to type up and then we had it copied and enlarged. We put up about 10 copies in conspicuous places around Moroni. At first we wanted to conduct classes at Ahmed's cousin's house, but that didn't last very long and so we were stuck with fliers that had the wrong information and we did not have enough money to make new ones. Actually photocopies, even in Moroni, did not cost more than about eight cents per page. We left application forms in a few places around the city and 22 students signed up. Right now they are eleven. I did the signs. Ahmed said they should be small at first so as not to attract government attention. If they see a lot of advertising, they'll think its a big operation and they'll either tax us more or come and make up some fines for us to pay because they **think we're a good source of income.** This situation kept Ahmed from conducting large-scale advertising, but his aversion to risk and limited capital resources were also considerable obstacles. **We don't want to attract too much attention. Besides, we're not sure we'll have enough chairs if we get more students. Right now we only have space for twelve.** This made it clear to me why Ahmed wasn't attempting to get more students; until he was sure the idea would work, he did not want to submit to government scrutiny by calling attention to the business. At first I thought his problem was a failure to "think big," but this wasn't the case.

Not only getting students, but also keeping students, was a problem. Attendance was very irregular; of 11 students only 5-6 showed up on a regular basis. Perhaps attendance would have been better if more students were actually paying for the services. Ahmed attributed poor attendance to "the Comorian mentality" and the fact that he did not have a qualified teaching staff. **You can't find good teachers. One of my teachers is off somewhere at a wedding, and the other one was appointed deputy minister or something...Staff is a big problem.** After three months, Mohammed

had stopped coming and Ahmed was teaching on his own. In addition, he had to contend with the Peace Corps, which for the last four years has been offering free English courses to Comorians in order to train its incoming volunteers.

I was very interested in hearing more about how Ahmed sells his service given these limitations. I asked some more questions about different ways of getting students, and we began talking about word of mouth. How often do you talk to people about ESC? **I talk about it to a lot of people, because I don't want people to think I'm doing politics. When you greet people you talk and exchange news, this is an opportunity to talk about ESC...But we aren't serious about word of mouth, we are too corrupted by modern advertising.** He smiles wide and I laugh because we both know how easy it is to blame "les Français." Ahmed says that half of his students heard about ESC through word of mouth. **In the past, the village elders would send messengers by foot to inform people of important news.**

Indigenous Marketing

When I asked Ahmed if there was any relationship between teaching English and tourism in the Comoros, he answered by telling me about an innovation which is an important part of his practical approach to language training: the academic tour. On an academic tour Ahmed rounds up his students, puts them in the back of a pickup truck and takes them around the city, speaking to them only in English, as if they were tourists. **We will treat our students as tourists because they will be able to learn by doing and they will appreciate the democratic atmosphere.** From the way he was talking, I gathered that they hadn't done this very often. Later I arranged for a car so I could observe him in action. **We don't have a car, although we can probably do it without a car.** When Ahmed explained this to me, I became very excited about the marketing potential of such a tour and we began talking about how attracting attention to the tour might be a good way to get more students. **Comorians are very curious.** "We could take them to the post office, the market," I said, "maybe even the beach." Then Ahmed stopped because Mohammed seemed somewhat frustrated with our enthusiasm. Mohammed hesitated for a moment and then said: **Me personally, I don't see the value of doing academic tours, it has to be something apart from**

advertising, it has to be something for the students. I stopped too, for a moment, to think about how my ideas may be affecting my research and Ahmed's language school.

The Government

I asked Ahmed if the government is a problem for his business. He answered: **The government? We haven't thought about that.** When I asked what the government wants from him, he mentioned three things. **They don't want to put their stamp on just anything.** In order for ESC to be officially registered, the minister of education wants to be sure of my qualifications as a teacher and to get this approval it wouldn't hurt if we were from the same political party as him. Then the minister of planning needs to be notified. This is not so difficult, but he needs to see my license, which may take a long time to get. The third person concerned is the regional governor. He looks at my license at the end of each year and tells me how much tax to pay. A license costs about 50,000 CFA. At this point Ahmed had not completed all of the steps. **This is just a trial period.**

According to Ahmed, recognition of ESC by the government and having a charter is important for students so they can receive a certificate after their studies and for ESC so it can have access to funding sources for future expansion. Despite these comments, though, I still had the feeling that Ahmed placed very little faith in the government. In another interview he said: **Comorians understand that if you want a good education, you have to pay for it, because the government schools are bad. They can't even pay their teachers regularly.** By taking pressure off crowded government schools, private schools like Ahmed's are helping the government more than the government is helping them.

Discussion

There are several points of discussion which emerge from Ahmed's case. First, his idea to start the business was based on his skills and experience and not on any assessment of the market for English courses in the Comoros. There is no doubt that he is a qualified teacher and certainly there are Comorians who are interested in learning English. However, these two facts alone do not guarantee a successful business. Ahmed did very little research to determine the extent of the demand for his service.⁴⁸ Consequently, he had difficulties getting and keeping students. Closely related is the second point, indigenous forms of marketing. Despite the fact that Ahmed had very little concrete information about the market for English, he used several techniques (word of mouth, the academic tour, etc.) to promote his business which were inexpensive and culturally sensitive. These forms of indigenous marketing are not obvious to the average businessman, who, having too much faith in western-style advertising, might have stopped after realizing that fliers and radio ads are too expensive. As Ahmed pointed out, **Comorians are very curious**; his marketing efforts attempted to capitalize on this curiosity. This is an important aspect of Ahmed's entrepreneurialism.

The third point pertains to government. There is no doubt that the potential abuse of government taxation was one factor which discouraged Ahmed from expanding the scale of ESC. Other factors, however, also limited the growth of the company. As I suggest above, Ahmed was not ready to expand. He wanted to be sure the idea would work before investing all his resources. But perhaps more importantly, the number of people willing and able to pay for such a service may not have been as great as Ahmed expected. I would argue that the government per se is not Ahmed's most significant obstacle. He himself said he had not given the government very much thought.

⁴⁸According to Peter Johnson, Dobson Centre for Entrepreneurial Studies, this is the most common reason for failure of small businesses in Quebec and other regions in North America. Personal communication, July 1993.

MABUKU

Marketing Fish in the Mountains⁴⁹

There is always someone home at Hassane's house. The first person I saw was his mother-in-law. She was feeling a bit sick but managed to get out a few greetings and ask the other people in the room what I was doing there. They told her that I was a friend of Hassane's and that I had come to spend a few days. This was Shindini, fishing capital of the south of Grande Comore. The food is on the table and the guest's mosquito net is in place, but there's no ceremony, no fuss. Hassane's house, like many Comorian houses, is in a constant state of becoming. It is a cement skeleton with space where the doors and windows will be. Inside there is a table with four chairs and on the table is a bowl with plantains, coconut milk and a chunk of fish in the middle. This is where Hassane and I began our work.

Growing Up

Hassane tells me about his father: **Everyday we used to go to the countryside to take care of the cows. My father would take us there to drink fresh milk every day before going to school...I think about my father and his role in society. He was very conservative but everyone respected him...He loved children. These are our children, he would say, they made some mistakes, it's true, but if we don't care for them, who will?...My father himself was not educated, but he valued education. He sold his goats so that he could send his brother to school in Madagascar. And it was this uncle that made sure I went to school.**

49 The interviews for this case study were conducted in French.

Everybody

Hassane's voice cuts through the air. He speaks sharply but never harshly and his eyes sparkle when he smiles. In Shindini, everybody wants Hassane. Old women want his fish, young men want his car, friends want his money, and anthropologists want his time. Everybody wants to see Hassane, so I started calling him "Everybody."

On the day we began work, the first person to visit was the *chef du village*. There were rumors that a group of boys from Fumbuni had plans to sabotage a marriage ceremony that was to be held in Shindini in the coming week. Upon hearing this news, the *chef* went directly to Hassane and asked that Hassane take him to the police station in Fumbuni to prevent it from happening. We all got in Hassane's truck and went together. He stopped in every village on the way, sometimes two or three times, picking up passengers who stopped when they saw us coming in order to look stranded on the black tar. When we returned, an uncle was waiting at the door to ask him for some money, because he needed new shoes and he was feeling ill: "When I twist my arm like this, it hurts terribly."

Hassane apologized for the interruptions. I tried to convince him that they weren't a problem. "It's totally normal for us to stop what we're doing when someone comes to see you. I mean, this isn't the U.S., people don't make appointments. Actually, I'm even taking notes on them. I don't know what you think, but from my point of view this is all part of the job you have to do and my study is about your job." He seemed to understand and he let me know once again that he felt bad that we couldn't work straight through. Just then a young girl with fat cheeks and buck teeth came in and began to remind Hassane that he promised to buy her some clothes. She didn't seem very needy; she was well-dressed and well-fed. Hassane says **of course I haven't forgotten, but there are lots of problems and no money.** She smiles and asks Hassane for 50 francs to buy a coconut. He gives her 100.

Beginning Work

As a boy, I used to fish on the rocks and I used to get money selling fish tails. Then I would give the money to my mother to make it look like I

was contributing too; I think this is how I learned to manage my money. Of course she would have to add money of her own before she could buy me something. Hassane was born in 1962 and is the second of ten children. His position as the oldest son required him to assume a lot of family responsibility. Hassane was still in school when his father first fell ill, but he felt obligated to make money to help his family. He liked fishing, but says that initially he was pushed into it to support his family. He stopped selling fish tails and soon became a specialist in net fishing. At the age of 16, he began spearfishing. He and a friend used wood and an old inner tube to design a speargun which they used until they had enough money to buy equipment.

Fishing School

Hassane was a good student, but even after two attempts he wasn't able to pass the secondary school exit exam (the BAC). Sometime after his second failed attempt, Hassane heard about the Fishing School, a professional training center for young Comorian fishermen. He applied to the school, which was a part of a new program being developed by the Japanese Development Agency, and he was accepted. Hassane wasn't sure about going to another island (Anjouan, the second largest island of the Comoros) to live and study. My family said "if you wanted to be a fisherman why didn't you start before? Why did you waste all that time going to school if all you want to do is fish?" But it seemed like a great opportunity and I wasn't doing anything else, so I decided to go...The first year was hard; I came back homesick every three months and I had to force myself to continue the second year... I think it was a good decision, there is a certain degree of uncertainty in his voice. He elaborates, as if he is trying to convince us both that he made a good decision. now I have a trade...I'm a fisherman, but unlike other fishermen, I've studied fishing; navigation, motor repair, management, electronics, oceanography and fiberglass boat construction. I know how to do all these things. His training sets him apart from the vast majority of Comorian fishermen.

As graduates of the first class of the Japanese fishing school, Hassane and his classmates all had jobs waiting for them upon graduation. Hassane was assigned to an

EEC fisheries project. He enjoyed his work at first, but before long he began to have conflicts with his supervisor. He is skeptical about the foreign development workers (in French, "cooperants") who crowd the country. When the conflicts worsened, Hassane talked with a former classmate from the Fishing School about his frustration on the job. Through periodic conversations, Hassane realized that he and his friend Mohammed had a lot in common and they began meeting on a regular basis to discuss the possibility of starting their own company. When they finally decided to join forces it was the first partnership to occur among Fishing School graduates.

Mohammed carries his books in a briefcase and wears little round glasses with frames, but no lenses. His nickname, "Mabuku," comes from the English word "book" and alludes to his schooling as well as to the fact that he always carries a book-filled briefcase. When Hassane and Mohammed began their business, they decided to call it Mabuku, so Hassane also became known as Mabuku. **Mohammed is the paperwork specialist, I'm the one who fixes the boat.** During my research, Mohammed Mabuku was in France being treated for a medical condition. Hassane Mabuku was in charge of the business in his partner's absence and so I worked exclusively with him.

The Business

Mohammed and Hassane, both graduates of the Fishing School and both familiar with fishing on the southern shores of the island, make a good team. Their idea was to pool resources so they could increase the amount of fish they were catching and eventually save enough money to buy a car for the regular distribution of fish in their region. Now the two partners have a stable and growing enterprise. They employ six fishers⁵⁰ on a full-time basis and own two boats (see "Innovations") which spend a total of 5-7 days a week in the water on a rotating schedule. Most fishing trips last 2-3 days, but day trips are common also, and unpredictable weather sometimes keeps them from fishing for several weeks at a time. After the fish are caught, a portion is given to fishers and immediate family members, some to fish sellers in the village; and the rest go into freezers (which Mabuku rents in Fumbuni) awaiting the next morning's trip into the mountains.

50 "Fisher," besides being more gender neutral than the standard term "fisherman," allows me to distinguish between Hassane and the fishermen who work for him.

The red and yellow Mabuku truck barrels along the coastal road until it sees the fork which takes them up the side of Mt. Karthala and through a handful of villages where fish are not available on a regular basis. Keeping the truck in running condition is quite a challenge. Hassane always seems to make do with temporary solutions and adaptations, but he spends a lot of time tending to mechanical matters. There is a hole in the bed of the truck which allows rainwater to fall into the gas tank and exhaust fumes to seep back into the cabin, but the fish don't mind. Mabuku doesn't seem to mind either. The truck does what is expected of it; it brings Mabuku and his fish to people who he says need more protein. He announces his arrival to each village with repeated beeps from a sick horn and his sales pitch: **Mba ireeee-oh!** (a little bit of protein) **Ngabo irewo!** (come get your protein). **I'm good at selling, but it's not easy. A kilo is never a kilo.** Hassane usually has to tip the scales with an extra chunk of fish in order for customers to accept the transaction. If that still isn't enough, Hassane will play hard to get, sometimes pretending to leave so that people will buy. **We can't come back to Shindini with fish, what will people think? They'll insult us because we didn't want to sell to them and now the fish are 12 hours less fresh.**

The first year was good but then things became difficult because we started establishing a clientele and people started asking us for things. Hassane is referring to the incessant favors asked of them; some people want a ride, some want money, some want fish. Almost everyone wants credit. **We have to give credit. If we don't, people will say we're mean, and they won't buy from us. And if you have fish that's about to go bad, you don't really have a choice but to give it to someone.** For Hassane, becoming successful has had its price. **The first year was free and easy but now everybody knows Mabuku.** It also seems that the novelty of Mabuku has worn off. When I first met the team in 1990, they were still starting the business. At that point their enthusiasm was contagious. I asked Hassane to talk about his marketing: **I don't know if what we do is marketing, but people know Mabuku and they come to us when they need fish.** They must have done marketing of one form or another. One man sent Hassane a note asking for 50 kilos of fish with five days notice. The man sent his son for the fish, but the weather had been bad and Hassane didn't have any. Then the man sent his sister, who insisted that Hassane sell her 50 kilos of fresh fish. **I didn't know this man and he was acting as if I had a**

freezer full of fresh fish just waiting to be sold. Mabuku's reputation brought him this business, but obviously he was not yet prepared to be managing large fish inventories.

Innovations

When I first began working with Mabuku I thought there was only one innovation which concerned my research, but it soon became obvious that this was not the case. Not long after deciding to work together, Hassane and Mohammed had the idea to go to their teachers at the fishing school and ask for help getting boats. They were trained on large, orange fiberglass boats with built-in motors, large pontoons and space for cold storage. The boats, called *Japawa*, were designed by the Japanese to approximate the traditional Comorian outrigger fishing canoe, the *Galawa*. Their idea was to ask that these boats be loaned or even rented to the graduates of the fishing school with the hope that each student would start his own business. The way Hassane explained the story to me, he and Mohammed organized all the graduates, drafted a proposal and presented their proposal to the director of the fishing school. **We felt our teachers would listen to us.** After hearing what the students had to say, the Japanese agreed to supply their students with free boats and free fishing equipment.⁵¹ I was skeptical about how Hassane and Mohamed were able to convince the Japanese to donate a fleet of such valuable boats along with supplies. The fact remains, however, that they have the boats and they did not pay for them. This was Mabuku's first innovation.

The agreement was put through normal government channels for approval and was accepted, but the fishing school was asked to give some of the boats to the Comorian Ministry of Production. This meant that the students would have to share; two students per boat. **When the president was killed and his government was replaced in 1989, the Japanese teachers reclaimed the boats they had given to the government and gave them to us.** Now Mabuku was a two-boat business and things were looking up. **The fishing was good. An average catch for one boat on a two-day trip was between 75 and 150 kilos of fish. On a good trip we**

⁵¹ According to the E.I.U., Japan donated 36 fishing boats in 1989, in addition to the 50 they had donated previously (EIU 1992: 44).

could come home with more than 250 kilos. Hassane was somewhat liberal with his estimates. One particular week in July, I saw two boats come back empty, and a third with about 70 kilos of fish. This may have been, as Hassane suggested, due to the season. Throughout the interview process, he didn't discuss the weather much more than this.

After getting the boats, catching fish was no longer difficult, but selling them was. Enter innovation number two: a car. At first Mabuku used local transportation between Fumbuni (the regional capital) and Moroni to sell its fish. **The bush taxis were always crowded and not all the drivers would agree to take us with our fish. Not to mention the fact that with bush taxis we had to stay in one place for a long time.** Soon Mohammed and Hassane began actively looking for their own transportation. They had some savings from fish sales, but neither came from too poor a background that he couldn't depend on wealthier family members for short-term credit. Their first chance was to buy a used vehicle that was being sold at the post office in Moroni, where Hassane's sister-in-law worked. The vehicle was a Renault F6, modelled after the Renault 4L but with a large, covered rear section for carrying heavy loads. At 130,000 CFA, the price was right, so they bought two. They didn't realize until later that neither of the cars was operational. **But that was okay, we needed a second truck anyway for spare parts.** Three mechanics and 900,000 CFA later, Mabuku had a running vehicle and an almost complete set of spare parts. They began distributing fish immediately.

At first they encountered problems because people who saw the yellow post office truck thought they were using a post office vehicle to transport fish. Finally they were stopped by the police and were told that if they didn't paint their vehicle they would be fined and put in jail. **I went to get some estimates for painting the truck, but they wanted so much money, we said it's not worth it, let's do it ourselves.** With an almost intentional disregard for aesthetics, they called together all the children in their neighborhood, handed out brushes and slowly converted the yellow truck into a red one (or as red as eight liters would permit). **We didn't care what it looked like, we just didn't want to get arrested.** It's true, the truck was ugly. To top it off, they asked the village artist to paint a picture on each side: a shark with a book on one side, and a tuna with a book on the other side. **The tuna represents the Comorian fisherman, the book is to show that we've studied fishing, the shark is us,**

we are the sharks among fishermen. Hassane's style was more like a tuna. I had a feeling that the shark was his partner's idea. **At first people weren't interested in buying fish as much as they were interested in the picture. We must have explained what the picture meant ten times a day.**

The only two students to stay together since graduating from the fishing school are Mohammed and Hassane. Other fishing school graduates continue to fish, but since they work alone they have had limited success and very few have managed to break into markets outside of their hometowns. Hassane thinks the partnership is one of the reasons that Mabuku has been so successful. I asked him what has enabled them to stay together up till now. **As we got to know each other we realized we have a lot in common: same region, same school, same politics.** Actually, they even married into the same family. They also support the same political figure, a man who is probably the region's most powerful politician. These common elements help the partnership advance and help keep it intact. Hassane gives another reason for their success: **We only became friends in the second year of fishing school. But the most important thing is our philosophy; it's our business, it's our money. We do everything together. This is the glue that holds Mabuku in place.** This collaboration was central to Mabuku's third innovation: theirs is a cooperative model of management, not only between partners, but also between the partners and their fishers. Hassane described the profit sharing mechanism: **After operating expenses, all the revenues are divided in half, one half for the fishers and one half for us** (Hassane and Mohammed). In addition to half of net earnings, the fishers also earn a part of each catch. They decide the portion of the catch that is to be used for consumption. **We let them decide how much to take for food and the rest is earnings.** Hassane often arrives on the beach as the fishers are deciding how to distribute the catch. His presence is authoritative but not authoritarian; I found it difficult to determine who actually makes the decision. According to Hassane, trust is not an issue during distribution since cheating could not go unnoticed and skimming would mean less profit for everyone. **Then we record the earnings as salary, add it up and pay them at end of the month. If we didn't do this, they would spend it all right away. They can also have advances.** For each fisher, Hassane records how much money is spent and

on what. On or around payday, he meets with the fisher to help him understand where his money goes and how to manage it better.

So what distinguishes Mabuku from other fishermen? **It's the organization, because we were the first to set up a schedule where we could go to sea for 2-3 days at a time.**⁵² They were perhaps not the first to stay at sea overnight (there are fishermen's stories about getting lost at sea in an outrigger and landing weeks later on the Tanzanian coast), but unlike many fishermen, they have made it a regular part of their schedule. **Also, we don't deal with any middlemen. Most people who own large boats like this don't have anything to do with the fishing or the distribution, they just hire a cousin or somebody to do it for them. With Mabuku, we take fish from the water all the way to the people. We're there every step of the way.**⁵³ This point captures the most important difference between Mabuku and other fishing operations.

Entrepreneurship and Social Change

For Hassane, productivity is one of the most serious problems he faces. Despite relatively advanced equipment and staff of six, Hassane says he is not able to catch enough fish. He wants to catch more fish so that the price will come down and he wants the price to come down so that people can have more protein in their diet.⁵⁴ **The price of fish goes down and people eat better. There's not enough protein for people here, normally a family should eat 4 kilos of fish a day; when they know they can buy more, they will.** His plan is to invest in advanced fishing equipment to catch enough fish so that he can serve as a fish wholesaler to fishsellers who distribute within and among the villages in his region. Hassane knows that even at a substantially lower price, if he can sell more fish he stands to make considerable profit, but he is honest about his personal interests in this venture. **If the price comes down, I stand to**

52 "Going to sea" from Shindini involves a day trip across the water to Moheli, the smallest of the three islands and fishing its shores for two or three days before returning to Grande Comore.

53 Vertical integration is not common in small-enterprise in the Comoros. For more on the subject, see Coase (1952).

54 See Acheson (1986) for a discussion of the effects of firm size on entrepreneurial success and the effects of economies of scale on local consumption patterns

make money. He also acknowledges the conflict which may arise between himself and other local producers. The general population may be ecstatic about fresh fish at half the price, but the other fishers in his village, many of whom are Hassane's friends and extended family, are not the least bit happy about Mabuku's plans to catch/sell more fish and dominate the market. Furthermore, Shindini still does not have electricity or cold storage, which become more important as catches increase in size. It also seems inevitable that, with time, consumers will adapt to lower fish prices by bringing less money, not by buying more fish. Hassane disagrees. For him, all of these factors are potential problems, but they do not outweigh the possible benefits of his plans, both for himself and for Comorian society.

We were talking about the fishers in his village and somehow the subject got changed: **I didn't always know that I wanted to be a fisherman. All my brothers are fishermen, all my cousins are fishermen. After deciding to go to the fishing school, I had this plan to learn everything I could about fishing, come back here, teach them everything I know and then--**then his mother comes in. It was night, she came by to visit Hassane. I listened to them exchange a few words and then I asked Hassane what his mother thought about his decision to go to fishing school. He asked her and she said "Oh, I don't know." He asked her again and he hedged again. He rolled his eyes and said to me in a discouraged tone, **she can't answer, she doesn't know what she thinks...** She tried to defend herself: "If I say it was a bad decision you'll say I'm a difficult mother, if I say it was a good decision you'll say I don't want good things for my son, so what am I supposed to..." Hassane cuts in: **What were you saying, Bob?** I got the impression that they might have had a similar conversation at some point in the past and that it might be better to go on with my questions.

All my friends are doctors and technicians, and me? I just fish. He pauses. **I want to get into politics. I want to be a deputy and get some of the glory. I want to catch up to my friends.** Despite his ambitions, Hassane feels that people respect him for what he has done. I asked him how he is viewed by other Comorians: **the headmaster said to his students: "Things are hard now; you have to go to school even to learn to fish. These Mabuku guys, they use to be my students and now they pick me up on the side of the road and drive**

me into town." That's good, that means that thanks to us, being a fisherman isn't such a bad thing. Hassane is one of the four people who were asked to represent Shindini at regional PTA meetings. We wanted to valorise the position of fishermen. The Japanese were very committed to developing the fishing industry here too, because in Japan fishermen are highly esteemed. He thinks that Comorian fishermen should be respected in the same way... I'll never quit Mabuku, even if I get offered a deputy position tomorrow I can never forget Mabuku, it was my first step. It has a life of its own.

Discussion

In the context of the Comoros, one of the most interesting aspects of the Mabuku venture is its cooperative form of management. Partnerships and other horizontal forms of management structure are rare in the Comoros and, except for Mabuku, unheard of in small-scale fishing.⁵⁵ The model he and his partner have developed, is of course, not totally cooperative. The partners are responsible for certain strategic decisions on which the fishers have no say and shares in the profits are not equal between fishers and partners. This is expected given the investment and responsibility assumed by the two partners. Unlike a strictly vertical organization, however, the fishers are trained (and participate) in every aspect of the business from catch to sale. Hassane considers this guidance an important part of his duty as an employer.

Another important marker of Hassane's entrepreneurialism are the attempts he has made at expansion. More so than any of the other entrepreneurs studied, Hassane has very precise long-term goals for the growth of the business. He is continually looking for new technology and new combinations to make Mabuku bigger and better. Other entrepreneurs talked about getting into more profitable lines of work (see below), but Hassane's vision involves promoting what he and his partner have already set into motion. This approach

55 In future research I will examine the constraints to cooperation in small-enterprise and manufacturing in the Comoros. "We Are Mabuku," an unpublished manuscript, discusses these issues in greater detail.

distinguishes Hassane from the entrepreneurial type which prefers to go from business to business, setting up and selling once the operation is up and running.⁵⁶

Lastly, this case study makes clear the demands put on entrepreneurs' time, money and property by family and fellow community members. As economic leaders, entrepreneurs in the Comoros become social leaders because they have access to resources that the average Comorian doesn't. If they refuse requests made for materials, gifts, money, etc, they will inevitably lose the status which access to resources alone cannot provide.

BASE-COM TIRES

All Day and All Night⁵⁷

Base-Com goes by the name of his business. His real name, Ali, is one that he rarely hears, but that does not seem to bother him. He has a lot invested in his business, the first 24-hour service in the Comoros, and he is proud to share its name.

Base-Com calls his family "**simple folk**." He says that his parents never travelled and that his father was basically a farmer. When I asked Ali questions about his family he was most interested in talking about his grandmother, Hanussi, who was very well-known in their community. She was the owner of the property that he now rents and Ali attributes his early interest in business to the basics that he learned from his grandmother. He was born in 1963, the fourth of seven children and came to the capital to seek a living at the age of 17. Ali had never been to school except for the obligatory three years of Koranic School⁵⁸ and some literacy training during the Ali Soilihi period. His French is smooth and sure-footed and he does not seem sensitive about the fact that he cannot read or write. **When it [school] was hard, I gave up; I still can't write a letter even in Arabic, but I can read and I know the numbers real well.**

⁵⁶ I have termed this type the "butterfly entrepreneur." See *Radio Karthala*.

⁵⁷ The interviews for this case study were conducted 70% in French and 30% in Comorian.

⁵⁸ Comorian children usually attend Koranic school (a sort of Islamic nursery school) from the age of three or four until the age of six.

Beginning to Work

When Ali was younger, his *beya* , or "age group," decided to come to Moroni and that each one would learn a trade. He chose woodworking but he lost a finger in an accident and decided to become a tailor instead. **I went to my mother and asked for her help to buy a sewing machine. She wanted me to sell a plot of land that belonged to her. I said I can't do that, it's not good to sell something that belongs to the family.** In order to save the money he needed and learn the trade, Ali became an apprentice under a well-known tailor in Moroni. In nine months he had saved enough money to buy his own machine and after a year and a half he was "set free" to work for himself in 1983. By 1986 he had saved enough money to go to Marseille to learn more about the trade. There he found a job doing touch-up work in a small shop owned by a Jewish tailor and when he returned to the Comoros he brought with him a wide variety of income-generating equipment: four sewing machines, two stereos, childrens' clothes, basic welding and mechanics' tools, an air compressor and soldering equipment. **Everything I brought back was something that would enable me to make more money.**

First Ventures

I was 24 when I opened my first store. It went well because I had the only store in the neighborhood. With his initial savings he put an ad on Radio Comores: "Every Wednesday everything in the store is 25% off." That was good for business. Soon he started travelling to bring back things to sell. **Onions, dried fish, and clothes are good items because they're inexpensive to buy and they are in high demand here. I've been to Madagascar, Nairobi, Mauritius, and Jedda.** His business started out as a small shop in a new neighborhood in Moroni. He sold Coke, crackers, cigarettes, matches, underwear, buttons, candy, sugar, soap -- lots of things. Now his shop is much bigger. It is located on the curve

which passes through one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in Moroni. His business has been so successful that the neighborhood now bears the name of his shop.

Selling "en détail" is limiting. With a high item inventory, you can't control the stock if you leave someone else in charge. If you sell things by the gross you just count the things you have and you count the money you have. Ali deals with several Asian wholesalers on a regular basis, but I think he has a simplistic view of their operations. They must bear the stress of irregular product supplies and deal with large amounts of credit to Comorian retailers. To Ali, though, they are the big men of Comorian business and they have it easy because they sell wholesale. **It's much harder to get away with something [if you sell wholesale].** There are only two people with whom Ali will leave the shop, his best friend and his fiancée. **It's really hard to leave someone here because they don't know the prices and so how can I trust them?** Not being able to leave the shop means that Ali has limited access to information and goods which arrive at the port from time to time. **A good wholesaler needs 3,000,000 CFA. What would you do with 500,000? Nothing. What would you do with 1,000,000? Invest in wholesaling. 2,000,000? Start a gas station, 24 hours. That's what I really want to do. I've always wanted to own a gas station. I like the idea of selling gas because I know what money I'll have after I've sold everything.** Here he is referring to the difficulties associated with controlling inventory in "detail" retailing. I asked him if he ever got tired of spending all his time at the shop. **I like being here. It wasn't profitable to hire someone on with 3,000 francs coming in per day; it's easier to just do it myself.** I wondered if Ali realized that working alone becomes more difficult as operations expand.

Is the government a problem for you? **I started all this with 24,000 CFA for the license and they collect taxes regularly.** He didn't say yes or no. **You go to tell them that business is bad so maybe they can reduce your taxes. In March and April the inspectors come to verify your license. They don't ask what you make, they just ask what you have...I know it's the government's right to take these things, but still I know that some people take the money for their own purposes. Maybe it's good for something, maybe sometimes it pays for hospital repairs, or teachers who haven't been paid. You said**

your shop used to bring in a lot of money, what changed? **I used to have the only shop in the neighborhood, now they're all around.**⁵⁹

The Business

The change is obvious. Base-Com's store is musty and settled. The button jars are all mixed up and despite their plastic smiles, the white dolls look sad to be so faded and dusty. His shop is filled with hundreds of things that never got sold. This is where we work. "C'est pas grave," I think to myself. This is Base-Com's past; 24-hour tire repair is Base-Com's future.

Just around the corner on the S-curve that winds by Ali's store is a shack that from the outside does not look noticeably dissimilar from his shop. There are, however, a few key differences. Here Base-Com does service, not sales. The two operations are completely separate; the accounting is done separately and he sets aside 1,000 CFA every day for separate electricity bills. **With the money I saved, had my brother send me some start up materials. The things I didn't have I was able to make; my friend had soldering experience, so we went to a few garages and copied the tools they were using.** His table is a workbench. It holds a vise, a saw, a can of glue and an assortment of rubber patches. Strewn all over the floor are tires. Big tires, little tires, bald tires and inner-tubes with varying amounts of air. There is a small air compressor in the corner which, when operating, makes interviewing impossible, attached to the side of the shack is a sort of bubble station. Here, under the all-season protection of a corrugated tin awning, Ali and his helpers douse unsuspecting inner-tubes in a dirty, water-filled, cut-away oil drum, to look for the air bubbles that allow them to do their job. Ali can repair three holes in about five minutes without the slightest trace of dirt on his clean white shirt and pressed slacks. He is doubtless the best-dressed tire repairman in the Comoros. But this is not the amazing part. What's so amazing is that he does his job all day and all night. For the equivalent of one American dollar, you can wake up Ali at any time of the night to fix your flat. I asked Ali why he repairs tires. **I like sewing, but fixing tires brings in more money, and I still get to use my hands.**

⁵⁹Other entrepreneurs also alluded to innovation as an important survival technique in Comorian enterprise (see *Radio Karthala*).

Considering the state of most Comorian road surfaces and the old age of most cars, I would say Ali made a good choice.

Innovations

Ali started the 24 -hour tire service in December 1988. **From December 25 to New Years is a very busy time, so that's when I started to open. I put up a small black sign with white writing. The sign reads:**

TIRE REPAIR
AT BASE-COM'S PLACE
ALL DAY - ALL NIGHT
----->

After the tire ad, things started to change; I started getting a lot of business at night. Now I do more business at night than during the day. There's still a lot of variation, but I can get up to 25 customers at night and only 15-20 during the day, and I can charge more at night. Ali doesn't seem to mind working late. Sometimes our work would begin after 11:00 p.m. Most people come before twelve. Last week one person woke me up at 1:30, but this week no one has waked me up so far. I put up the sign, so I shouldn't complain if people bug me late at night; I asked for it.

How did you get the idea? When I started thinking about it, I was having a lot of free time because business was slow. Or maybe it was because I sleep next to my shop. I'm not sure. Anyway, it's changed my life. Now I'm relatively well-known. I go to the beach and people know me. That's why I want to stay here. I don't want to go to France and have to start all over again. I've just started getting somewhere.

It's 11:35 p.m. A car pulls up outside and honks politely. I put down my notebook and follow Ali. It's Omar Tamou, former Minister of the Interior. I make an effort to exchange small talk: "Hello. How are you? Problem with the tire?" It's awful nice to have 24-hour tire repair, huh?" "It certainly is," he answers and as Ali removes the flat tire from the minister's trunk, Tamou starts singing Base-Com's praises. "You know, with the state of our economy it is wonderful to see young people like Ali working so hard, and so committed to making something of their lives. What he's doing is a service to our community." Ali is smiling mildly, respectfully, and I begin to take notes in my head. "This young man is nothing short of a role model." He turned to me as if he expected a response. "I must agree with you, Mr. Tamou." I turned to Ali, but he was already looking for bubbles.

Credit

Credit is a big problem for me, but the Comoros is small and so you have to be a good Muslim and give something to share the wealth. On the wall, rather unnoticeable among the dust-covered underwear and soccer cleats is a sign which reads: ABSOLUTELY NO CREDIT. Regardless of the sign, credit with customers is one of Base-Com's biggest problems. **If more people worked, it wouldn't be so serious, but people aren't paid. In France, it's okay, because you don't know anyone, that's the big difference...Two or three people have accounts, because I know they'll pay on a regular basis.** For these customers, he sets aside his last pack of Benson & Hedges. **They have a 10-15,000 CFA limit, but they're good friends. A normal limit is 2-3,000 CFA.** Ali estimates the total credit at any given time at less than 50,000 CFA and says that 70% of the people who take credit never pay it back. **I don't like to go running after people who owe me money. When I do that, I have to close down the shop, and this is a problem. But if someone has outstanding credit with me, he won't come back because he knows that I'm always here waiting for him to pay...Me, I don't owe money to anyone. I hate to be in debt.**

Good Husband

Ali is one of the few Comorians I know who never asked me for anything; people there usually ask for things like money, or medicine, or free English lessons. One day we were working late and both getting tired. As I closed my notebook, Ali turned to me and said **Bob, I want to ask you something.** I prepared myself for the bomb. **I wanted to ask you--it's my fiancée...Our families have set up this marriage.** I like her well enough, but the problem is she wants to get married now and go back to France. I don't know, I'm not ready. My heart isn't ready. She wants to go and I don't know what to do. I have my plan. Ali's plan was long-term. This kind of foresight is rare in small business, especially in the Comoros, and it is one of the things that makes Ali a successful, young entrepreneur. **I have a savings account, I put in a certain amount every month.** If you get married, you spend a lot more money and I'm not ready. **I'm afraid it's going to mess up my plan.** I was flattered to realize that all Ali wanted was my advice, or maybe just my open ears. But what really struck me was his sense of commitment. For some reason, the thought occurred to me that he would make a good husband. A week later he announced his engagement to Zakia and told the family they would be married **at some point in the near future.**

Businessman

Ali likes to travel to see other places and other businesses, once he told me **I would kill for the chance to walk around in America and go in and out of different shops asking people how they do business,** I told him that sounds like what I do. I'm not interested in living in France, maybe visit from time to time, or go to buy some things, but I'd rather live here. **I'm happy using my hands... I like being an entrepreneur because you can get around. It's the only job where I can travel and get visas all over my passport.** In other words, it's great to see the world but it's always a pleasure to return to your pond. **I'm an entrepreneur because I want to be -- it's the job I want to do.** Why? As an entrepreneur,

you can get ahead faster...I'm not conceited. In fact, he's very humble. Soft-spoken and serious, I could see how some people might consider him conceited, but he's not. He's takes pride in what he does and he likes his work. **If people say I'm rich that's good. One thing, though, I do want to build a house in my village--that would really make me happy.** I ask him another question, but he doesn't answer. He's beginning to fall asleep. Someone drives up and comes in making a lot of noise because he wants Ali to re-do a patch that one of his helpers did poorly the first time. This is the problem with trying to run a one-man show. I close my notebook and decide to try again tomorrow.

Busy Man

The next night I met Ali in his shop. We were supposed to continue the interviews, but Ali wanted to introduce me to a friend. I agreed and we set out together on foot. Ali walks fast; it didn't take very long. After the visit we came back and he ordered us dinner at his friend's family restaurant across the street, *Chez Base-Com*. It was a huge plate of rice pilaf and unfortunately I had already eaten dinner. I ate embarrassingly little of what was served to me and when Ali finished his plate, we went back to his shop to start to work. As we settled in, Ali served a few late-night customers: a mosquito coil, three Benson & Hedges, two cough drops. I asked him the first question and he gave me a short answer without much thought. My second question didn't seem to work either. I kept my head in my notebook, trying to find a better wording. He didn't answer, so I tried to rephrase, but the third question fell to dead ears. The pilaf had set in and BaseCom was asleep.

Ali is a busy man with an almost North American work ethic. **I don't like to sit around. I like working, I like to move. I'm young, I should work now while I can, because I won't have the strength when I'm old. I think the day is just too short.**

Discussion

The most important set of issues to emerge from this case study is concerned with customer credit. Similar to the cases of other entrepreneurs (see *ESC* and *Mabuku*), Ali has a significant portion of his clientele requesting credit on a regular basis. Base-Corn is located in a residential area of the capital city. This means that many of his customers are regulars and many more are people he knows. To refuse them the occasional courtesy of being able to pay later for a kilo of rice or a glass of juice would seem unnecessarily harsh. But add up all these little credits and the entrepreneur ends up losing. In many cases, the extension of credit gets out of hand and the entrepreneur must go in search of the money owed. In Chapter Five I discuss this dynamic in greater detail.

Ali's work ethic constitutes another salient aspect of his entrepreneurialism. The importance he gives to his business and the future of his business shows his commitment to the projects he undertakes. It is interesting to hear Ali discuss the importance he attaches to work. He enjoys working. He prefers working to sleeping and going out. This value sets Ali apart from the average Comorian businessman who works to make a living; Ali lives to work. There are other examples of work for work's sake among the entrepreneurs studied here (see *Radio Karthala*), but Ali's story is the best illustration of this point.

It is perhaps Ali's work ethic that enabled him to conceive of opening a 24-hour service. This innovation stands out among the other innovations in this study. The idea to offer tire repair at any hour of the day gives drivers increased confidence in off-hour travel (between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m.), but it also gives the message (to consumers as well as other owners of business) that customer service comes first. When I asked Ali what effect he thought this innovation would have on Comorian society, he said: **Oh, I don't know, but I think pretty soon there will be 24-hour everything.**

RADIO KARTHALA

Get Off My Radio⁶⁰

Two Grandfathers

Sharif comes from a wealthy, well-known family. **One grandfather was a religious figure and the other was a businessman. One had brains and the other had money. My mother's father was an important religious figure. People used to say he knew everything about astrology, philosophy, Islam -- they used to say he could talk with the spirits. My father's father, on the other hand, lived hard. He had five wives and lots of kids. He was a rich businessman but he died poor. That's the way I want to go. Sharif's eyes light up when he talks about this grandfather. He used to hire an orchestra to put himself to sleep every night. He was an "enjoy yourself" (sic) I didn't know him, but people say I'm exactly like him. He had a lot of money and he spent a lot of money, because money is made to be spent. He used to say, "money is like water in your hands--you can't hold on to it, because it goes right through your fingers."** Sharif told me these stories on a number of occasions.

I know the stories about him have a strong influence on me. People would say I am like him and I started to believe it. Born in 1959, Sharif is the oldest of seven children. He is married with no children. His wife lives in France where he spends part of every year. My wife does things differently, she thinks like westerners: you have to plan, you have to save for tomorrow. She could never live here. Then he says today is France's birthday, July 14. His birthday is coming up, but he doesn't like to call attention to it. Birthdays are too European.

⁶⁰ The interviews for this case study were conducted in French. "Karthala" is the name of the volcano which towers over the island of Grande Comore. The crater of the volcano is the largest (in diameter) active crater in the world and is the highest point on the islands.

Working for Myself

I asked Sharif to tell me about his work experience. **I continued helping my father until about the age of 15; this is when I started working for myself. I was in school. Not everyone went to school, but everyone that went was given money and a place to stay. I took my school money and built a shack to rent out to other students. With the money from the rent I bought bicycles. I rented out the bicycles and with the money I earned there I bought scooters. From the age of 16, I was independent. I used to give money to my family for food. His family probably wasn't suffering. Sharif comes from a long line of well-to-do businessmen and religious figures that for many years have occupied places of prestige from within Moroni's oldest urban residential area. I was mostly interested in making money. My father was happy because he thought I was following in his footsteps; all he talked about was business. At about 18 or 19, I starting getting into basketball. I went abroad with the Comorian basketball team. This travelling made me think more about continuing my studies. When I went to Paris to see about getting into a university, there was a coup d'etat in Moroni and I stayed in Paris instead of coming back. The political situation was rough. Sharif is referring to the Ali Soilihi coup d'etat in 1976. Because our family was not a part of the opposition and because I refused to return to the Comoros, the government arrested two members of my family. They were put in a cistern for more than a month, and then they were put on trial on the radio. I signed up in the French foreign legion to get revenge. I wanted to kill the people who had done this to my family.**

In 1980 he went back to Moroni. Soon after, he returned to France to study law. **I basically lost three years in the army, and I didn't have anything to show for it. I can't say I was a killer. I was able to talk to people and have something to say. I wanted to be somebody and I wanted to make my father happy, so I tried some different things. I trained as a mechanic and as an athletic coach. This diversity of experience would serve Sharif well in his future entrepreneurial endeavors. I was a mechanic in Paris and I was doing well. I**

knew my work. I wasn't thinking about coming back until my uncle started trying to convince me. He came all the way to Paris just to talk to me. He said France wasn't my home, and he said they would help me out if I had problems. I agreed to give it a try. When I finally returned, it was a wild party and I loved it, but I couldn't stay. It wasn't until a year later that I decided to go back for good. I had received a telegram saying that my grandmother died. I didn't want to hear this news; I ripped up the telegram and one week later realized what I had done. I wasn't even Comorian anymore, I was French. I left France as soon as I could.

First Ventures

Sharif has extensive experience in small business. He told me about three of his more important ventures. **The first real business I did was the night club. It was very successful, those were two of the best years of my life. People used to come and dance in the rain until 8:00 in the morning, it was the "big ambience" (sic). The clients who met there almost all got married. There was something special about that place; it needs a study to be done.** I look up from my notebook and he smiles. I guess he was fairly comfortable. I asked my participants to choose the location for our interviews. Sharif wanted to meet in his favorite restaurant, where wealthy Comorians mingle with an odd assortment of aging alcoholic development workers. I agreed, since it was one of the few places in town where we wouldn't be disturbed. Sharif's other ventures included a livestock experiment, a woodshop, a car repair, and Radio Karthala, the Comoros' first commercial radio station. **I do a little bit of everything.**

Radio Karthala - 88.8 MHZ

Sharif's radio station is very simple. He operates the entire operation out of an unfinished room in the unfinished second floor of his family's house just on the edge of

Moroni. The Radio Karthala studios contain the following materials: one table, two chairs (in case of an interview), one turntable, two cassette decks, one microphone, one pair of headphones and the transmitter. **My overhead is low, and I don't have to pay announcers a lot. There are lots of people who want to be on the radio.** The room has holes where the doors and windows are supposed to go, but this doesn't seem to keep the station from operating all day long. Sharif gave us a tour of the facilities and invited us to see him go on the air: **Okay, okay, okay, you're listening to Radio Karthala, it's 10:01 in the morning, I'm outa' here. Here's a little number from "Digital Express." Ali is up next, stick around for more music...we're not done yet!**

Sharif starts an extra long koissa-koissa⁶¹ and puts down the mike and headphones to talk about Karthala. **Sometimes we talk a lot, but we don't really know how to talk on the air. I'm like the Chinese now, if what you have to say isn't more important than silence, then don't talk. At first I had announcers that would talk about everything and nothing. One guy said, "look, if I can't talk how I see fit, then I'm going to leave." I told him to leave. Sharif's talk sets are relatively short. Two minutes of talk during a five-minute period? That's too much. Of course we have to talk over the music from time to time to keep people from recording at home. Now they never know when we'll open up the mike so they get tired of recording off the radio. He shows me his music collection. I used to have about 500 records, but people steal them. I've been back for a month and I'm already missing eight cassettes.** Sharif has a distinct advantage over other would-be radio operators, since his frequent travel permits him to introduce the latest music from abroad. **As soon as the government decides what it's going to do about private radio, then I'll see about investing in some more music. For now, its no problem, I put on a record from 1979 and people think it's brand new.**

61 Zairean dance genre from the 1980's.

You Can't Shut Us Down

The first time Sharif tried to open a radio station it was seen as a direct challenge to *Radio Comores*, the Comoros' government-run radio station, but also to the state, which up until that point had control over all forms of media. **I brought a transmitter into the country and told customs it was a radar device for finding fish. I plugged it in and started transmitting the same day. A few days later I realized that my house was completely surrounded by police. They burst in and told me to turn it off. They confiscated the transmitter and there was no problem.** In most African countries, radio stations are tightly controlled by the federal government. I was frankly surprised that Sharif didn't receive a harsher punishment to discourage him from transmitting in the future. **A few months later I opened again with a new transmitter. This time I was able to go for about ten or eleven days before I was stopped. But then they threw me in jail...and now, as far as I can tell, everything is fine. I've been up and running for two months without any problems.** He laughs.

Throughout this turn of events, Sharif had considerable support from people in the capital; those that weren't already avid fans of Karthala had at least heard of his daring move to open up the airwaves. Occasionally you can still see someone walking around Moroni with one of Sharif's earliest promotional tools: a T-shirt which on the front reads "RADIO KARTHALA" and on the back "YOU CAN'T SHUT US DOWN."

A Radio Karthala Production

Sharif is one of those rare radio announcers who looks like you expect him to after only hearing his voice: tall, dark and handsome. Part of the reason Sharif is so well-known in Moroni (besides his family and his entrepreneurial activity) is the distinctive form of advertising he has brought to the airwaves. He writes, produces, and performs all advertisements himself and, as with any commercial radio station, this is what fuels his business. **When I did my first ad on *Radio Comores*, I realized I had a**

knack for promoting. I wasn't even involved in radio and people who didn't know me came and asked if I would do advertisements for them.

Sharif has a distinctive style for most of his ads which he calls *fidjo*. Roughly translated, this means "hype." He shouts the words out in rapid succession using a very loud voice. According to Sharif, his listeners love it. **Everybody likes fidjo but I can't do fidjo for everything. The ad for the beach getaway didn't sound right with fast music and screaming. I knew I had to tone it down. I thought the ad for the junior high school party was great until the headmaster came to me and said the students were complaining because they wanted fidjo.**

I asked Sharif how he gets people to advertise on his radio station. **I go out and look for them. I go to businesses, big stores, bakeries, video rental places. I go to them and I say, "let me do an ad for you. 30,000 CFA and I'll put it on the air at least ten times."** He knows a lot of people in the business community who have enough money to advertise on the radio. But besides this, he charges less than Radio Comores. Radio Karthala has a huge following among young people in the capital, in part because it plays more contemporary music than the state-run station. **Half of my ads come to me. Right now I'm working on one for the new car dealership that's arriving next month. I've been working on it for four days.** After finding a potential customer, Sharif talks with the customer about the ad content. The customer listens to Sharif's final product before it goes on the air, and sometimes the ads have to be changed. **Sometimes the customer checks it before it goes on the air, sometimes I just do it. If I don't like it, I change it. I have to work hard to get these things good enough to be played on the air.** The balls of crumpled paper on the floor in his bedroom attest to the time he invests in making ads. **The ad should brag about the product; I'm proud of my ads. Do you do this all yourself? I do it all, from start to finish. One man show? "One man show!"** After a new ad is ready to be aired, it goes on the ad master cassette. From this cassette Sharif can make a weekly ad cassette, chaining together all the ads that have been paid for and slotted for that week. **All the announcer has to do is stick in the ad cassette once during his shift and everybody's happy.**

I asked him how people pay for their ads. **They don't always pay first. Right now I have 360,000 CFA outstanding. One guy who did an ad**

wasn't able to pay on the spot so I gave him the air time on credit. Thanks to the ad he was able to sell all his merchandise. With that money he went back to France to buy more things and he still hasn't paid me the money he owes me. He'll probably want to do another ad. I'm tired of running after money. I'll refuse if he asks again. He doesn't sound sure that he will be able to say no. I tried to get Sharif to explain why he does so many ads without being paid. **The owner of the night club that I did an ad for lets me in for free and gives me free drinks, don't you think that's reason enough?** This answer was witty, but it but it only alluded to the social and economic environment that make it difficult for entrepreneurs to refuse the extension of credit to their customers.

Sharif has also introduced several new types of programming. He has a regular talk show, which, with its emphasis on issues (not people), is a format previously unfamiliar to the Comoros. He and his guests discuss current events and social issues such as corruption, brain drain, and the promotion of private enterprise. He also has programs pertaining to Comorian culture, Comorian politics and new music from around the world.

Radio Karthala and Social Change

During one of our interviews, a young man came in very politely, a bit nervous, and told Sharif how his sister had been harrassed by four men driving around in a gray Renault. Their family was very concerned and was looking for some way to find information about the drivers. He listened very carefully, taking notes and asking questions and said he would put it on the air right away. **Usually a public service announcement costs 5,000 CFA, but non-profits I do for free. I feel like I have to give something back to the community...**In general, Sharif seems more individualistic than the other entrepreneurs, but situations like this one reminded me of his concern for his community. **You've never heard public debates on the radio here before Karthala. If things are going to change, it will be because of radio. If a cop abuses someone, then I say it on the radio and the guy will be fired. People have to know their rights. That's why I did the coup.** Sharif is talking about a recent attempted political event which took place on Radio

Karthala. Opposition politicians were invited to raise questions about the current government's policies and its ability to govern. This raised many questions in Comorians' minds about the legitimacy of the federal government and the role of new forms of media such as Karthala. It is believed that the announcement was made by people with whom Sharif has strong political ties, but he asserts that *everyone* has access to his radio station. He considers bold moves such as these important for the political development of the country. **They have to know that there was some guy who wanted to do something for his country. They may say I'm stupid, but I don't care, at least there will be one Comorian whose life meant something.** Then he asks me who it was that said "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

Butterfly Entrepreneur

After returning from the Comoros, I had the pleasure to meet a good friend of Sharif's who was pursuing his studies in Canada. We shared stories about Sharif. I told him about my research project and about Sharif's recent activities. "You know," he said "that's the problem with Sharif. I told him, I said, 'you're good at business, but you never settle down, none of your businesses grow.' He's just like a butterfly." I could only agree partially. It was true that Sharif didn't want to stay with any business for too long. But I think this can be seen as a strength. Like the African farmer who spreads out his risk by planting a variety of crops, Sharif never has his eggs in less than three or four baskets and this allows him to identify new niches and enter into new markets. Sharif and I went to visit "ENJOY," the first night club in Moroni to open during the week. He started the club a year or so earlier and thought I might be interested in meeting him there to see it.

I asked him why he didn't spend more time at his bar. **It's a dive** he answered, matter of factly. A similar story happened with his video rental store. It was a very lucrative and exciting business in the early stages, but as soon as competition began to crowd the video rental market, Sharif felt it was time to get out. He gave the business to an unemployed cousin. When I arrived to begin the research, Karthala was the only private radio station in the country. Three months later, it was one of four. This meant it was soon time to move on to something else. For Sharif, being an entrepreneur means staying

one step ahead. **You have to be ahead of the game, you can't think big here, the market is too small, the only way to make it is to innovate.**

Discussion

Of all the entrepreneurs considered in this study, Sharif is the most entrepreneurial. He is a butterfly, moving from venture to venture, always thinking of how best to stay ahead of the game. This is not to say he is without purpose or direction. His purpose is to be the first; his direction is innovation. This aspect of Sharif's entrepreneurship limits expansion in his businesses, but ensures him a place of status within the Comorian business community and guarantees him the income to live a lifestyle which is to his liking.

Many of the innovations which Sharif has attempted to introduce into the local economy are based on ideas or practices which he has observed while living abroad. The time he spent in France contributed significantly to his repertoire of entrepreneurial activity. From these stays he returned with technology to raise animals, catch fish, and transmit radio signals. His advertising style is loosely borrowed from western "hype" styles of promotion and he told me on a number of different occasions that he feels more comfortable promoting in French than in Comorian. Certainly the elements he borrows are not simply imported and transplanted in their original form. Fascinating combinations come of the borrowing of foreign ideas.⁶²

A third point which is made clear in Sharif's case study is the importance of innovation to successful small enterprise in the Comoros. According to Sharif, consumption in the Comoros is insufficient at the moment. For any given product, the market is limited. In order to make a profit you must be one of the first to offer the product and you must be ready to leave the product when competition for a limited number of consumers becomes too stiff. Sharif views innovation in this small economy as a prerequisite for the survival of small enterprise.

62 See Background section for a reference to Cole's notion of competitive imitation.

SABATA

Entrepreneurial Tourism⁶³

I only have a few weeks left to complete my research. I have not been able to get in touch with Sabata, the last participant in my study, and time is running out. It's 9:00 p.m. Despite the winds and a faulty headlight I get on the motorbike and start for his town. It's usually a 25-minute ride to Bangwa, but tonight it takes an hour and fifteen. I'm really nervous about dropping in on Sabata, but I tell myself it's only fair, considering he missed our last three appointments in Moroni. I pull up in front of his house, pull off my helmet and walk into his living room with messy hair and a grin. He grins too; it's like he was expecting me. Comorians have so much composure. **Mr. Bob, this is my wife.** I nod and she offers her hand. **This is our brother.** They all seem very glad to see me. I decide that Sabata, the Comoros' first full-time tour guide, is in the right business. **Get him a napkin, chérie. Sit down, Mr. Bob, have some chicken.** That night I stayed in Bangwa.

Family

Before Sabata could get to the heart of his life history, I was watching the words in my notebook go in and out of focus as I began to fall asleep. Sabata was very understanding. He pulled down the sheets on the bed which took up the majority of the living room where we were working. This was the guest bed, and I, presumably, was the guest. I apologized for being so tired and Sabata reassured me it was not a problem. **No problem, Mr. Bob, we can try again tomorrow.**

Sabata's father was born in Bangwa Kouni on the North of Grand Comore. He went to Zanzibar at the age of 17 to study the Koran. He also studied masonry and later he became a building engineer. He returned to Bangwa to marry Sabata's mother and then returned with her to Zanzibar, where Sabata was born. Sabata's father travelled considerably to keep in touch with family members in the Comoros. After Sabata's father died some years later, his mother returned with her children to live in the Comoros. When

⁶³ The interviews for this case study were conducted 80% in French and 20% in English.

Sabata first arrived in the Comoros, he stayed with his mother, but when she remarried, she moved to another town and Sabata stayed in Bangwa with other family. His mother was married four times.

When I came here for the first time I was nine years old. It was January 22, 1964. I remember dates real well. I came to Bangwa with my father's sister, who came to help with my sister's "grand marriage." My father had already left for the Comoros to begin the preparations. It was a big marriage. My father killed 12 cows. She was finally married in 1967. And me, I've been here ever since.

When I was in Zanzibar I had to go to Koranic school. I began going to English school in 1961 and stayed for three years. I asked him how people viewed him there. I was a Mgazidja Mgeni (foreigner from the Comoros). Most of my friends were Comorian or Arab. I came to the Comoros after the revolution in Zanzibar. It was bad; I saw my own grandmother cut to pieces by the revolution. When I came here I continued school. He got as far as the fifth year of French elementary school, but only completed three weeks. At that time I started turning into a clown. My father wasn't around and my mother didn't take very good care of me. I was 13 in 1968 and I left school. I wasn't working or doing anything until 1974.

First Jobs

Sabata seems somewhat embarrassed about his education and the fact that he left school to do nothing. My first job was at the Restaurant Islam. Did you ever hear about this place? I told him I only knew the new Restaurant Islam. My first job was dishwasher. I did that for three years, from 1974 to 1977. After that I began with business by selling bread. I would buy bread at 90 CFA a loaf and sell at 100. For each loaf I made 10 CFA. I did this for three months. Why did you stop? I thought I had to learn a trade. This was understandable considering all the odd jobs he had occupied up until that point. I wanted to learn how to make shoes. I used to sell bread in the morning, and when

my bread was all gone I would go to Ali Shitati's. He was a shoemaker. I became an apprentice and studied under Fundi Ali for one-and-a-half years.

When we started, there were three of us, we were all from Bangwa. Fundi Ali had opened his shop one year earlier. He was a good friend of our family so I was the first one to begin learning. In four months, I knew everything. This struck me as a rather short period of time to master shoemaking. I let him continue. I had about 42,600 CFA in savings. Either Sabata has a numeric memory, or he was making all this up. I was surprised how relatively easy it was to discuss income and savings with most of the entrepreneurs in the study. I left there and went to open my own shop. This was my first business. I bought a bygole,⁶⁴ hammers, a sewing machine from my sister, and I paid 3,000 CFA a month to rent a kiosk made of sheet metal. Before long, I had three students of my own. Sabata has a knack for making things sound effortless. I had lots of clients because I'm nice and I know lots of languages. I did this for about 19 months.

I left my workshop because it was getting difficult. I was having to buy all my materials under the table from the large wholesalers. Materials were hard to get. Still, it was a good job because you work for yourself. My boss is the client. But I had to close and look somewhere else for work. My sense is that Sabata feels the periodic need to travel. With the money I had saved, I was able to go see my family in Tanzania. Then I started doing tourism. I started going to ports to look for French tourists. I got to know all the captains and they would let me travel free on their boats. Sabata has a gift for socialising. He knows almost everyone, everyone knows him, especially the foreigners. He says that other Comorians are jealous that he has so many foreign friends. To a certain extent, Sabata is a foreigner too. This might set him apart from other Comorians, but all of the entrepreneurs I worked with had travelled before. This time I didn't stay long. I returned to the Comoros in early 1979 and had some other jobs. I had one job where I was working for a state-run meat house. I only lasted about five months, they weren't even paying me

⁶⁴ A type of mold for shoes.

on a regular basis, so I left. Then I was selling material in a fabric shop and when they needed a driver I volunteered. I didn't know how to drive, but I wanted to learn. This is how I became involved in tourism in the Comoros.

Driver Guide

After I left the fabric shop, I began looking for ways that I could get a car to find work as a tour guide. I mostly went after Swahili businessmen who were visiting the Comoros. This would prove to be a useful technique in Sabata's future work. I used to borrow a friend's car and make 5,000 CFA on 15,000 CFA. Then sometimes I would take my brother-in-law's car. In 1987 I started working with a man who gave me a small van to do transport and tourism around the island. Sabata apparently had access to a number of cars at any given time. We split the maintenance and repair costs. I was able to save about 40,000 CFA per month. So in seven months I had 280,000 CFA. With this money I started making bricks for my house.

In 1987, Ali Hadji took me on as a *guide chauffeur* (driver guide) at his new hotel Villa Karibu. I was responsible for all the English-speaking tourists that came to his hotel. I would pick up the guests, bring them back to the hotel and make sure all their needs were taken care of. After one year, the other guides left and I was there with the boss's son. He put me up in the hotel, gave me my own car and 15% of the profit. I was making between 80-150,000 CFA per month. I left there this year. Why did you leave? I had a problem with the boss. What happened?

One day some clients came and someone heard that they wanted to go to Villa Karibu, but actually they wanted to go to a different hotel...My boss accused me of trying to divert customers for my personal benefit and the next thing I knew I had been replaced...that's no way to treat someone who's worked for you for 2 years. Then he shows me the paper which contained his complaint to the courts regarding what his employer had done. He seemed proud to

show me his complaint and tell me the story of how his integrity had been falsely questioned **He hasn't paid me for 17 months. He'll get his.** When I first met Sabata, he was working for Villa Karibu. Even then it struck me that he seemed out of place working for someone else.

Self-Employed, Full-Time

The first time Sabata had a car and was working for himself full-time, it was made possible by a deal with an in-law. His brother-in-law's brother agreed to let Sabata use his car. If he made a certain amount of money after paying to rent the car, then he could buy the car for himself. **But as soon as he saw that I was doing well, he changed the program. He wanted to keep the car and try to make money like I was doing.** Sabata gave back the car. The car he uses now belongs to a man from outside of Moroni who approached Sabata with a similar proposition. **When he came to look for me I wasn't ready. He came back a few times. When I finally agreed it was on my conditions. Now I do as I please; it's like my car. If I bring in 300,000 CFA then I get 100,000. If it's 200,000 then I get 75,000.** It wasn't obvious to me how these conditions differed from previous ones. Sabata was still renting someone else's car. **He hasn't tried to change the conditions yet. In the first month I made 110,000 CFA, in month two 85,000, and this month only 35,000. But right now, there just aren't many tourists.** This drop in earnings was probably also due to a drop in Sabata's energy level. This irregular client base is one of Sabata's most serious problems. Tourism in the Comoros is a seasonal business (depending on the type of tourist) and the market for tourist services is still very limited

The Business

I have an account at the post office. For Sabata's purposes this is better than the bank because he can take out money on the weekend, which is very important for him

to be able to accomodate tourists. He notes expenses in a book every day and adds up at the end of the month. **In a good month I can easily work 25 days. Sometimes I even rent out the car I'm using to another driver guide. He gives me 15,000 for one day, signs my contract, and I sit at home and wait.** Sabata showed me his accounting system. It was very simple. One column for gas, and one for maintenance, per day. Maintenance over a month long period usually costs 7 12,000 CFA. He needs 10 liters of gas per day at 285 CFA per liter. He says he can clear about 80,000 CFA per month. He also sells books about the Comoros and small packages of locally grown cloves and vanilla, which he keeps in a box in the trunk. I asked him if his system of accounting is adequate. **The little I know is enough for my business and the kind of books I keep.**

When I asked Sabata how he divides his time, he mentioned four things: accounting, looking for customers, touring, and advertising. He spends most of his time looking for customers, less time conducting the actual tours and about an hour a night on accounting. Looking for customers is the most demanding part of his job. **Sometimes I can wait a whole day for customers.** "It seems like you do more than you did when you weren't self-employed." **I make much more money on my own. I can do jobs on the side and it's all for me: change money, sell tour books, souvenirs, vanilla. It's much easier now. I'm making 2-3 times what I made before.** Despite the fact that he works longer hours, at least he is working for himself.

Sabata has two prices for his driver guide services: 15,000 CFA per day with insurance but no driver and 20,000 CFA with insurance and driver. Gas is paid by the customer. **I have two kinds of customers: those who want to see the island and those who want to see businesses. I prefer businessmen over tourists. Businessmen know exactly what they want, and they usually stay longer. I know the economy and all the businesses here and I can show them everything. Sometimes they pay for my lunch. Sometimes they give me gifts like sunglasses, clothes, watches.** During our research, he was given a large electric orange suit from Nigeria.

I asked Sabata to talk about the problems with his business. **I don't have any financing. I want to open a tourist agency. Especially for the average tourist. I have lots of people who are willing to give me their cars to rent.**

I could do car rentals, tours, maps, books, translation, hotel advertisements. Despite his enthusiasm, the plans didn't sound very well thought out. **If the country develops, it will develop thanks to tourism.** I had to press him to admit that tourism can also have negative effects on host countries. He was willing to accept that tourists shouldn't wear short shorts in town, especially on Friday. **Also, I want to study tourism. I also don't know enough about the history of the Comoros to be a good tour guide. I know a few common stories, but I don't know the history.** Very little is written about the history of the Comoros, but most of what is written is available in Moroni; he didn't need to go far to learn this.

Sabata didn't mention transportation. Since beginning in this business, he has never owned his own car. This is not surprising for someone of limited means, but given the myriad of problems that go along with operating a car in the Comoros (bad roads, expensive gas, no spare parts, people asking for favors, etc.), it seems an important point to consider.

Innovations

Usually I go to the airport and look for businessmen who need help getting around Moroni. When a businessman comes here who doesn't know the Comoros but wants to do business here, I know exactly what to do. Sabata is tall and gracious. To differing degrees he speaks Kiswahili, Comorian Swahili, English, French, Japanese, Arabic, and Malagasy. **They usually stay at least one week, sometimes a month. I introduce them to all the important merchants and businessmen in Moroni. They all know me. I take them there, introduce them, translate and stay there with them unless they want to talk privately. I take them to a nice restaurant.** I saw Sabata with his customers on a number of occasions. When he's on duty he's even more accommodating than usual. **Sometimes I take them to eat with a Comorian family. As we go along I try to explain to them some of the important things about my country: how the government works, how people are paid, how important it is for Comorians to have**

relatives working abroad. I tell them how people in the Comoros get by. I knew he did this well. In effect, this is what he was doing for me.

If I don't know them, I start by asking if they need a car. I asked him to pretend that I'm a potential customer. He agrees and tries to sell me on his services. Mr. Bob, don't you need a car? You know I'm not Avis, I'm a private tour guide. Kind of like that. Sabata, probably more than any of the entrepreneurs in this study, has to hustle to get business. Tourism is not yet sufficiently developed for there to be a clear demand for his services, but somehow this doesn't keep him from finding potential clients and convincing them that he is the right man for the job. Then they get in the car and they see my "Livre d'or," my golden book. Somewhere along the way Sabata had the idea to start keeping a record of all his customers. He bought a blank book with a nice cover and began asking his customers to sign their name and say a little bit about their trip and their driver guide, Sabata. He encourages people to write in any language they wish. I had one man begin to write in Japanese. I understand Japanese if you speak to me, but I can't read it. Then six months later I had another Japanese customer. When he saw what was written in my book in Japanese he was so happy...By each person's name I write the date and their country of origin. I want to copy it so I can put it into an album and have a little country flag by each person's name. His golden book is always handy. He keeps it in the back window behind the passenger's seat. It actually serves him as a sort of résumé. I want everyone to sign my book. Then I can show it to people and they will know that I'm the person to show them the Comoros.

On Tourism

Is tourism good or bad for the Comoros? If we have lots of tourism, then Comorians are getting jobs making things to sell, or they can work at hotels. People get ideas from meeting foreigners. The government gets money from airport and immigration taxes. There are no negative consequences from tourism? Well, the tourists walking around in bathing suits is a problem, we are Muslim. But that's the fault of the government. The

government should be responsible for explaining to its visitors about its peoples' traditions. This doesn't seem a realistic undertaking for the Comorian government, which has changed the Minister of Tourism nearly a dozen times in the last two years, but Sabata is right to point out the need for such an awareness-raising campaign. Perhaps it should be part of the agreement made between the government and the South African hotel company. **You know there are 432 people employed at the South African hotel. I'm working in tourism to learn about the world.** Sabata wants to know something about every nationality. **Take the Swiss, for example. The Swiss never offer to pay for you. So when I go there one day, I'll know to put some money in my pocket before going out.**

Discussion

Two points are raised by Sabata's story. First, it is obvious from the case study that Sabata thrives on being self-employed. This is true of most of the entrepreneurs in the study (see especially *Base-Com*), but it seems to be a motivating force for Sabata. If he can operate on his own time and under his own conditions, he is content with having to use someone else's car or with being waked up at unreasonable hours to chauffeur his client for a last-minute meeting. Unfortunately, this aspect of entrepreneurialism is overlooked in the literature on African entrepreneurs (see *Models of Entrepreneurs*) and it may be one of the few traits which is true of entrepreneurs cross-culturally.

Second, for the purposes of this study, Sabata's innovative business tours are an important aspect of his entrepreneurialism. By combining his extensive knowledge of local commercial networks and his talent for hospitality, Sabata has discovered a very lucrative niche early on in the development of tourism. Regional trade in East Africa and the western Indian Ocean has existed for centuries; modern transportation and communication has only made it accessible to more people. But more than simply finding a niche for himself, Sabata is facilitating contact between commercial players and interests that will inevitably lead to increased investment in the Comoros. This kind of capital inflow, primarily through private interests, has much more promise for economic development than traditional forms of international aid, which in many cases are inefficient and misdirected.

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings

Problems and Priorities

How do Comorian entrepreneurs characterize their situation? This question will be answered by synthesizing entrepreneurs' responses to set of specific questions about the factors which either help or hinder their businesses. I had hoped that a structured interview would enable me to make some generalizations about the perceptions of Comorian entrepreneurs, but the final stage of the interview process required improvements along the way and thus was not used in a uniform fashion with all participants.⁶⁵

I began by asking the entrepreneur to talk freely about the problems he faced in his business, and then asked him to give possible explanations for the success of his business up until that point in time. At this stage, discussion was informal and open-ended in case the categories used by the entrepreneur to characterize his situation differed from those which I was employing.⁶⁶ I then discussed briefly the five categories which according to my preliminary research could be seen as enabling or constraining factors in small enterprise: individual, family, community, state, and market. None of the categories was completely unfamiliar to the entrepreneurs, but some categories required additional discussion to be sure that we agreed on the exact meaning of the term.

The "Individual" category, for example, caused some confusion. It seemed to me that the entrepreneurs were not accustomed to talking about their own strengths and weaknesses with regard to their enterprise, but when I explained that this was the aim of the question, they slowly began to generate answers. "Market" also required some clarification. I used the term to mean the set of factors which together make up the

⁶⁵ This accounts for the difference in the number of respondents in Tables 1 and 2. Additional data for these tables are included in the appendix ("Category Rankings by Entrepreneur").

⁶⁶ Besides the mention of some factors which I had not considered (for example the price of electricity, the weather), the entrepreneurs' categories did not seem substantially different from mine. I am skeptical, however, about my ability at that time to elicit or be sensitive to categories other than my own.

economic environment in which business is conducted.⁶⁷ In two cases, this clarification proved useful in order to distinguish between "markets" and "marketplaces."

The other three categories were familiar to the entrepreneurs and we found it relatively easy to agree on the boundaries of the definitions. "Family" referred to any family member, close or distant, related through blood or marriage, who could make claims on the entrepreneur's resources based on kinship ties. "Community" meant any non-family member of the same neighborhood, social organization, village or city with whom the entrepreneur interacted for business purposes or otherwise. "State" referred to regional and federal government or government-related institutions.

Then I asked the entrepreneur to talk about each of the five categories and to say whether in his view they helped or hurt his business. This step helped the entrepreneur focus on the subject of the interview and it helped me by providing a secondary source of data against which I could later check the final stage of the interview process. Finally, I asked the entrepreneur to rank the five categories from most constraining to least constraining and from most enabling to least enabling. I asked for two separate ordered lists, one corresponding to constraining factors and one corresponding to enabling factors. The question forms "qu'est-ce qui aide l'entreprise le plus?" and "qu'est-ce qui empêche l'entreprise le plus?" proved effective for most of the interviews, but in some instances I varied the exact wording of the questions.⁶⁸ For each decision, I asked the entrepreneur to give several reasons for his choice. The use of two separate lists (constraining and enabling) was initially intended to serve as a cross-checking device, but it soon became clear that the two lists provided different types of information and that keeping them separate was a necessity (see below). Carrying out these steps enabled me to generate a prioritized list of "constraints and creativity" for each entrepreneur (see opposite page). This information was then compiled in the form of tables and was used in the analysis presented below.

⁶⁷ This refers to factors such as consumer buying power, competition, trading infrastructure, access to exports/imports, unemployment, cash flow, etc.

⁶⁸ Here is a sample translated from my notes: "Okay, like we were saying before, we've got these five categories (I give list). "Some of these categories help your business, some hurt your business, maybe some do both. Let's start with the ones that hurt your business. Which one of the five categories ... (I give list again) "Which one hurts your business MOST?" (pause) "Which one causes the most problems for your business?" (the entrepreneur continues to think and answers "community") "Why?" (he gives two reasons for his answer. I take notes). "What's next? After "community," which category gives you the most problems?"

**Category
Rankings by
Entrepreneur**

	What hurts your business most?	What helps your business most?
Mabuku	1) market 2) state 3) community 4) family 5) individual	1) individual 2) market 3) state 4) family 5) community
Basecom	1) community 2) market 3) individual 4) state 5) family	1) individual 2) market 3) family 4) state 5) community
Sabata	1) family 2) individual 3) market 4) community 5) state	(not available) ¹
Radio Karthala	(not available)	1) individual 2) state 3) family 4) market 5) community
ESC	(not available)	1) individual 2) family 3) community 4) market 5) state

¹ I did not finish analysing the data until after returning from the field,
this accounts for inconsistencies in data collection

Obviously a sample of six participants chosen on the basis of some type of innovation holds limited possibilities for statistical analysis. Furthermore, one of these six did not participate in the final stage of the interview process,⁶⁹ and several of the participants formulated one prioritized list instead of two. There are some interesting points which the tables suggest, but any observation based on them must be considered tentative. The tables are not intended to be an accurate representation of the Comorian entrepreneurial perceptions; the sample size is too small to permit any such claim. Instead, they are included only as an illustration of a method which, with a larger and more carefully chosen sample group would be effective for mapping the perceptions of a set of entrepreneurs.

In each of the tables (see opposite page), the rows correspond to the five categories which I had identified from the literature as possible factors influencing entrepreneurial activity. The columns show numbers, from 1 to 5 (1 being "most important" and 5 being "least important"), which correspond to the importance assigned to each category. For example, "individual" in the constraints table (Table 1) received one "2", one "3" and one "5". This means that one participant ranked this category second, another ranked it third and a third participant ranked it last in importance among the factors that constrain his activities. In the creativity table (Table 2) we see that the same category received four firsts.⁷⁰ The totals are simply the result of adding up the number of weighted responses. So, for example, the numbers in the individual category add up to 10 (2,3,5), which is slightly larger than the average (9), the total number of points (45) divided by the total number of categories (5).

⁶⁹ For reasons stated in the methods section, I chose not to include a case study for this participant, DeGaulle, who was the first person in the Comoros to sell food on the street. He introduced this innovation some 15 years previous to my research and has since become a successful shopkeeper and an aspiring wholesaler. Nonetheless, some of the general information which he gave me about being an entrepreneur in the Comoros proved to be very helpful and I have included some sections of his interviews in this chapter. His answers to the final stage of the interview process are not included in the tables.

⁷⁰ The symbol "x" is used to denote an answer in the constraints table (Table 1) and the "+" symbol is used in the creativity table (Table 2). The use of these symbols will allow the reader to more easily distinguish the two categories in Table 3.

Table 1: CONSTRAINTS**Factors which entrepreneurs say hinder enterprise**

	1's	2's	3's	4's	5's	TOTAL
individual		x	x		x	10
family	x			x	x	10
community	x		x	x		8
state		x		x	x	11
market	x	x	x			6
TOTAL						45

N=3

(Average: 9)

Table 2: CREATIVITY**Factors which entrepreneurs say help enterprise**

	1's	2's	3's	4's	5's	TOTAL
individual	++++					4
family		+	++	+		12
community			+		+++	18
state		+	+	+	+	14
market		++		++		12
TOTAL						60

N=4

(Average: 12)

Several observations can be made from Tables 1 and 2. The categories that differ most from the average are *individual* in Table 1 and *individual* and *community* in Table 2. The *individual* category is chosen as the most enabling of the five. To a certain extent this is a function of the fact that innovation was an important criterion for participation in the study. The participants were owners of small or micro-enterprise, which is heavily dependent on the initiative of the individual entrepreneur. Second, *community* and *market* are the two most constraining categories. In Table 1, *market* is more constraining than *community* and in Table 2 *community* is less enabling than *market*, but these differences may be too fine to be significant, especially considering the small sample size.⁷¹

An example such as this points to ambiguity in the data. It is not clear, for example, if the 5's for the *community* category in Table 2 mean that community is constraining or that it is simply not enabling. It is possible that the elicitation technique used in the constraints category was not clear to respondents.⁷² Another point of interest is the fact that Table 2 displays significantly more clusters than Table 1. This may reflect the fact that there is one less respondent in Table 1 or it may indicate that Comorian entrepreneurs do not characterize their situation in the same way I do, that is using a constraints/creativity opposition to describe their efforts (see Models, Chapter 2).

⁷¹ Note that a smaller total in Table 1 means "more constraining" and a smaller total in Table 2 means "more enabling."

⁷² I realized later that the verb "empêcher" could have been substituted with "limiter."

Table 3: CONSTRAINTS & CREATIVITY

Entrepreneurs' perceptions of factors which help/hinder enterprise

	1	2	3	4	5	TOTAL
individual	++++	x	x		x	-6
family	x	+	++	x/+	x	2
community	x		x/+	x	+++	10
state		x/+	+	x/+	x/+	3
market	x	x/++	x	++		6
TOTAL						15

(Average: 3)

Table 3 combines Tables 1 and 2 on the same grid for comparison. In this table, *individual* and *community* stand out as significant areas of agreement between participants. Table 3 also highlights the dispersed nature of the responses in the family and state categories. This may be explained in part by the discomfort associated with making judgements about the institutions of family and government or by the variation among individual families. The state category also has the highest number of mixed responses (2,4,5), pointing again to highly varied responses to the government

Perhaps the only certain observation in this analysis is that the information contained in these tables is not complete and that it is more telling when considered in conjunction with information from interviews with participants. According to the data presented, entrepreneurs view *individual* as the category which helps their business most. Of the four entrepreneurs that gave a ranking for factors that enable business to succeed, all four put *individual* first on the list. They all seemed confident that they are good at what they do. Mabuku considers himself a **good mechanic**. Deviaulle says **I'm good with customers**, and Sharif is **always ahead of the game**. Only one participant thought his lack of knowledge/skills was holding back the business. Despite his extensive

contacts and thorough knowledge of the island, Sabata insisted that his business couldn't really be successful until he had the opportunity to finish his studies. **I also need to know more about the history of the Comoros**, he said.⁷³

The two most constraining categories (*community* and *market*) correspond closely with comments made during the interviews, as well as with observations I made throughout the research process.⁷⁴ Entrepreneurs, who made relatively few disparaging remarks about the government or about their families, had much to say about community. Sharif complained of people who think they deserve credit for ads simply because they know who he is. According to Base-Com, **there are a lot of people that try to take advantage of me** by getting tires repaired and not paying. Ahmed had similar experiences with students who wanted "free English." During interviews I observed considerable tension between entrepreneurs and members of the community. In some cases, these were customers requesting products or services on credit, like the taxi driver who paid regular visits to Base-Com without money or any intention of paying. In other cases, community members requested favors of the entrepreneur such as lifts, clothes, food and small loans. Mabuku had regular visits from people asking favors (see "Everybody" in *Mabuku*).

From my own observations, it seems clear that the *market* category is also a constraining force on entrepreneurial activity. Most of what Mabuku discussed with me in our interviews had to do with fish pricing and competition from *wachuzis* or fishselling middlepersons. Sharif correctly pointed out that consumption in the Comoros is constrained by an economy with limited cash flow and by high unemployment.⁷⁵ In addition, a small population (the capital has less than 25,000 people) means that the number of consumers is limited and that attempting to capitalize on economies of scale is very risky. Further examination of entrepreneurs' statements (in formal and informal

⁷³ It is possible that the explanation of my research and motivation behind undertaking such a project (i.e. the pursuit of higher studies) may have influenced Sabata to emphasize education in his answers. I am skeptical in general of the results I had from Sabata. He was the last entrepreneur I worked with and his data lead me to believe that I didn't allow enough time to establish a comfortable and reliable working relationship.

⁷⁴ I chose to focus on these categories for two reasons. First, they both exceed the constraints average in Table 1. Second, they were both questions which received considerable attention from entrepreneurs throughout the interview process (see *Comorian Signposts*).

⁷⁵ Comorians often refer to the "periode de crise" as a generalized form of economic recession.

interview settings) together with my more general observations points to certain aspects which stand out as markers or *signposts* of the entrepreneurial activity under consideration.

COMORIAN SIGNPOSTS⁷⁶

As discussed in the methodology section, my attempt to represent Comorian entrepreneurs or culture is necessarily tentative. Even the term *signpost* is tentative. It is not my intention to "explain" Comorian entrepreneurs, a project which is constrained by the diversity among Comorian entrepreneurs, the complexity of Comorian culture, and the nature of the research process. Instead, my research attempts to point out certain recurring patterns in Comorian entrepreneurship. Some of the signposts covered in this section run counter to generalizations made in the literature. This may be due to differences in the quality of research as well as differences in the area of study.

Community is a Constraint

The most striking element to come out of the data analysis is the degree to which entrepreneurs viewed other members of their community as a constraint to their enterprise.⁷⁷ Entrepreneurs view this group, which is made up of friends, friends of friends, colleagues, classmates and acquaintances, as a strain on the enterprise because its members only **ask for favors and never give anything in return** (Mabuku). In the interview setting, references to community were clearly more common when

⁷⁶ I am indebted to Professor Ron Burnett, Director of Graduate Program in Communications, McGill University, for this term.

⁷⁷ "Family" referred to any family member, close or distant, related through blood or marriage, who could make claims on the entrepreneur's resources based on kinship ties. "Community" meant any non-family member of the same neighborhood, social organization, village or city with whom the entrepreneur interacted for business purposes or otherwise.

discussing "constraints" than when discussing "creativity." According to entrepreneurs, demands on their money, time and resources are by far greatest from this category:

People think we're rich because we travel and we have a car. Mabuku, driving a distance which usually takes 5 minutes, stops four times on the way to pick up people who ask for a ride.

Mabuku on his social obligations within his community: If among all the fish we catch we don't give some away, it looks bad...Overall, I think I give them more than they give me.

Mabuku talks about how local traditions constrain his enterprise: Other fishermen are too tradition-bound for us to get together and buy this new net as a group; they think we're going to overfish the waters. Overfishing without large-scale commercial fishing seems highly unlikely. And on another occasion: People don't work because they don't have to, it's embarrassing if an old man has to work, a Comorian proverb: *kudja shinda wahantsi mbabaho?* You can't take care of your father?

The elders want to sell sand and I'm against it. Sand and sea coral are important resources in the Comoros, as they are mixed with imported cement to reduce the cost of construction. The collection of sand and coral for eventual sale by members of the community threatens the fragile marine life eco-system which supports the Mabuku enterprise.

Ahmed on his obligations as a teacher: I have to look good and be in good health, but it's hard. My students dress better than I do. But this doesn't mean they are paying customers. Only 4 of 11 students were paying in advance. They want English, but they don't want to pay...I agreed to let 4 or 5 students take classes without paying. We try to understand; people pay less according to their means.

Entrepreneurship in the Comoros doesn't work because people don't consume (Sharif). People rent video cassettes and refuse to pay late fees. Very few people buy original productions of local music; home-made copies are much cheaper. **In theory the community is the gas that fuels the machine, but here they don't help the business at all, they're just a hassle.**

Individual members of the community ask entrepreneurs for money and favors, and social obligations within the community make demands on the entrepreneur's time and ability to effectively run his business. There are only a few examples in the interviews of community helping business. Members of Mabuku's community helped him move his boat on the beach when his fishers were sick, and he says they help him during catastrophes and emergencies. Base-Com entrusted his shop to a friend when he left the country on business, although he makes clear that he **can't trust anyone to run the shop**. There were no other references to community as an enabler. Only one of the entrepreneurs (Sabata) talked about the members of his community as consumers, a role

which is obviously enabling for the business. For Comorian entrepreneurs, members of the community are primarily a strain and are not commonly discussed as customers.

The literature on African entrepreneurs pays very little attention to members of the local community (non-kin) as a constraining force on small enterprise.⁷⁸ Instead, scholarly writing in this area has given more emphasis to the role of institutions such as family, government and education. This is a considerable weakness in the literature, given the degree to which community causes problems for entrepreneurs in the Comoros.

Many Credits

Credit is a very common topic in the literature on economic development. Usually, however, the discussion centers around ways in which credit can be organized and extended to small and medium-sized enterprise. Marris and Somerset (1972) focus on issues surrounding such formal credit mechanisms for small enterprise. Hart (1972) and Nafziger (1977) also attempt to demonstrate the importance of institutional credit for the development of small business. It is true that this set of issues is important for encouraging entrepreneurial growth, but its prominence in the literature on entrepreneurs ignores a related set of important issues: those concerning entrepreneurs' credit with their customers. On the whole, entrepreneurs seemed much less concerned with formal credit mechanisms being extended to their business and more concerned with credit agreements between themselves and their customers.⁷⁹

Seventy percent of my customers who take credit don't pay it back. Base-Com did not have to think before giving me this figure. He had obviously spent time thinking about it before.

⁷⁸ Barth's "social relations which hamper" business (1963: 8) address some of the social costs of entrepreneurial activity. Geertz (1963) discusses how cultural values can limit the growth of local entrepreneurial initiatives.

⁷⁹ For a discussion of credit and customer relations in West African trading networks, see Bauer (1963), especially his note on the effects of indebtedness, p. 214. Abner Cohen (1965) discusses how traders attempt to limit losses that can be incurred from extending credit to customers.

There are a lot of people who try to take advantage of me. They want to get their tire fixed for free. They say, "no problem, I'll pay you tomorrow." They never do. As Base-Com was finishing his sentence a taxi driver runs in for two Benson & Hedges (2 cigarettes, not two packs). Base-Com asks for the money which the driver owes for 2 tires repaired last week. "You know I'm gonna' pay, I just don't have the money now." He drives off and when I look to Ali he says: He's not even a friend of mine.

Sharif on credit problems associated with advertising: I'm popular but there are people who think I should give them free ads just because they know me. Sharif explains why some people think he is wealthy. Some people count the ads. I talk about my money problems and they start to count the ads. Unpaid credit accounts for approximately 30% of his business.

Mabuku on credit: People won't buy from you if you're too mean to give credit...If you sell fish with a freezer then you don't need credit and if you don't give credit you don't get customers. Credit is bad, but we don't have a choice...We have to give credit because the fishsellers do--we always get some payment, even if it's only 5% of the total.

It was clear, even during the interviews, that credit is a recurring problem for Comorian entrepreneurs. Customers, acting like old friends, would request a "small" exception to the credit rules which are posted in almost every Comorian store,⁸⁰ attempting to take advantage of Comorians' inability to say no.⁸¹ To a certain extent these requests are a function of the fact that unemployment is very high in the Comoros. Those that are lucky enough to have a job (usually with the government) often receive their salaries after three to six-month delays. Nonetheless, the literature on African entrepreneurship neglects the issue of credit between entrepreneurs and their customers, and the limitations these arrangements put on cash flow and accumulation of capital.

Money is Not a Problem, It's a Solution

These are the words of Ahmed, who was able to start his English School with no personal savings and without incurring substantial debt.⁸² This *signpost*, which shows

⁸⁰ There is a wide variety of "no credit" signs in stores in the Comoros, most of which are not displayed in prominent places. One such sign reads: "Moi pas donner credit...toi facher...moi prefere toi facher."

⁸¹ A common Comorian refusal technique begins with, "It's not that I'm saying no, it's just that..."

⁸² The start-up money for ETC came in part from Fuad's partner Mohammed and later from the few students who were able to pay their course fees.

that owners of small and micro-enterprises in the Comoros do not view the shortage of money as their most significant problem, contradicts one of the most common myths about African economic development: that Africans need more money. Capital is certainly important, and Comorian entrepreneurs know it is a necessity for entrepreneurial activity, but there are good examples within this study which show how ingenuity and frugality overcome material constraints (see *ESC, Base-Com*, and *Sabata*).⁸³

Sabata, who was renting a vehicle in the same way that a taxi driver would from a private owner, required only gas money to start his business. His daily earnings paid for personal expenses and maintenance of the vehicle. Hassane and his colleague petitioned the Japanese aid agency so that upon graduation, the fishing school's first graduating class would receive boats. This enabled them to begin fishing and soon after begin accumulating capital. Ahmed's English school had very low start-up expenses. The house he rented had a living room which served as a classroom and the twelve chairs were included with the house. Ahmed already owned basic teaching materials like books, chalk, erasers, and paper. He had a blackboard made for the equivalent of \$25, spent a small sum on photocopies and he was ready to begin teaching. Since the landlord was having a difficult time renting his house, he agreed to let Ahmed use the house on a trial basis: if the business did not take off, Ahmed was under no obligation to pay the first month's rent. **We'll get more chairs when we get more students.** Obviously there are situations that could arise, causing the enterprise to fail due to lack of funds (automobile accident, failure to attract enough students, etc.), but the point is that the lack of capital is *not necessarily a barrier to entry* into small business. All the participants agreed that more money would help their business and their ability to grow, but material constraints did not keep them from establishing or conducting business.⁸⁴

Certainly, not all enterprises require as little capital investment as the ones mentioned above. In fact, some of the participants (Sharif, Base-Com) had very high start-up costs

⁸³ Harris & Rowe (1966) show that capital is not a "limiting factor" for African entrepreneurs. Similarly, Schatz (1977) argues that failures in African industry are due to the economic/political environment, and not a lack of capital or know-how. Geertz on Indonesia: "... the central problems the leaders in development face are organizational. Lack of capital, shortages of skilled labor or disciplined labor, insufficiency of markets, lack of technical knowledge and so on are all, to some extent genuine problems. But none of these seems in any proper sense an immediately limiting factor on economic development" (Geertz 1963: 74). It may also be argued that a sample of businesses that are "up and running" will be imbalanced in favor of those entrepreneurs that already have the ability to save or generate their own sources of capital.

⁸⁴ This may not be the case for less wealthy Comorians or for disadvantaged groups such as women.

relative to the other entrepreneurs participating in the study. It must be reiterated that the entrepreneurs in my sample are owners of small or micro-enterprises, which are generally less capital-intensive than medium-sized businesses, especially in manufacturing.

However, in each case the entrepreneur was personally responsible for raising start-up money, a large part of which usually came from personal savings. It was clear from the interviews that Comorian entrepreneurs do not depend on institutional credit to meet their needs. **I could probably get a loan from the bank but it wouldn't work unless I knew someone** (Ahmed).⁸⁵ Only two of the entrepreneurs had attempted to obtain loans or credit through formal channels (National Bank, United Nations Development Project, Mission de Cooperation Française, etc); neither of them succeeded.

Despite plans for expansion (a net for Mabuku, a car for Sabata, etc.), only one of the entrepreneurs discussed money when asked to talk about the problems faced by his enterprise.⁸⁶ When I pressed the issue, Ahmed said **Money is second...because if we put only money first that will be a constraint. Money is not a problem, it's a solution.**

This signpost can be attributed to a number of factors which stand out on the Comorian cultural landscape. Comorian entrepreneurs are good at saving money. Base-Com, who comes from a humble background, was investing a fixed monthly sum into a forced savings account which he could access only after a period of five years. Over the years he had accumulated enough personal savings to rent two plots of land for his business, buy two cars, and travel extensively in the Indian Ocean. He was in the process of constructing two houses for family members. With the money saved from his business, Mabuku and his partner were able to buy the two used trucks which they use to distribute fish. DeGaulle on saving: **If I lose one franc, it worries me.** The ability to save can be attributed in part to the *aanda*, or Big Marriage, a Grand Comorian tradition which has been known to cost as much as U.S. \$150,000 and which has been referred to

⁸⁵ Access to credit is one area where the "community" category might have been discussed as an enabler, but throughout the course of the interviews, this never occurred.

⁸⁶ Nafziger (1977) suggests that capital is a common concern for new enterprises and Marris & Somerset (1972) give numerous examples of successful small enterprises which began without large amounts of capital investment. To a certain degree, this question depends on the scale of operations and the particular sector or industry.

as the cultural, social, political and economic base of Comorian society.⁸⁷ Traditionally, preparation for the "aanda" required as many as 25 years of saving funds and planning. In addition to the "Grand Mariage," other indigenous institutions such as rotating credit associations and youth groups exist as stimulants to saving and sources of income.⁸⁸

The Role of Government

Contrary to many examples from other parts of Africa, the Comorian government does not seem to be a significant problem for entrepreneurs. Hart (1972) demonstrates the degree to which government policy has constrained the development of indigenous entrepreneurship in parts of South Africa. MacGaffey (1987; 1992) is obligated to address the issues which arise from the distinctive mix of obstruction and neglect which characterize the Mobutu regime in post-independent Zaire. The Comorian government, however, despite numerous authoritarian regimes and mercenary-led military takeovers, does not seem to pose a formidable threat to small-scale entrepreneurial activity.⁸⁹

Three of the six participants were operating outside of the government's control, and those who had acquired the appropriate operating license had no complaints concerning the fees and revenue taxes they paid. Base-Com called tax collecting the "daula ya circali," or the government's right. It may be argued that government is a constraint since some entrepreneurs make efforts to avoid government scrutiny, but this point seems unimportant when considering how easily government control can be avoided. Ahmed explains how he runs his business without government interference:

We found this house just outside of town and put up a little sign near the

⁸⁷ From Soilihi (1988). For more information on the Comorian Grand Mariage, see Ottenheimer (1985) or Rouveyran & Djabiri (1968).

⁸⁸ I did not collect any primary data on indigenous savings and credit institutions in the Comoros. Based on informal questioning I was able to identify several *tonlines* which are common among vendors in Moroni's central food market, but the entrepreneurs with whom I worked were not involved with any organization of this type.

⁸⁹ DeSoto (1989) is an excellent example from Latin America of the obstructive, even destructive, potential of some governments toward small and micro-enterprise. DeSoto and Hart give information on enterprises of varying sizes. Although this study gives examples of only small-enterprise from the Comoros, the work of these scholars is important in order to show how *relatively* unobstructive the Comorian government policy is toward small business.

road. **We don't want too much attention right now.** According to Ahmed, to attract a lot of attention would mean the possibility of having money extracted for personal use by government officials. It is true that ESC cannot issue official diplomas to its students, but these are trade-offs for Ahmed, who was reluctant at first to participate in this study since ESC was **only working on a trial basis**. Ahmed attributes his success in part to the fact that government-run schools are inefficient and over-crowded. This means that families with moderate means are more likely to send their children to private schools like ESC. Mabuku also listed the state as an enabler for his business since, as a fisherman, he is not taxed and does not need a license to operate. He explains: **I think the government wants to show that fishing is a respectable job.**

In other cases, entrepreneurs have been able to use the government's disorganization to their advantage.⁹⁰ Radio Karthala is a good example. When Sharif first opened his radio station, he was the first to attempt to share the airwaves with Radio Comores, the country's long-standing government-run radio station. It took the Comorian government three days to find Radio Karthala and *ask* its owner to shut down the operation. Sharif was left unharmed. It wasn't until the second coming of Karthala that the government actually put him in jail; this time they took almost two weeks before shutting down his operation and confiscating the transmitter. After several weeks he was released from jail and he left the country in order to get, among other things, another transmitter. **Right now, the lack of regulation is working to my advantage.** For now, while a newly-appointed government media commission is still considering the rules that will be enacted to regulate private radio stations in the Comoros, Sharif runs his radio station as he pleases.

This is not to say that entrepreneurs view the government as totally harmless or benevolent. DeGaulle complains that because of government price control mechanisms, he makes an almost insignificant profit for each ton of rice that he sells, **but a store without rice in the Comoros can't do business**. Sharif attempted to sell the government on an idea for the Comoros' first national lottery, a project which he thinks could earn as much as \$25,000 per week, but the government refused. He says that political obstacles such as this keep the country from advancing.

⁹⁰ MacGaffey (1987;1991) gives excellent descriptions of similar ingenuity in Zaire.

Other Observations

The categories of market and family were also discussed by the participants, but they did not provide results uniform enough to be considered distinct signposts. Market was usually considered a constraint. The entrepreneurs cited lack of money flow caused by delays in government salaries as an example. The market is limited because **not enough money is circulating** (Mabuku). With the current state of the economy, **Comorians don't consume**, says Sharif, and that **the market is there, but it hasn't been tapped yet**.⁹¹ Overall, the market is more bad than good; its early stage of development means many opportunities, but there is an overall lack of jobs and spending. The price of electricity, which is said to be the most expensive in the world,⁹² is also given as a constraining factor.

Entrepreneurs seem to be equally divided on the subject of family. For three of the participants, family can be considered a constraint. **My family helps a lot, but it's not a boss/employee relationship so you can't ask for everything to be perfect...I prefer hiring people to start a good business and then give the business to my family after it's up and running** (Sharif). Family employees can be paid less, but they also produce less. They drain the entrepreneur's already limited resources. **I'm the oldest, even my uncles' wives come to me for things** (Sabata) and **My family is very large, I'm even related to the chef du village** (Mabuku). The other three entrepreneurs view family as an enabling force. Family members are a cheap source of labor, they can be trusted, and they fully support the enterprise since in some sense it carries their name. **Family doesn't constrain me at all; if I don't have my family I'm not happy** (Base-Com). **The stability I have from family enables me to take this on** (Ahmed), and **Business is better with family...I have to provide for my brother anyway so I might as well just hire him** (Degaulle).

⁹¹ According to Schatz, there is usually a limit to potential earnings in any given line of work in many African economies (1977: 94).

⁹² Personal communication, Peter G. Harding (U.S. Embassy, Moroni), May 1990.

There is general agreement on the part of entrepreneurs that the individual category is almost never a hindrance to the enterprise. On the one hand, this may suggest that entrepreneurs are not able to see their personal shortcomings or limitations. Malcolm Harper claims that small-scale entrepreneurs often see their most serious problems as those things that are out of their control, such as access to capital, marketing channels or credit (Harper 1984: 66). On the other hand, their responses clearly suggest that individual entrepreneurs are responsible for the success of the enterprise and that we may need to question the common assumption that entrepreneurs need more formal training or education. The entrepreneurs in this study have travelled extensively (Sharif, Sabata, Base-Com), have learned foreign languages (Ahmed, Sabata), and have served as apprentices in various fields (Sabata, Base-Com), all examples of investments in human capital which do not require formal education. Local systems of training and knowledge can provide important insights into determining regional or local needs. Mabuku explains what it was like to have development workers visit him while he was working on the EEC fisheries project: **You have these people come in as experts and tell you what to do. But they don't know these waters, a lot of times they don't even know how to fish. It's like a soccer team. Let's say I'm a goalie, have been for a long time. I know my players and I know the terrain. Don't come here and tell me how to play soccer, especially if you don't know how to play yourself.**

Discussion

The information that emerges from this chapter comes to us in two forms. First, an attempt is made to understand entrepreneurial perceptions through a very simple system of quantitative analysis and mapping (*Problems and Priorities*). The limited size of the sample and an unsystematic elicitation approach mean that the results of this analysis are too imprecise to be significant. The tables submitted and the written analysis that accompany them are perhaps best seen as a methodological exercise which, with some improvements, may be used for similar purposes in different circumstances. Second are

the signposts, which stand out as recurring themes and patterns discussed by the entrepreneurs in our interviews.

Both methods of representing this information attempt to answer the same question: what, according to entrepreneurs, are the factors which affect (either negatively or positively) the growth and/or state of their enterprise? Several answers to this question surface from their responses. First and foremost their responses highlight the tension which exists between the entrepreneur and members of his community. Entrepreneurs view non-kin community members as a constraint to their activities, since as "friends" and potential customers they request favors, money, and most importantly credit. Entrepreneurs' responses also show that the Comorian government is not perceived as a major obstacle to small-scale entrepreneurial activity and that capital, although necessary for certain entrepreneurial functions like expansion, is not seen as a significant stumbling block or barrier to entry into small enterprise. With satisfactory, but by no means comprehensive answers to the question given above, this research proposes a possible method for gathering and organizing data on the perceptions of indigenous African entrepreneurs and in doing so suggests the possibility of an indigenous agenda for the promotion of private enterprise in Africa.

CONCLUSIONS

What then can be said about the role of entrepreneurs in Comorian society? This is a difficult question to answer given the limited nature of the sample chosen for this research. However, even if the entrepreneurs in this study are not representative of Comorian entrepreneurs on the whole, their stories do give certain insights into the nature of entrepreneurial activity and development in the Comoros.

Socially Conscious Self-Actualization

Case studies from the Comoros show that motivations differ from one entrepreneur to the next. They also point to the multiplicity of motivations, ranging from totally self-interested to totally altruistic, which characterizes most entrepreneurs. According to Geertz (1963), entrepreneurs in one town followed an "ego-focused" pattern of change (self-interested, individualistic and pioneering) and entrepreneurs in another town followed a "group-focused" approach (supportive, egalitarian and traditional). Findings from this research suggest that more significant variation occurs among individuals.

Belshaw (1955) argues that this variable is a function of the social distance between the entrepreneur and his "home group."⁹³ According to this analysis, an entrepreneur who shares values in common with his community is less likely to accumulate wealth than one who has symbolically "broken away" from his home group. He claims that in Africa "many leaders of initiative are motivated by their concern to raise the level of living of their own people, and to provide a more promising future for their children and grandchildren" (Belshaw 1955: 158). This claim seems naive, especially when compared with Geertz, who writes of Modjokuto entrepreneurs that their "ruthless" individualism is "destroying customary constraints on enterprise in a traditional society" (1963: 126).

⁹³ Belshaw gives four categories for understanding this variation: 1) the entrepreneur is completely broken away from his home group, 2) the entrepreneur has made an incomplete break from the home group, 3) the entrepreneur identifies with his home group and has expansive motives in commerce and 4) the entrepreneur identifies with the home group but has no intention to expand operation" (1955: 149).

Perhaps both accounts are somewhat exaggerated. Is it not possible for an individual, especially a local leader or in this case entrepreneur, to be self-interested and altruistic simultaneously? Evidence from the Comoros shows entrepreneurs with both selfish motives and a concern for community welfare. This socially conscious self-actualization is especially clear in the *Mabuku* case study. Hassane made Mabuku's resources readily available to certain members of his community (the truck and credit for fish are good examples). He attempted to sell more fish, which, according to him, would benefit Comorian society as well as himself. In addition, he was preparing his "grand marriage," a long and demanding process which demonstrates a commitment to the community and to traditional values. Sharif, the most "enterprising" of the entrepreneurs in the study, feels it is his responsibility to **wake up Comorians**, and make them aware of what they can do and be. He often talks about being a medium for the arrival of **global culture**, which according to him is **a good thing**.

In the *Base-Com* case study, there is evidence of the entrepreneur's efforts to help his immediate family, but less is done for non-family or community interests. This may also be a function of the fact that he lives and works in Moroni, and not in the village of his home group. Sabata discussed plans to rent his video equipment to the youth groups in his town: **It's for a good cause. I won't charge a lot, but I'll still make some money.** To differing degrees then the entrepreneurs who participated in this study are concerned with making money. Their enterprise, after all, is their livelihood; but these examples show that in carrying out their activities they remain aware of community as well as personal needs.

Entrepreneurship and Social Change

Most of the participants in this research had something to say about the effect of their enterprise on Comorian society. To differing degrees they were aware of this possibility and made it part of their planning. Mabuku was the most vocal on this question. He argued that Comorians, especially in areas far from the coast, were in great need of more protein. He said that by catching and selling more fish he could bring down the price, and Comorian society (himself included) would stand to benefit. He also talked (without my

asking) about his attempts to "valorise" the position of fishermen in Comorian society. Fishermen in the Comoros are highly stigmatized as a social group and Hassane saw it as his duty to project a professional image to improve the status of those who fish for a living. **What I was and what I am isn't the same thing...and this makes my family look good, we're no longer just another poor fishing family.**

Sharif was also aware of the potential his business had to affect Comorian society. He planned his radio programming to stimulate debate on issues which affect the political and social lives of many people in the Comoros: structural readjustment, rural exodus, Comorians living in France, jealousy, traditional healing. He talked about his style of advertising as a means of promoting local businesses and consumer behavior.⁹⁴ **Local businesses need a place to advertise. Imagine someone who sells yogurt...he doesn't want it to go bad.** On the air, he mixes French and Comorian and sees this as a positive and inevitable sign of the globalization of culture. According to Sharif, this use of language not only reflects local usage, but also reinforces it. He talks about the work ethic and Radio Karthala: **I give some sort of education, it gives people an idea of the Karthala lifestyle.** Every morning he starts his programming with a Haitian work song: "When you sleep your whole being sleeps. While other people are sleeping, you could be doing something to have a future."

Ahmed says he had the idea to open the English School because of his experience teaching English, but also in an attempt to help ease tension arising out of increased tourism and business investment from English-speaking countries. He also noted that his style of teaching (academic tours, emphasis on speaking) would help students from small villages ("up country") to integrate and feel at ease in the capital city, a relatively urban environment. Base-Com was surprised to learn that he was the first 24-hour anything in the Comoros and after hearing me explain the idea behind all-night convenience stores in the U.S., he decided his next venture, a service station, would also be open "24 sur 24."

⁹⁴ Beveridge and Oberschall (1979) argue that in Africa, the act of opening a business is in itself a form of social change. According to this argument, people come to see business as a reliable source of income and this leads more people into small business. The subsequent proliferation of small businesses changes the way people earn a living as well as the way they consume.

Later, when I asked him about the effects of his business on Comorian society, he said: **Now people can drive at night without any worries . . . pretty soon there will be 24-hour everything.**

Some Comparisons

Stories of Comorian entrepreneurs do not confirm Geertz' (1963) findings on entrepreneurship in developing economies. Geertz shows two kinds of entrepreneurial activity: bazaar-style trading, dominated by "entrepreneurs without enterprises" who lack the "capacity to form efficient economic institutions" (28) and the formation of new commercial interests by a local aristocracy who are struggling to move "from a peasant-village type economy toward a firm type economy" (ibid 83). In both cases, Geertz describes entrepreneurial activity with no visible signs of economic or social change. Entrepreneurs are spinning their wheels, and they are mostly unable to mobilize people or capital. Unlike Geertz' "peddlers," however, Comorian entrepreneurs are able to accumulate and re-invest in new forms of economic organization (from fisherman to fishery; from corner store to 24-hour service; from night club to commercial radio). Unlike his "princes," they are able to exercise individual initiative in the market without upsetting local traditions and relations (see above, *Socially Conscious Self-actualization*).

Stories of entrepreneurs in the Comoros more readily support the findings of MacGaffey (1987; 1991) and Barth (1963; 1967), whose attempts to analyze individual agency examine more closely the nature of change resulting from entrepreneurial activity.⁹⁵ MacGaffey's entrepreneurs are working around institutional constraints to accumulate wealth and, in the process they are contributing to the emergence of middle class consumption and values (the cases of *Mabuku* and *Radio Karthala* show similar phenomena). Entrepreneurs in Barth's studies act as cultural brokers whose innovations are constrained by, but also have significant impact on, traditional economic and cultural

⁹⁵ Many studies attempt to explain how social change occurs through the action of entrepreneurs. This task, though, has proven to be a difficult one. Greenfield and Strickon (1981) give a fascinating account of how economic and social innovations get accepted and adopted by society. Attwood (1992) describes similar processes in Western India.

practices (see for example Sabata). Case studies of Comorian entrepreneurs show that even under the most unlikely circumstances (i.e. a stagnant local economy and limited infrastructure) economic and social change can occur through the activities of entrepreneurs. If we agree that no culture or economy is static, it is more accurate to assume that change is happening and to set out to study the effects of these changes as they occur.

These examples show how studies in the literature on entrepreneurs differ with regards to the emphasis they give to change. Structuralist studies (such as Geertz 1963 and Berry 1985) are less concerned with change than with existing structures and institutions. Individualist studies, however, (MacGaffey 1987 and Barth 1963), make the question of social and economic change central to their analysis. Stories of Comorian entrepreneurs, which show individuals innovating in an economic space constrained by community values and imperfect markets, are told from an individualist perspective, since this approach allows the consideration of both individual agency and institutional formations. As MacGaffey has shown, an individualist perspective does not have to neglect the structural factors which characterize structuralist analyses.

One potential weakness of individualist analyses is the tendency to glorify the entrepreneur. According to Greenfield and Strickon, some perspectives place the "future good of humanity" in the hands of entrepreneurs, arguing that economic development could not occur without them (1981: 470).⁹⁶ The "heroification" of entrepreneurs, however, is less likely when analytical frameworks emphasize entrepreneurial roles over entrepreneurial characteristics. Schumpeter (1961), for example, examines the role that entrepreneurs play in the process of economic development and not the particular characteristics that make them successes or failures.⁹⁷ The latter point is a common criticism brought against socio-psychological theories of entrepreneurs, which are more concerned with socialization and personality traits than with the activity of the entrepreneur (Greenfield & Strickon 1981: 481).

To what extent can the entrepreneurs in this study be considered heroes? They are heroic insofar as they exemplify the dynamism of economic activity which this research sets out to examine. These are the stories of individuals who, despite considerable

⁹⁶ See for example the work of DeSoto (1989). Bernard Belasco (1980) presents an historical analysis of the symbolic importance of entrepreneurs among the Yoruba in Nigeria.

⁹⁷ Barth (1963) and Glads (1967) are also good examples of this approach.

obstacles, have managed to introduce goods and services which improve consumer access and well-being. However, the study also shows the tension which exists between entrepreneurs and their customers; the general public in the Comoros is more likely to view the entrepreneur as a personal resource than as a hero (Sharif). Other models of African entrepreneurs do not seem to fit either. The entrepreneur in the Comoros is not evil; his plans for expansion may alter traditional economic activity (Mabuku, Sabata), but they may also create jobs and bring down consumer prices. He is not a victim; external forces such as the availability of capital and government policy are obstacles, but not barriers to his advancement (ESC, Base-Com). Lastly, he is not a commodity, since entrepreneurs, even in the small sample chosen for this study, come from various socio-economic backgrounds, have varying levels of education and do not tend to identify themselves as part of an entrepreneurial group. The case studies presented in this research, which do not correspond neatly to any of the various models put forth by scholars, demonstrate the importance of local perceptions to an understanding of local problems.

Indigenous Knowledge and the Discourse of Development

I have attempted to make clear that Comorian entrepreneurs do not order their world in the same way as much of the social science literature on African entrepreneurs has attempted to do for them. They do not always identify the same issues as factors which affect their activity and when they do, they often discuss them in very different ways. There is evidence, for example, to suggest that Comorian entrepreneurs do not analyse their business activity in terms of a constraints/creativity opposition which is characteristic of much of the social scientific writing on this subject.

The findings in this research show that Comorian entrepreneurs are concerned with customer/credit relations and the constraints imposed on enterprise by imperfect markets and opportunities (see *Signposts*). The social science literature on African entrepreneurs, on the other hand, looks to entrepreneurial deficiencies, capital and the role of family as

important aspects affecting entrepreneurial activity.⁹⁸ The importance of these factors, especially entrepreneurial deficiencies, is not supported by evidence from the Comoros. Each of the case studies has examples of how entrepreneurs obtained education and experience through non-formal channels to start or expand their business. Sharif has travelled extensively and conducted business abroad. Sabata depended on family members and friends to learn how to make shoes and how to drive. In his travels he has learned to speak six languages. Ali also served as an apprentice and has mostly himself to thank for the savings which have allowed his business to grow. In the Comoros, human capital formation can occur in many ways, many of which are not provided by formal training.

What do these differences tell us about the policies which are implemented on behalf of local entrepreneurs (credit programs, entrepreneurial training programs, industrial estates, government-run cooperatives, trade unions, etc.)? If we assume that entrepreneurs need more training (Marris & Somerset 1972; Kilby 1969), then a rich set of human capital resources will be overlooked. If we assume that what entrepreneurs really need is greater access to credit (Akeredolu-Ale 1975),⁹⁹ then governments may run the risk of throwing valuable funds at people who haven't proven their ability or commitment to making their business work.¹⁰⁰ If we assume that entrepreneurs are in short supply and the job of the state is to create more (Nafziger 1977), then precious federal monies and international aid will go toward 'making' entrepreneurs,¹⁰¹ a policy which *may* work in Nigeria, but has had limited success in the Comoros.¹⁰² And if we believe, as the

⁹⁸ I have argued elsewhere (1993) in greater detail that the categorizations of social science are insensitive to the perceptions of local entrepreneurs. For discussions of these categories see: Kennedy (1988); Hart (1972); Nafziger (1977); Kilby (1969); Schatz (1977); Okeredolu-Ale (1975).

⁹⁹ This concern figures prominently in much of the development literature. See for example Dinwiddie (1974) and Mann et. al. (1989).

¹⁰⁰ Recent successes in micro-credit programs such as the Grameen Bank have led lending agencies to question the assumption that the poor are a credit risk. It is probably also true, however, that most lending institutions in developing countries do not have the means or the know-how to tackle a credit/extension program such as that of the Grameen Bank.

¹⁰¹ One major flaw in the social science literature is its failure to distinguish between programs aimed at creating entrepreneurs and those intended for helping entrepreneurs who are already in business.

¹⁰² Entrepreneurial training programs in the Comoros were first formally organized through the Centre d'Etudes et Recherches sur la Cooperation Internationale (CECI). They have changed structure and hands several times and are currently being coordinated by a private sector promotion project which is funded and organized by representatives from the UNDP and the ILO. According to the former CECI representative, one reason why these efforts have not succeeded is that NGOs are not aware of complex social relations which limit cooperation among Comorian entrepreneurs.

literature suggests, that entrepreneurs are more constrained than creative, then we run the risk of overlooking local initiatives that are sustainable, efficient and profitable.

Suggestions for Further Research

Besides the aspects discussed above, my research led me to two other related points which merit further study. First is the notion of indigenous marketing.¹⁰³ Marketing is not a new concept in developing countries, but it does take different forms in an economic context which is beginning to show signs of Western capitalist activity.¹⁰⁴ The entrepreneurs in this study used public spectacles, word of mouth and local affordable means of advertising to capitalize on Comorian curiosity and sell their products. This aspect of African enterprise may make for fascinating research, especially given the increasing exposure to Euro-American patterns of advertising and consumption in many African countries.

Second, in emphasizing what is specific about the Comorian economic and cultural context, it is easy to overlook the elements of small business which may be common to entrepreneurs from different parts of the world. Analysis of the data from the Comoros points specifically to several aspects which resemble the situation of small-scale entrepreneurs in other parts of the world: namely, ambition, trust, and the desire to be self-employed. Among other things, this research shows that much more must be known about entrepreneurial perceptions in order to generalize cross-culturally about entrepreneurial values.

¹⁰³ Here I am using the term "marketing" in the management sense of the word, to mean activities associated with the promotion and/or advertising, not the distribution/sale of goods.

¹⁰⁴ To date there has been very little research in this area. Kilby (1965) describes "production" and "market-oriented" entrepreneurs. Kennedy also discusses the importance of marketing to expansion in small enterprise (1988: 164), but issues related to marketing are given limited attention.

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