

## Country Report:

# Comoros Islands – Philosophy Teaching in Secondary Education

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## 1. An Educational System Inherited from the Former Colonial Power, in the Process of Hybridisation

The Union of the Comoros is a former French colony located in the southwest of the Indian Ocean, which became independent in 1975. It comprises four islands, one of which is the subject of a dispute with France as it became a French department (Mayotte).

As a result of a mainly Bantu and Arab-Shirazian mixing, the Comorian population is united both religiously by Islam and linguistically by Shikomori<sup>1</sup>, which shares its status as an official language with Arabic and French. Its symbolic importance is low, however to the benefit of Arabic (both the religio-liturgical and the business language with Persian Gulf nations) and French (language of administration, politics, media, school: language of knowledge, power, social success and emigration<sup>2</sup>). From primary school to higher education, the exclusive teaching medium is French, but unofficially, Shikomori is orally used to compensate for an insufficient command of French by both the students and the teachers (Bavoux 2002), in a diglossia context suspected for causing low philosophy academic performance (Demuth 2014).

The Union of the Comoros is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world<sup>3</sup>: since independence, the Comorian education system has suffered from a lack of resources coupled with the country's chronic political instability (numerous coups d'état) and massive demographic growth (Lacoste & Leigniel 2016). The impact on learning conditions has led to the proliferation of private schools<sup>4</sup>. At upper secondary, supervision conditions are nevertheless generous (student – teacher ratio: 14) compared to the averages observed in Sub-Saharan Africa (24); the gross enrollment rate has increased from 21% in 2008 to 44,5% in 2015 (PTSE 2017).

Even after three reforms (1976, 1982, and 1994) the school system organisation still bears the mark of the French one, with its division into three cycles punctuated by very selective exams. The *baccalauréat*, after three years of high school – general education cycle structured in sections, as in France in the early 90s: literary, scientific and economic –, gives access to higher education locally<sup>5</sup> or abroad. However, a certain syncretism is undeniable, related to the legacies of the traditional Koranic school and States of the Arab League's increasing support offers, but also to the submission to international standards supported by the United Nations

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<sup>1</sup> Close to Swahili.

<sup>2</sup> Out of a population of approximately 800,000 inhabitants, nearly 400,000 live abroad. Of them 80% live in France.

<sup>3</sup> 2019 GDP per capita: 833 USD; HDI rank: 165.

<sup>4</sup> In 2015: 62 private high schools for 10 public ones (PTSE, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> University of the Comoros was created in 2003.

system<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. A French-styled Subject Crowning Secondary Education, Crossbreed with Local Adaptations and Sponsored Contents

As in France, as well as in all former French colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa, philosophy in the Comoros is a compulsory subject and appears as the showpiece test of *baccalauréat*. However, since 2008, it is no longer taught only during the last year of high school: Comorian students benefit from two to three hours of “philosophy initiation” class the year before – which is atypical.

At the *terminale* level, philosophy is taught weekly for three hours (in the scientific and economic section: test coefficient respectively 1 and 2) or five hours (in the literary section: test coefficient 5, the highest of all): depending on the *baccalauréat* type, given the very low pass rate (around 30% in the last five years; around 10% in 2014 and earlier), the philosophy test is decisive for obtaining the qualification.

Due to a French institutional tradition philosophically hostile to any didactisation of philosophy (Tozzi 2009), it is implied by Comorian curricula that philosophy would be in itself its own didactic: the example provided by the lecture of the teacher conceived like a *dissertation* – French exercise *par excellence* – and based on the study of “major” philosophical texts, all accompanied by periodic written training leading optionally to remedial exercises, prepare students for a four hour written terminal examination: essay<sup>7</sup> or text analysis, at the candidate’s discretion.

Yet, French-style teaching of philosophy, with its Western-style rationality carrying foreign epistemic structures and Eurocentric programs left in memory by the 1970s *coopérants* teachers who often appeared as representatives of the materialist-Marxist doctrine, has long had the reputation of being a colonial and anti-religious instrument of acculturation, dedicated to corrupting Comorian youth (Demuth 2014). An identity defense reflex may then explain locally conceived textbooks – which is uncommon<sup>8</sup> – and curricula adaptation efforts<sup>9</sup> to give more meaning to a learning accused of being disconnected from the students’ life<sup>10</sup>. Thus, philosophy curricula reveal strong similarities with the French model<sup>11</sup>, in which is mixed the teaching of the history of African and Arab-Muslim philosophies and debates over Ethnophilosophy, content linked to norms or values promoted by UNESCO, as well as notions of civic and

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<sup>6</sup> The Comoros benefits from the support of multilateral partners, in particular the World Bank, UNICEF, the European Union, but also the UNESCO’s Regional Office for Education in Africa for the implementation, since 2009, of the procedures for evaluating the quality of education through the program for the analysis of educational systems (PASEC) of the Conference of Ministers of Education of countries sharing French (CONFEMEN).

<sup>7</sup> Whose subject is formulated as a question.

<sup>8</sup> Most other French-speaking African countries either do not have a philosophy textbook or import unsuitable French ones (UNESCO 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Last revision in 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Which did not occur in all the francophone sub-Saharan countries - in Burkina-Faso, for example, French curricula from 1925 remain (UNESCO 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Consisting of a list of concepts defining fields of philosophical problems to explore and of a list of philosophers providing texts to study.

religious<sup>12</sup> education related to the major contemporary issues of Comorian society<sup>13</sup>.

Since teachers and students only have one philosophy textbook to refer to, one might ask whether it is acceptable that teaching supports orientations such as respect for Islamic values, the need to fight against underdevelopment and the righteous use of “community spirit”, for this imposes conceptual limits. However, one can retort that the centralisation of didactic material defined by public authorities represents a barrier against proliferation of proselytising or doctrinal works, and that it is philosophy’s epistemic nature to draw its vitality from measuring itself against concrete matters of individuals and societies.

Lastly, the University of the Comoros, even if the fields in which Comorian students most often enroll are those overrepresented in the 1970s in French universities – social sciences and humanities – does not provide philosophy courses, which is only distilled in theology and law courses. This prevents any interaction on a national scale between secondary and higher education, which may contribute to reducing philosophy to a closed body of knowledge since the archipelago is deprived of places involved in living philosophical production. As a consequence, no real conceptual decolonisation of philosophy curricula or didactic orientations implemented could be carried out: the official textbook is a collection of thematic texts of which 96% are from Western philosophers and teachers themselves do not feel equipped to contribute to such a task.

### **3. Philosophy Teachers Training: Between Institutional Void and System D**

Philosophy teachers are recruited on application file by the State. The lowest diploma required is a bachelor’s degree in philosophy, but most teachers have a master’s degree or a doctorate<sup>14</sup> – necessarily obtained abroad, often in Madagascar.

Qualification for school education does not require following any special teacher training courses: upon leaving university and once hired, teachers are sent directly to the classrooms. The profession is learned on-the-job and mainly by mimicry from lessons of more experienced peers or from one’s own student experience.

Priority is given to basic education, Philosophy is the great disinherited of the Comorian education system: as the only subject without an *Inspection* unit, there’s no coordination or evaluation of philosophy teachers, nor an official in-service training organisation. This institutional deficiency is however compensated for by individual initiatives: informal tutoring arrangements are set-up internally in high schools, and a corporate association provides a legal framework allowing volunteers from the three islands to meet regularly, in order to engage in common didactic reflections, to share pedagogical practices and thus alleviating both isolation<sup>15</sup> and the deficit of educational resources. The demand for discussions with foreign didacticians is very strong among those philosophy teachers who are only motivated by a sincere vocation, given their working conditions – a call that this report will hopefully relay.

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<sup>12</sup> Comorian high schools are not secular. Besides the first year, in addition to the study of the links between philosophy and religion, five themes are questioned: industrial revolution, globalisation, colonisation, slavery, human rights.

<sup>13</sup> Through *Terminale* courses such as “Society and Development” or “Violence and Nonviolence”, for instance.

<sup>14</sup> Their salary does not only depend on seniority, but on their highest qualification.

<sup>15</sup> Isolation scarcely overcome by the internet (expensive connections, complicated access to electronic devices, power cuts).

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