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The Scents of Subsistence: Labor, Crisis, and Kinship in Ndzواني's Commodity Frontier

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in African Studies

by

Adam Benjamin

2024

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Scents of Subsistence: Labor, Crisis, and Kinship in Ndzuani's Commodity Frontier

by

Adam Benjamin

Master of Arts in African Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Hannah C. Appel, Chair

A primary ingredient in many of the world's most popular perfumes, ylang-ylang essential oil has long been a staple of the French perfume industry. Few know that the majority of the world's supply of the coveted essential oil comes from the small Indian Ocean archipelago nation of Comoros, specifically the remote island of Ndzuani. The bulk of Ndzuani's essential oil production occurs in small artisanal distilleries nestled in the island's mountains. This artisanal system manages to outcompete and undercut other more efficient large centralized operations based on a traditional plantation system. During times of severe price collapse and crisis, only the artisanal system can produce. This thesis argues that it is the system's strong roots in local kinship networks that allows it to continue production in times of crisis. Contrary to assumed economic rationality, the tendency of this system to disaggregate rather than concentrate, to decentralize rather than centralize, is more advantageous to the industry's export capitalists.

The thesis of Adam Benjamin is approved.

Alden Young

Andrew Apter

Hannah C. Appel, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

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And to Palestine, from the river to the sea!

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## Introduction

Upon entering an upscale pharmacy in the haute bourgeois French town of Aix-en-Provence one can find a wall stocked with bottles of essential oils sourced from multiple countries: rose geranium from Egypt, gum rockrose from Spain, laurel leaf from Bosnia, tropical basil from Vietnam, patchouli from India, red myrtle from Morocco, and ylang-ylang from either Comoros or Madagascar. The essential oils and perfume industries draw from a multiplicity of differing productive systems that span the world, appearing at first to be mystified at the commercial level of the industry. This study set out to investigate the inner workings of the production of ylang-ylang in the Comoros Archipelago. To go behind the veil of the commodity is to uncover the vast array of social relations such as these which constitute its production, to enter what Marx called the “hidden abode of production”.<sup>1</sup> The luxury commodity which gave Comoros the nickname “the perfume islands” is the starting point of this thesis.

When I arrived in Comoros, I was made aware of many shortages. First was a shortage of gasoline, then a shortage of meat, and perhaps most striking of all shortage of rice, the staple food. Alongside this was a large surplus of raw ylang-ylang essential oil; none of which could be sold. I arrived to see the object of my study at a standstill. A crisis was in full swing as the price of ylang-ylang had seen a massive collapse since 2018. Little demand had trickled in. The entrepreneurs of Ngazidja (Grande Comore), the largest island in the archipelago and the nation’s capital, could only sell small amounts when buyers dialed in from Grasse, the perfume capital of France. But in Ndzuani (Anjouan), the second largest island which is responsible for

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 279.



up to 60% of the crop on its own, production continued through the price collapse at a meandering pace.<sup>2</sup>

Essential oil production is a staple to the livelihood of many rural villagers in the archipelago, but more profoundly for around 10,000 households in rural Ndzuani.<sup>3</sup> It is produced by boiling down ylang-ylang flowers in a still into a condensed steam which trickles into oil, a process known as hydro-distillation. It is divided into five different categories measured in terms of liquid density. These are *super*, *extra*, *premier*, *deuxieme*, and *troisieme*. The first three are the primary ingredient in luxury perfumes, including Chanel No. 5, while the latter tiers are used for detergents and soaps and also sold on their own as an essential oil. Comoros has specialized in producing top quality oil for luxury perfumes. While originating in the Philippines and also grown in Madagascar, the flower of the *Cananga odorata* tree and its oil is readily identified with Comoros. A piece of Comorian labor can be found everywhere from duty-free shops in airports to cosmetic chain stores across the West.

There is a marked difference between essential oil production in the two islands. In Ngazidja most all production takes place in large factories composed of around six separate stills with three factories in total, complimented by large plantations worked by laborers for a wage. This is a centralized operation, and in the face of the crisis their owners could no longer afford the costs of production compared to the selling price of oil. In Ndzuani, however, production occurs in small individual makeshift distilleries held by owner-operators, some of which have small plots of ylang-ylang trees and most of which source their flowers from peasant households across the island's interior countryside. While there are only three factory distillers and 12

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<sup>2</sup> ID: Initiative Developpement. *Analyse de la filière ylang-ylang à Anjouan pour les NRSC: Rapport Finale*. ID: Initiative Developpement. 2014. 7.

<sup>3</sup> ID: Initiative Developpement. *Analyse...* 1.

planters in Ngazidja, there are around 600 small distilleries and an unknown amount of planters operating during peak production in Ndzuani.<sup>4</sup> Only the former persists.

What gave owner-operators, who manufacture at longer production times, use less advanced machinery, and have to compete to earn suppliers from several locations, the ability to outlast and outcompete centralized operations who can outproduce them and rely on their operations for raw materials? This study advances the following thesis. The most resilient owner-operators are those with reliable footing in kinship networks; groups of family interrelated family units usually with separate smallholder plots that grow ylang-ylang flowers to be sold exclusively to the owner-operator. When a crisis emerges via steep price collapse, other owner-operators outside of this structure are forced to shutter, while those within this structure can soak up remaining demand from France and continue operations with their respective networks. This entrenches these select farmers into the sector through periodic downturns. The more “backward” and low-productivity operations are in fact more forward in the sector in terms of market share.

Kinship is the mechanism that serves as a guideline to the structure of the artisanal model. This relationship between owner-operator, those who own a distillery (and sometimes a field of their own) and the smallholder is what I call the “kinship bond”. This gives the owner-operators a competitive edge in what was been called the “competition for flowers”.<sup>5</sup> The network of the owner-operator is not limited to his own family. Many begin by relying on the plots of their distant relatives, but many also attach themselves to networks of families unrelated to them. However, the institution of kinship is not limited to the relationship between owner-

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<sup>4</sup> Melle Chloé. “L’ylang-ylang des Comores”. UN-IFAD, 2018. 11.

<sup>5</sup> ID: Initiative Développement. *Analyse...* 34.

operator and peasant-worker. In the ylang-ylang sector, when crisis pushes producers to shorten their flower harvests and rely more on subsistence farming, the peasant-worker will go from relative to relative, pooling together small amounts of flowers to meet the 125kg necessary to produce around 3-4 liters of oil. The smallholder can continue producing flowers while spending more energy towards food crops. What money is made from this is redistributed among relatives. Kinship permeates each level of production as a means of accruing labor and materials.

Whereas in Ngazidja harvesting and distillation are done within the same firm with limited outsourcing, operations in Ndzuani are disaggregated at every level. Peasant-workers harvest flowers on their plots, sometimes with hired help, and sell them to either a relative or directly to their owner-operator. The owner-operator then distills them and then sells the oil to another owner-operator who acts as an intermediate collector. The intermediate collector sells to the wholesale collector, having established a contract often through an extension of an advance to purchase oil.<sup>6</sup> The extension of credit lubricates access to kinship networks along the supply-chain. The wholesale collector then answers directly to the exporter, who sells to an intermediary in France who then deals with the cosmetics companies. The artisanal system is preferential for large exporters as it allows production to be outsourced at each level, thus reducing capital expenditure, and also avoids the potential political ramifications of land grabs and dispossession by allowing smallholders to keep their plots. The exporters can set prices based on market rates and rely on cheapened production at the level of the smallholder.

The study will begin with an attempt to locate the role of ylang-ylang in Ndzuani's socioeconomic and geographical landscape and vice-versa. It will then proceed to place the case

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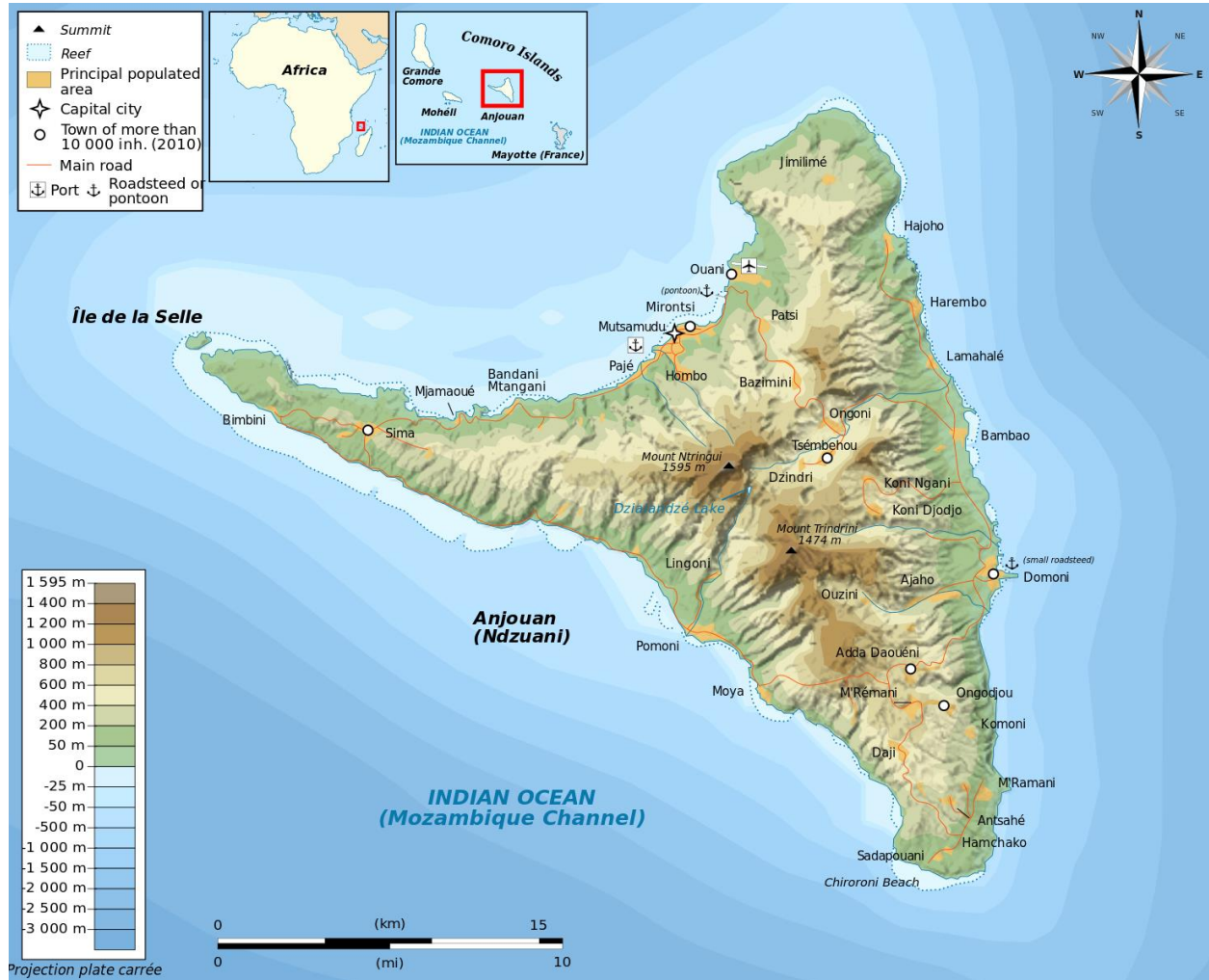
<sup>6</sup> These owner-operators sometimes also extended credit to their flower supplier networks. Networks of credit and debt permeate this system. For a more extensive analysis of credit and debt among planters see: Ainnoudine Sidi. *ANJOUAN: L'HISTOIRE D'UNE CRISE FONCIÈRE*. (Paris: L'Harmattan. 1998), 203-205.

of Ndzuanu in a wider body of literature, primarily commodity chain histories and ethnographies, the debates around agrarian transition, and the abundant literature on kinship and capitalism. Following this, a historical account of the genesis of the artisanal system will be given; showing how the island went from a pre-colonial food producer to an island dominated by centralized cash crop operations (resembling Ngazidja more than it does the system today), and finally to the present-day model. Lastly, an account of the crisis and an ethnographic analysis of the role of kinship in the artisanal system will explore how these relationships undergird this system.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This study was initially conducted during three months of field research in Comoros during the summer of 2022. Data was gathered here through ethnographic field methods, such as semi-structured and structured interviews, surveys, and participant observation. Archival research was undertaken at the archives of the *Centre national de documentation et de recherche scientifique* (CNDRS) in Moroni and Mutsamudu. Further archival research was done in the spring of 2023 at the *Archives nationale d'outre-mer* (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence, France. All cited interviews were conducted by me with the help of my research assistants Rouif Abdou, Zakaria Mkatibou, and Oumayyat Mhadji.

## Chapter 1: Locating Ndzuan



**Topographic map of Ndzuan via OpenStreetMap**

Ndzuan, home to the Wandzuan, is one of four islands in the Comoros Archipelago and one of three in the state of Comoros. The four islands consist of Ngazidja (Grande Comore), Mwali (Moheli), Ndzuan (Anjouan), and Maore (Mayotte). The latter is officially under French control as an administrative department and uses the Euro, but is claimed politically by Comoros. The four islands are located in the Indian Ocean between Mozambique and Madagascar in the

eponymous Mozambique Channel. In the course of this study, the local names of each island will be used in preference to the francophone names mentioned in parentheses. Ngazidja is the largest and most populous island and is also host to the capital city of Moroni. Ngazidja has no natural sources of fresh water, making most agriculture entirely dependent on rainfall. Mwali is the smallest island, produces small amounts of ylang-ylang, and is home to a small marine safari tourism sector. Each island has its dialect of Comorian which are relatively mutually intelligible with each other. Most all Wandzuani are Muslim.

From the view of the incoming ferry, the island's lush, jungle-covered mountains jut toward the sky from the Indian Ocean. On a clear day, each one of the other islands can be seen in the distant waters from a different point on the island. Its interior is defined by mountain highlands peaking at *Nitringui*, the highest mountain, at 1,595m. The highlands give way to deep valleys dotted with village settlements. Waterfalls, a short-lived source of hydroelectric power, can be seen cascading down the mountainsides. Rivers and streams tumble through the mountains and empty into the ocean, made possible by the island's lichen-covered cloud forests whose condensation feeds said rivers and streams. Ndzuanu is home to the nation's only freshwater lake, *Dzialandze*, which is doubly sacred: considered holy to practitioners of folk magic and a major freshwater reservoir in a growingly water-scarce island. The natural beauty of Ndzuanu's rugged and lush terrain is threatened by a rupture in the island's fragile ecology.

Many hills where the deep jungle was once present now lay barren. As demographic pressures force more families to push into the forest in search of cropland, deforestation has proceeded at a rate of 8% per year between 1995 and 2014, depleting many rivers and streams as it eliminates the cloud forests that create them.<sup>8</sup> This ecological degradation has made the

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<sup>8</sup> Guy Boussougou Boussougou, Yao Téléphore Brou, et Ibrahim Mohamed, "Changements de la couverture forestière dans l'île d'Anjouan entre 1995 et 2014". (SAGEO. 2015), 8.

production of food crops increasingly more difficult, and has increased dependence on imported rice. Most forests remains on the mountain's steeper slopes and are inaccessible as farmland. Ndzuani's fertility and natural abundance are responsible for its cash crop sector but are at the same time undermined by it. The ylang-ylang distillation process requires wood, said to burn at a steady and even temperature just right for the process.<sup>9</sup> The other alternative is kerosene, which is used by centralized operations in Ngazidja, but for the owner-operator this is far more expensive than abundant and cheap firewood. The sector inevitably contributes to the deforestation crisis. But the process also requires natural running water to boil the flowers. As deforestation threatens natural sources of running fresh water, so too does the sector threaten its existence by participating in it.

Once home to other crops such as jasmine, basilica, sugar, and coffee; Ndzuani now specializes in only cloves, vanilla, and ylang-ylang. Ylang-ylang and vanilla were introduced by the French, and before then the island was a robust producer of food crops (see: Chapter 2). With dwindling subsistence production and chronic cyclical price collapses, peasant-workers in Ndzuani typically vacillate between the production of the three. Each of these crops is prone to chronic downturns and ylang-ylang itself has suffered multiple crises in 1978, 2002, 2009, and most recently 2018 (see: Chapter 3). This has caused many to enter and exit the sector throughout generations, making kinship networks all the more essential to the sector's precarious sustainability. Many young Wandzuani find the poverty and precarious employment unbearable and make a dangerous illegal migration across the Mozambique Channel to the more developed French neo-colony of Maore (Mayotte) where they can be paid in Euros. These clandestine crossings have taken up to 10,000 lives at sea since 1995, around 1% of the nation's total

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<sup>9</sup> Chloé. "L'ylang..." 16.

population.<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, Wandzuani migrants in Maore and Ngazidja also make up the bulk of the ylang-ylang plantation workers on both islands.

The tree itself can grow to be 39 feet tall but is kept short on plantations to be accessible to harvesters and to direct the plant's energy towards a few productive branches (see: Appendix, Figure 2). The tree is particularly suitable to the rich volcanic soil found on the island, its deep root system even works as a bulwark against soil erosion. While the flower of the clove is toxic to the soil ylang-ylang cooperates well with other crops. Most ylang-ylang is grown on the fertile slopes closer to the coast, primarily around Jimilimé, Moya, Domoni, and Bambao. Cloves, on the other hand, are grown in steeper areas such as Bazimini, Ongoni, and Sima. But unlike vanilla and cloves, ylang-ylang grows nearly year-round, providing constant income to those who harvest it. Production only slows (but does not cease) during the rainy season, when rainfall can dilute the oils within the flower.

The rugged terrain and lack of infrastructural development created stark regional differences between city and country dwellers. The cities of Ouani, Domoni, and Mustamudu (the capital) have been home to the Arab-Shirazi elite known as the *makabaila* who are the mixed descendants of Hadhrami Arab migrants and locals. This elite has historically reproduced their prestige through matrilineal clans maintained through intermarriage. Those who reside there are more likely to speak French, the language of their former colonizer. The surrounding countryside and the deep interior were home to *wamatsaha*, isolated rural folk who claim to be the original inhabitants of Ndzuan and who historically lived by subsistence on communal plots governed by lineage roles and eventually gave tribute to the *makabaila*. Today they are more likely to only possess a rudimentary Quranic education. As kinship operates at each level of the

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Carver. "Mayotte: the French migration frontline you've never heard of". *The New Humanitarian*, February 14, 2018.



ylang-ylang sector, it also gives way to a multitude of practices. Land is the property of the patriarch, while the house belongs to the matriarch. Inheritance and descent are passed down via the mother and her brothers to her children, making the relationship between brother and sister essential.<sup>11</sup>

The *grande marriage*, an elaborate and sometimes week-long marriage ceremony, is a strongly held cultural institution that is critical in conferring status to the family. Many go into massive debt to afford it, while others sell their land or use their profits from cash crops when in times of boom. Those who intend to, at some point, sell their land make sure to keep their ylang-ylang trees instead of replacing them with food crops. The presence of the trees greatly raises the value of the land, and if the price of oil rises, so does the value of the trees and thus the plot. The most predominant form of speculation, however, is done among owner-operators and exporters alike. Instead of producing strictly on demand, many prefer to keep stocks of oil be it in the thatched roof houses of the smallholder or warehouse and vault of the exporter. There the bottles rest among dust and spiders, waiting to be picked off and sold when the signal from Grasse arrives at an indefinite point in the future.

But Ndzuani's artisanal system does not exist in a vacuum. Most export companies operating in Comoros are also international, with domains and operations across the African continent and in some cases the world. One of the largest export companies for example, Biolandes, has operations in Morocco, Turkey, Bulgaria, and neighboring Madagascar. The relationship between kinship and capitalism has been the subject of much debate and ethnographic literature. So too has the history of and prospects for agrarian transition in the third world been fiercely contested. How are agrarian social formations made amenable to global

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<sup>11</sup> Iain Walker. *Islands in a Cosmopolitan Sea: A History of the Comoros*. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 57.

capitalism in a place like Ndzواني? By investigating this question we can begin to infer more broadly as to how, not only the perfume industry, but capitalism functions in its periphery.

### **Kinship and Agrarian Transition**

The intersecting literature concerning the place of the peasant in global capitalism and the transition into capitalist agriculture have been at the center of this study. Where it was once considered conventional knowledge in Marxist and non-Marxist circles alike that the existence of wage labor pre-supposes the existence of capitalism, this notion has been criticized for its failure to account for the prominence of nominally non-capitalist forms which are firmly within capitalist circuits of production. Alongside this, teleological assumptions that history moves progressively toward centralized industry and formal wage labor have been cast into doubt by the persistence of the “pre-modern” and the “backward” forms of exploitation within the history of capitalism. In this vein, Marxism must once again be “stretched”, in the words of Fanon, to uncover the workings of peripheral capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

Among the sharpest critics of this teleology has been Jairus Banaji. In a foundational exploration of modes of production, Banaji criticized the “formal abstractionism” of Maurice Dobb by which “[...] modes of production were deducible, by a relation of ‘virtual identity’, from the given forms of exploitation of labor”.<sup>13</sup> By this logic, each form of exploitation must necessitate a co-existent mode of production. But this would imply, for example, that New World slavery, despite how it underpinned the growth of Western capitalism as shown by Eric

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<sup>12</sup> Franz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 40.

<sup>13</sup> Jairus Banaji. “Modes of Production in the Materialist Conception of History.” *Capital & Class*, No. 1, Vol. 1, pp. 1-44, 1977. 6.

Williams, would be a “slave mode of production”.<sup>14</sup> Yet slaveholders in the Americas were deeply integrated into circuits of capital. It is then useful to keep in mind the observation of CLR James that the enslaved in Haiti were “closer to the modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time”.<sup>15</sup>

When looking at the content of the history of capitalism we find instead a patchwork of differing forms of exploitation, social formations, and property relations each integrated into the production and reproduction of capital on a world scale. A place such as Ndzواني, where the viability of centralized and formal industry was undermined by a disaggregated system of production which is buttressed by pre-capitalist institutions and property relations, helps to highlight the critical importance of these systems and their staying power in an industry as large as French luxury perfume. Sam Moyo, a la Archie Mafeje, has shown that private property relations were not necessary for agrarian transformation, evidenced in the failures of large-scale agricultural experiments.<sup>16</sup> In Ndzواني, where three types of land ownership, communal/lineage-based, tenant-landlord based (*sultansque*), and private-property based plantations all participate in the cash crop sector, local property systems cannot be said to be a sole blockage to agrarian change but are the conduits of the regional forms that it takes.<sup>17</sup>

Building off of Banaji in the case of Ethiopia, Elleni Zeleke argues that: “The subsumption of historical relations of production into newer forms does not mean that Africans

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<sup>14</sup> Eric Williams. *Capitalism and Slavery*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> CLR James. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 87.

<sup>16</sup> Sam Moyo. “Third World Legacies: Debating the African Land Question with Archie Mafeje.” *Agrarian South: A Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 1-21. 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Ainnoudine Sidi. *ANJOUAN: L'HISTOIRE D'UNE CRISE FONCIÈRE*. Paris: L'Harmattan. 1998. 14.

or Asians have a separate mode of production that articulates within capitalism; instead the historical forms subsumed into capitalism simply show how capitalism has always worked”.<sup>18</sup> Rather than separate modes of production operating together in the case of Wandzuani smallholders or archaic social relations yet to dissolve in the case of kinship networks, examples such as ylang-ylang in Ndzuani represent different iterations of how commodity production works in the periphery.

The peasant-worker in Ndzuani is a peasant only in form. They rely on their subsistence crops such as cassava to make up for insufficient pay in the sector, yet remain dependent on production for the market, continuing to grow cash crops because in their own words “they have no other choice”. Essentially a semi-proletarianized class, this is also a part of a process that Sam Moyo and others observed was the result of the “extroverted nature of accumulation”.<sup>19</sup> In the gap between smallholder subsistence and the absence of formal wage labor, the peasant-worker moves through the labor market by attaching themselves and their family network to the owner operator. Kinship becomes the way by which what Marx called “the silent compulsion of economic relations” is mediated and thus “sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker”, thereby linking the owner-operator to the supplier and the exporter to the commodity.<sup>20</sup>

To reconcile the diversity of development paths throughout both the past and present of global capitalism, various commodity histories and ethnographies have been deeply influential to

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<sup>18</sup> Elleni Centime Zeleke. *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge, 1964-2016*. Historical Materialism, 201. (Chicago: Haymarket Books. 2020), 216.

<sup>19</sup> Sam Moyo, Paris Yeros, and Praveen Jha. “Imperialism and Primitive Accumulation: Notes on the New Scramble for Africa.” In *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, Issue 2. 2012., pp. 181-203. 87.

<sup>20</sup> Marx. *Capital*. 899.

this study's investigation of ylang-ylang. Household production of cash crops, and that which involves a collector, is by no means unique to the case of Ndzuani, both historically and in the present. From tobacco farming in Malawi to cocoa and cashew production in Nigeria and Ghana, smallholder farming has persisted to underpin cash crop production in Africa. The production of gum arabic, a primary ingredient in chewing gum and soft drinks, in the Kordofan region of Sudan is conducted on a smallholder-collector basis; historically even using slave labor in periods of increased demand.<sup>21</sup>

Historical studies help illuminate this varied landscape. Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu use a combined and uneven development approach to analyze how the convergence of empires and forms of labor exploitation generated capitalism on a world scale.<sup>22</sup> Sven Beckert in *Empire of Cotton* frequently deploys the concept of a “global countryside” which was transformed for the production of cotton, a commodity rivaled by none in synonymity with capitalism, using a wide variety of labor regimes.<sup>23</sup> Tariq Omar Ali, building off of Sven Beckert's concept, explores jute-producing peasant households, left at the “mercy of global capital”, and how they responded to price fluctuations by “reapportioning labor” between cash crop and food crop production.<sup>24</sup>

In *Tea War*, Andrew Liu looks at how coercive and extra-economic measures were taken to boost productivity in competitive tea production between India and China, as opposed to

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<sup>21</sup> Endre Stiansen. “The gum arabic trade in Kordofan in the mid-nineteenth century.” In *Kordofan Invaded: Peripheral Incorporation and Social Transformation in Islamic Africa*. Ed. Endre Stiansen and Michael Kevane. (Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia) (Brill, 1998), 70.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu. *How the West Came to Rule: the Geopolitical Origins of Modern Capitalism*. (London: Pluto Press. 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Sven Beckert. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2014), 124, 131.

<sup>24</sup> Tariq Omar Ali. *A Local History of Global Capital: Jute and Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018,) 5.

labor-saving technology.<sup>25</sup> Other commodity chain studies, such as Ghulam Nadri's work on indigo, look at the *longue durée* of the commodity's production through booms and busts and its place in the political economy of empire.<sup>26</sup> But perhaps the most impactful study on this project's historiography has been Sidney Mintz' classic *Sweetness and Power*, not only for its analysis of the production and consumption of sugar between England and the Caribbean but for Mintz' observation that sugar production, with processing and cultivation being done in such close proximity, was "in essence the synthesis of field and factory".<sup>27</sup> In Ndzuani this synthesis is further disaggregated, as will be seen.

Commodity ethnographies have also had a significant impact on the development of this study, often intersecting with studies of kinship and capitalism. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, for example, analyzed the various levels that made up peasant banana production in Dominica and the logic of the growth of peasant economies in an island which is fully integrated into the capitalist world economy.<sup>28</sup> Sarah Besky, in her study on Darjeeling tea plantations in Assam, describes how kinship networks take the place of the labor market in distributing jobs among plantation workers.<sup>29</sup> Paige West mentions how Gimi coffee growers in Papua New Guinea end up "[...] making kin and kinship relations out of buyers, traders, and others in the industry".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew B. Liu. *Tea War: A History of Capitalism in China and India*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Ghulam A. Nadri. *The Political Economy of Indigo in India, 1580-1930: A Global Perspective*. European Expansion and Indigenous Response, Volume: 22. (Brill, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Sidney Mintz. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 47.

<sup>28</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy*. Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Besky. *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 7.

Among the first and foremost to take the relationship between kinship and capitalism to task was Claude Meillassoux, who in the second part of *Maidens, Meal, and Money* examined how capitalism maintained the “domestic mode of production” to cheapen the price of labor by holding the burden of the reproduction of labor power on the household.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, however, this articulation is undermined by outmigration of members of the domestic community.<sup>32</sup> Bridgit O’Laughlin took to task this separation of production and reproduction and Meillassoux’s inability to formulate reproduction as the reproduction of society as a whole.<sup>33</sup> Though the articulationist approach has its shortcomings, Charles Bettelheim similarly noted a tendency towards “conservation-dissolution” in which non-capitalist social relations are conserved, restructured, and subordinated to capital.<sup>34</sup> In Ndzuani, the “subordinated” social relations likewise influence the contours of production. Sara Berry in her seminal *Fathers Work for Their Sons* held that kinship was hindering development of the productive forces in Nigerian cocoa production as surplus accrued was invested in social relations rather than the production process.<sup>35</sup> During the collapse of the copper industry in Zambia, James Ferguson describes how

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<sup>30</sup> Paige West. *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 29.

<sup>31</sup> Claude Meillassoux. *Maidens, Meal, and Money: Capitalism and the domestic community*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>32</sup> Meillassoux. *Maidens, Meal, and Money...* 110-116.

<sup>33</sup> Bridgit O’Laughlin. “Production and Reproduction: Meillassoux’s *Femmes, Gerniers, et Capitaux*.” In *Critique of Anthropology*, No. 2, Vol. 8, pp. 3-32. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Bettelheim. “Theoretical Comments,” in Arghiri Emmanuel. *Unequal Exchange: A Study of Imperialism and Trade*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972. 297.

<sup>35</sup> Sara Berry. *Father’s Work for Their Sons: Accumulation, Mobility, and Class Formation in an Extended Yoruba Community*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1985).

kinship networks are strengthened for the sake of economic cooperation in the face of mass informalization, very similar to Ndzuani in the crisis of 2018.<sup>36</sup>

Other studies, such as Jonathan Devore's work on Brazilian cacao, shows how kinship relations were instrumentalized to facilitate dispossession of land.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Tania Li in *Land's End* examines how kin members are excluded from each other's land as it is growingly commodified.<sup>38</sup> Robert Bates saw how the dissolution of some forms of kinship relations created a landless class of Kikuyu in Kenya, laying the foundation for the Mau-Mau Rebellion.<sup>39</sup> Finally, elements of the kinship bond and its endurance through crisis has been noted in existing literature on the ylang-ylang sector. The French NGO *Initiative Developpement*, in their 2014 report on the sector, documented a form of what they call "mutual aid" whereby a group of owner-operators will cease distillation, revert to flower production, and sell to an individual owner-operator among them, typically a relative or close friend.<sup>40</sup> The data gathered in this study (see: Chapter 3) indicates that many of these are intermediate collectors as described above. Nevertheless, non-intermediate collectors persist in their production using smallholder kinship ties and smallholders keep a foothold in the sector via their gathering practices among kin.

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<sup>36</sup> James Ferguson. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life in Zambia's Copperbelt*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 161.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Devore. "Scattered Limbs: Capitalists, Kin, and Primitive Accumulation in Brazil's Cacao Lands, 1950s-1970s." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, Vol. 23, Issue 3, pp. 496-520. 2018. 499.

<sup>38</sup> Tania Li. *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Robert H. Bates. "Capital, Kinship, and Conflict: The Structuring Influence of Capital in Kinship Societies" *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, pp. 151-164. 1990.

<sup>40</sup> ID: Initiative Developpement. *Analyse...* 21.



## Conclusion

Whereas Ndzuani was once home to large landowning cash crop companies, this very system has disaggregated and been merged with local smallholder agriculture. Rather than the recession of kinship's importance vis-à-vis the incorporation of Ndzuani into the capitalist world, kinship has risen to be foundational in linking the smallholder to the world market in the backdrop of the decentralization of the industry. When this system is tested in crisis and many withdraw to other sectors, it is the mechanism of the kinship bond, cemented through relations of credit from top to bottom, which keeps peasant-workers and owner-operators alike locked into ylang-ylang production. In this case, it is only those locked into the relationship that can continue production when demand comes in, allowing them to absorb nearly all of it. The rest of the population drifts between occasionally selling flowers and waiting for the next boom when their labor will be in high demand. Where dispossession and centralization would be politically volatile, export companies are content to maintain a distance from production while continuing to profit with the French buyers. The creation of this system, from a plantation model to the system we see today, is the subject of the following section.

## Chapter 2: The Making of an Exporter's Paradise

Despite being introduced by the French under the colonial land regime, the contemporary system of ylang-ylang production also finds its origins in the rise of the urban Arab-Shirazi elite, also known as the *makabaila* and an emergent class of owner-operators. The latter today owns small artisanal distilleries and gathers flowers from networks of rural families, the former has established holdings of their own and fights for various pieces of the export market. From their rise in the Indian Ocean trading system to the early establishment of the cash crop plantations in Ndzuani; the *makabaila* were both politically placated and structurally integrated into various merchant networks, colonial administrations, and finally into the circuits of capital in the present day. At the same time, Wandzuani slaves and peasants faced first subordination by the *makabaila* and later total alienation from their land by the colonial companies.

These developments provided the critical breaking points by which the contemporary system of ylang-ylang production could emerge; the rise of a local bourgeoisie in a pocket of the waning French Empire, the entrance of the middle peasant into the semi-industrial levels of the cash crop market, and the creation of the peasant-worker. French colonial companies and Indian merchants, on the other hand, merged neatly into export firms with direct connections to the French Rivera.

The following section will trace the transition from centralized to decentralized ylang-ylang production, starting with the pre-colonial period and into the present day. It finds that the *makabaila* could leverage their social position to push forward an emergent system of disaggregated ylang-ylang production which dominates today. This paved the way for middle peasant-workers to gain access to small distillation technology; thereby transitioning into owner-operators and intermediate salesmen of essential oil. Lower peasant-workers, on the other hand,

had only renegotiated the terms of their exploitation as they were given more room for food crops yet were simultaneously trapped between meager subsistence and turbulent, unstable international cash crop markets. Ultimately, the case of Ndzuani demonstrates that local systems of production, backward as though they may seem in the face of centralized industry, are in many ways the most amenable to modern capitalism.

### **Ndzuani in the Indian Ocean World:**

The premodern Indian Ocean trading system is characterized by Kirti Chaudhuri as one in which: “Means of travel, movements of peoples, economic exchange, climate, and historical forces created elements of cohesion. Religion, social systems, and cultural traditions, on the other hand, provided the contrasts.”<sup>41</sup> For Edward Alpers, the steady system of monsoon winds, coupled with the uneven distribution of resources across the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, gave way to its enormous system of economic exchanges, the “elements of cohesion” described above by Chaudhuri.<sup>42</sup> Ndzuani, a small but fertile island, finds itself on the tail end of the Swahili Coast, an integral part of the trading system. According to Philippe Beaujard, it was between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries that elites began to monopolize contact with the outside world which established the Swahili Coast as a semi-periphery between the Asian and African world-system.<sup>43</sup> Thus: “The growing integration of the East African coast in the world-system was in

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<sup>41</sup> K.N. Chaudhuri. *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Edward A. Alpers. *The Indian Ocean in World History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10-11.

<sup>43</sup> Philippe Beaujard. “East Africa, the Comoros Islands and Madagascar before the sixteenth century: On a neglected part of the world system.” *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*, Vol. 42, 1, 15-35. 2007. 21.

fact accompanied by increased social differentiation and the development of unequal relationships, both external and internal.”<sup>44</sup>

Essential to the aforementioned social differentiation and unequal relationships was a dynamic interplay between the urban and the hinterland. This urban-hinterland dynamic was expressed in a system in which urban elites could extract provisions and commodities from their respective hinterlands and plantations, worked by slaves and peasants, to sell on the world market. The urban dwellers rose to prominence, and by the 17<sup>th</sup> century they commanded prestige with the power of traded Western goods. Hinterland dwellers, on the other hand, had local systems of production revolving around ethnic formations reoriented towards the international market and eventually withered away.<sup>45</sup> Power discrepancies were then represented by the “growing differentiation of agriculture and land tenure”.<sup>46</sup>

One of the most outlying iterations of this dynamic is found in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century caravan trading networks. Here, large caravans could penetrate deep into the hinterlands of coastal cities, extracting slaves through raids, ivory during hunts, and cash crops from peasant households to be exchanged on the world market. This process simultaneously incorporated African peasant households into the world market and developed uneven exchange relations between coastal caravan warlords and interior peasants.<sup>47</sup> Consisting of three quarters of Zanzibar’s economic

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<sup>44</sup> Beaujard. 21.

<sup>45</sup> Edward A. Alpers. *Ivory and Slaves: Changing Patterns of International Trade in Central Africa to the Later Nineteenth Century*. (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1975); Edward A. Alpers. “Rethinking African Economic History: A Contribution to the Discussion of the Roots of Under-Development” in *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, Vol.3, No. 3. 1973.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Glassman. *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888* (Social History of Africa). (London: James Currey. 1994), 24.

<sup>47</sup> Glassman. 46.

value, the hinterland trade relied on a “series of such trading networks that could at various times and placed be linked under different stimuli”.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout the centuries, therefore, hinterland labor came to be a staple in supplying grain and other materials to large trade cities from surrounding fields and workshops.<sup>49</sup> Islands such as Pemba, for example, had been a granary satellite for the city-state of Mombasa since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These hinterlands provided the basis for these established city-states, which in turn continuously integrated them into the world market and developed merchant classes. Ndzuan, with its fertile soil, deep water port, and strategic position in the Mozambique Channel was both a granary and a locus of international trade.

Ndzuan, and the rest of the Comoros islands, were fortunate to be spared from early Portuguese colonialism; even going as far as the establish diplomatic relations with the fledgling commercial empire. The *makabaila*, an assortment of urban families who maintained their elite power through intra-communal marriages and matrilineal kinship systems, began establishing themselves as a sophisticated merchant class with ties to various European empires. The *makabaila* were thus able to trade with British, French, and Portuguese throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As anthropologist Sophie Blanchy has demonstrated, the prestige of this elite class was produced not solely by territorial control but by the establishment of networks.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Abdul Sheriff. “The Hinterland of Zanzibar” in *Slaves, Spices, & Ivory in Zanzibar* (Eastern African Studies). (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1987), 155.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Vemet. “The Deep Roots of the Plantation Economy on the Swahili Coast: Productive Functions and Social Functions of Slaves and Dependents, Circa 1580-1820.” In *Changing Horizons of African History*. (Africa World Press, 2017), 59.

<sup>50</sup> Sophie Blanchy, "Anjouan (Comores), un nœud dans les réseaux de l’océan Indien. Émergence et rôle d’une société urbaine lettrée et marchande (XVIIe-XXe siècle)". *Afriques: Debats, méthodes et terrains d’histoire*, Vol 6. 2015. <https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.1817>. 1.

Mustamudu, the largest city and present-day capital of Ndzواني, became a local hub of trade and scholarship. Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *makabaila* became a sophisticated commercial class. The height of their capabilities is exemplified in their relationship with the British during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ndzواني, endowed with an abundance of food crops, including the now staple but often scarce rice, livestock, and water, soon became a stop for East Indiamen in search of provisions on route to Bombay.<sup>51</sup> The British, like the Portuguese, spared Ndzواني from any direct extension of their power. As a result, the *makabaila* gradually adopted aspects of British culture by the 18<sup>th</sup> century in a one-sided cosmopolitan effort to maintain favor with the empire.<sup>52</sup> In exchange, Ndzواني received arms and gunpowder from the British to defend against persistent and devastating Malagasy raids; even going as far as to raise a British flag over their citadel to dissuade them.<sup>53</sup>

British presence in the Cape Colony gradually undercut the island's position as an imperial stopover, though diplomatic relations still persisted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Still, the *makabaila* held on to trade opportunities. Amidst of the British anti-slavery crusades, the island was an intermediary station for the local slave trade.<sup>54</sup> Ndzواني's trade also capabilities led them to export rice as far as Pate in the extreme north of the Swahili Coast.<sup>55</sup> Rice, sorghum, millet,

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<sup>51</sup>H. V. Bowen, "The East India Company and the Island of Johanna (Anjouan) during the Long Eighteenth Century". *International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 218-233.

<sup>52</sup> Jeremy Prestholdt. "Similitude and Empire: On Comorian Strategies of Englishness" in *Journal of World History*, Vol. 18, 2, 113-138. 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Prestholdt. 30.

<sup>54</sup> Edward A. Alpers. "Slavery, antislavery, political rivalry, and regional networks in East African waters, 1877-1883 (Esclavage, anti-esclavagisme, rivalités politiques et réseaux régionaux dans l'espace maritime de l'Afrique orientale (1877-1883))" *L'Afrique orientale et l'océan Indien : connexions, réseaux d'échanges et globalization*, 06, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.1744> 36.

<sup>55</sup> Prestholdt. 112.

coconuts, and livestock were frequently shipped to Mozambique, and in 1831, as a famine ravaged Southern Africa, it was Ndzuani that relieved it with provisions for the Portuguese (in exchange for slaves to replenish the population reduced by Malagasy raiders).<sup>56</sup> While commercial activities gradually declined in Mutsamudu, Ndzuani still occasionally supplied American whalers in the 1840s.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout these centuries the continued existence of the trade hub was contingent on the ability of the *makabaila* to extract these provisions from their mountainous hinterland. The *makabaila* held partial control over interior lands and made subjects out of those inhabiting it. Their subjects fell into two categories: the *wamatsaha*, colloquially referred to as “bushmen”, said to be the original inhabitants of the island, and the *warumwa*, slaves and their descendants who populated both the town and country. Each of these social classes rendered portions of their harvest to the sultan and various elite clans, with slaves working on coconut plantations and cereal fields. The commercialization of the hinterland increased with incoming European traffic, which pushed the coastal towns to extend their control over their surroundings.<sup>58</sup> In the 1830s, Sultan Alawi II enforced a head tax on his subjects amounting to various portions of rice.<sup>59</sup>

As the *makabaila* tightened their control of the interior the *wamatsaha* moved further and further inland. Dispossession from land and heavy extraction of surplus bred resentment among the *wamatsaha* and *warumwa*. The want of land and communal autonomy became a frequent

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<sup>56</sup> Edward A. Alpers, "A Complex Relationship: Mozambique and the Comoro Islands in the 19th and 20th Centuries (Une relation complexe: le Mozambique et les Comores aux 19e et 20e siècles)". *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 41, No. 161, 2001. 77.

<sup>57</sup> Iain Walker. *Islands in a Cosmopolitan Sea: A History of the Comoros*. Oxford University Press, 2019. 80

<sup>58</sup> Blanchy. “Anjouan...” 25

<sup>59</sup> Blanchy. 22.

driving force of local peasant struggle. The most striking rupture stemming from this cleavage was the revolt of Tumpa in 1774, by which the *wamatsaha* leader led thousands of fellow interior-dwellers to occupy Domoni and threatened governor Abdallah in Mustamudu until Tumpa was shot down by a British rifle and his forces were permanently routed.<sup>60</sup> Periodic ruptures to this system came to characterize the instability of the coming colonial land regime in which company plantations, having integrated the *makabaila* into their fold, came to dominate. Soon, however, westerners took interest in the island and the *makabaila* became tentative partners to their exploits.

### **The Genesis and Culmination of the Plantation System**

The *makabaila*, sophisticated traders who were well-acquainted with European empires, were positioned to integrate into the workings of the incoming colonial plantation system. Before the tremendous breakthrough of the French perfume market in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, new lands for sugar cultivation were sought following the long-term effects of the Haitian Revolution. Various wanton and wayward characters showed up in Comoros in search of bountiful fortune in the archipelago. Following numerous attempts by Europeans to establish various plantations, it was perfume crops, cloves, copra, sisal, and vanilla that became the mainstay of the consolidated company holdings on the island. Under this colonial regime, the rural-urban divide was severely exacerbated through dispossession of the rural classes on the one hand and assimilation into the colonial machinery by the *makabaila* on the other.

Seven years after Andriantsoli, the last Malagasy monarch of the neighboring Maore, ceded the island to the French in 1841, William Sunley arrived on Ndzuani as the second British

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<sup>60</sup> Walker. 68.



consul meant to report on French activities in Nosy Bé and Maore.<sup>61</sup> Given a plot in Pomoni, a town in the island's southwest, by Sultan Salim II, Sunley began his venture as a sugar planter. Legally prohibited from taking on slaves, he contracted the slaves of the *makabaila* as wage laborers, though most of the said wages found their way to their masters. Sultan Abdallah III, the successor to Sultan Salim, purchased a share of the land and established his plantation in Bambao Mtsanga located in the island's southeast. Under pressure from David Livingstone, who objected to his practice of contracting slaves, Sunley was forced to withdraw from the consul to keep his plantation. Sunley's holdings were eventually sold by his nephew in 1900 to Alfred Region and Georges Bouin, two key founders of what would become the largest colonial company, the *Société Coloniale de Bambao* (SCB).<sup>62</sup>

Benjamin Wilson, a doctor aboard a Massachusetts whaler, settled in Ndzuani in 1872, established a 2,000 hectare plantation in Patsy near Mustamudu on a 30 year lease with Sultan Abdallah III, and expelled several *wamatsaha* families in the process.<sup>63</sup> Wilson "built industry, introduced modern machinery, cleared the land, bridged the torrents and built roads", and in turn, like Sunley, laid the groundwork for the centralized plantation economy with the sultan's land and labor.<sup>64</sup> Ndzuani's endowment of fertile land and accessible labor could be transformed and transfigured for European markets.

At the same time, other Europeans were looking towards Mwali and Ngazidja for their plantation potential. Joseph Lambert, a Frenchman from Brittany, established his sugar

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<sup>61</sup> Walker. 98.

<sup>62</sup> Walker. 109.

<sup>63</sup> Alpers."Slavery, antislavery, and political rivalry..."

<sup>64</sup> The Boston Globe "DR. WILSON RESTORED A BLIND KING'S SIGHT" *The Boston Globe*. January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1906.

plantation on Mwali.<sup>65</sup> Among the most infamous and impactful of these early colonizers was Leon Humblot, who arrived in the Comoros in 1884. A French horticulturalist turned adventurer, Humblot scoured the land for suitable terrain for perfume and cash crops. Eventually settling on Ngazidja, he established a plantation under his new company, the *Société Anonyme de la Grande Comore* (SAGC), and ruled it with an iron fist, a period which historian Mathilde Cocoual identifies as the “time of the military planters” in which the expansion of plantations was concomitant with military expedition.<sup>66</sup> Eventually he controlled 47% of the land on Ngazidja.<sup>67</sup> With connections to Grasse, the French perfume capital, ylang-ylang was among his staple crops. In 1886, largely due to Humblot’s efforts in establishing his fief, a French protectorate was established over Ngazidja.<sup>68</sup>

Humblot’s establishment of French dominance over Grand Comore as a lab for perfume crops and sugar cane was not by happenchance.<sup>69</sup> Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France the hygiene revolution had come to fruition. Perfume, among other products, allowed the French bourgeois to distinguish themselves from common folk while industrial innovations lowered its production costs.<sup>70</sup> Flower farms blossomed in Grasse, sending large quantities of raw materials to Parisian factories, and by 1900 the market value of perfume was at 80 million francs from 2

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<sup>65</sup> Walker. 93-94.

<sup>66</sup> Mathilde Cocoual. “De la Capitale des parfums aux îles aux parfums: de les intérêts grassois à Madagascar et dépendances” in *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, Vol. 92, pp. 287-304. 2016. 3-4.

<sup>67</sup> Malyn Newitt. *The Comoro Islands: Struggle Against Dependency in the Indian Ocean*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 33.

<sup>68</sup> Walker. 105.

<sup>69</sup> Walker. 104-108.

<sup>70</sup> Eugénie Briot. “From Industry to Luxury: French Perfume in the Nineteenth Century” in *Business History Review*, Vol. 85, No. 2, pp. 273-294. 2011. 274.

million in 1810.<sup>71</sup> The search for tropical lands in which to grow more exotic crops was well underway. Territories such as Ndzuani became responsible for the further industrialization of the French Rivera. The prospects for Ndzuani to fall into the folds of this corporate expansion grew when Sultan Abdallah ceded the island to be a French protectorate in 1886 in a bid for protection against encroaching rivals.<sup>72</sup>

Among those on the search was the Chiris family. Antoine Chiris, the patriarch, had established a refinery business in 1768 in Grasse, and his successor Anselme Chiris expanded into the world market in search of English customers.<sup>73</sup> The next successor, Leopold Chiris, established a factory in Russia and purchased plantation land in Algeria. Finally, his joint successors Edmond and Leon Chiris divided their labor, the latter established farms in China, the Congo, Vietnam, Madagascar, and finally the Comoros.<sup>74</sup> Georges Chiris, the next successor to the company's reins, merged with Alfred Regoin and Georges Bouin in 1907 to establish the SCB with the lands once belonging to Sunley as its basis.

In 1920 the SCB purchased Wilson's land and eventually Humblot's floundering SAGC in Ngazidja. Unlike smaller holdings, the sheer size of the SCB allowed them to cope with unstable cash crop markets. The less fortunate holdings, unable to do the same, such as Wilson, Sunley, and Humblot, were bought out by the SCB which could call upon the Chiris estate for increasing amounts of capital.<sup>75</sup> The company gradually became a "state within a state", holding

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<sup>71</sup> Briot. 275.

<sup>72</sup> Walker. 101.

<sup>73</sup> Mathilde Cocoual. "La famille Chiris : des industriels en politique, une politique d'industriels ?" in *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, Vol. 92, pp. 177-191. 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Cocoual. 3.

<sup>75</sup> Mouhssini Hassani el-Barwane. *La Societe coloniale de Bambao Comores (1893-1975)*.( KomEDIT. 2015), 46.

a monopoly on imports (most importantly the staple rice, now scarce following its replacement with cash crops) in cooperation with local Indian merchants.<sup>76</sup>

The SCB dominated the island's economy and had competition only from Jules Moquet, founder of the Nyumakele company (NMKL), located in the southern portion of the island of Nyumakele (the company's namesake) and the smaller domain of McLuckie in the north. By 1938 the SCB, having purchased the SAGC, controlled 37% of the island's land, alongside 15% of Maore, 22% of Mwali, and 47% of Ngazidja.<sup>77</sup> The two companies combined owned 65.14 square miles of Ndzuani out of 163.82 total, including 75% of the islands cultivatable land.<sup>78</sup> Local demand for market commodities skyrocketed as a result. Peasant-workers, now in desperate need of rice, were made dependent on company imports. As the *makabaila* transformed their remaining holdings into vanilla and clove plantations, new influxes of monetary wealth increased demand for meat in the cities.<sup>79</sup>

Wage labor was thrust into the countryside by the SCB; the monetary conquest of arable land impelled peasants into it. By 1953 the SCB had 2,200 workers at their disposal and NMKL had 1,500-1,700 sharecroppers.<sup>80</sup> Pre-existing discontent over land tenure was exacerbated by this imposed arrangement, expressed in 1940 by a widespread labor upheaval across the islands' plantations.<sup>81</sup> Torn from sufficient subsistence and dependent on the wage, the peasant-worker

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<sup>76</sup> Mouhssini Hassani el-Barwane. 11-15.

<sup>77</sup> Newitt. *The Comoros Islands* 35-38 ; Walker. 123.

<sup>78</sup> Newitt. *The Comoros Islands*... 35-38.

<sup>79</sup> Claude Robineau. *Société et Économie d'Anjouan (Océan Indien)*. O.R.S.T.O.M. 1966. 109.

<sup>80</sup> Henry Isnard. "L'Archipel des Comores" in *Les Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, Vol. 6, 21, 5-22. 1953. 16.

<sup>81</sup> Jean Martin. "GRANDE COMORE 1915 ET ANJOUAN 1940: ÉTUDE COMPARATIVE DE DEUX SOULÈVEMENTS POPULAIRES AUX COMORES," *Études Océan Indien (Conflits dans l'Océan Indien)*, Vol. III, pp. 69-100. 1983.

was born. As the popularity of Chanel No. 5 skyrocketed after its creation in 1921, ylang-ylang with its high international demand became a staple of the SCB and NMKL holdings. Land reforms, beginning in 1921 and becoming successive in the decades to come, were instituted to alleviate peasant-worker anger at diminished subsistence holdings. It was guaranteed that only absentee land would be remitted to peasant-workers, and the SCB surrendered 2,500 hectares with a promise of compensation.<sup>82</sup>

While the *makabaila* saw their holdings diminished, alongside the resignation of the last Sultan and subsequent end of the protectorate for full integration into the empire in 1912, they were also integrated into the goings on of the companies, with the family of Sultan Abdallah III taking up positions in the SCB administration.<sup>83</sup> The urban elite was well placed in the vanilla market and also took part in official government administrations having been appointed to posts. Participation in cash crop markets gave them the technical know-how in the export trade, this combined with local knowledge of the social terrain gradually made them well positioned to reassert themselves into the island's restructuring economy. While the colonial arrangement intensified the rural-urban cleavage, the elite could leverage its expertise to participate in land reforms to grant peasants concessions and purchase land for themselves.<sup>84</sup> A leading figure in the major 1949-1953 land reforms was Ahmed Abdallah, a vanilla rich elite of Domoni who later became the island's first president.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Mouhssini Hassani el-Barwane. 75.

<sup>83</sup> Blanchy. "Anjouan..." 38

<sup>84</sup> Sidi. 220; Blanchy. "Anjouan..." 47.

<sup>85</sup> Sidi. 220.

In 1950 a devastating cyclone ravaged the island killing 600 people and destroying 60% of plantation land.<sup>86</sup> While the companies were rebuilding their capacity they came to rely on independent vanilla growers and eventually ylang-ylang was introduced to their plots via a government aid package.<sup>87</sup> The large-scale 1949-1953 land reforms, which distributed surplus company land to village control, were also beneficial for the ruling elite. As Abdallah distributed lands to his friends, he and other elites could begin to make new inroads into hinterland cash crop markets. Others in the middle classes of urban Ndzuani, such as BaKhadija Hamdou, father of Oumadine Mahoumoud, the current landlord of an ylang-ylang plantation, were able to purchase land and eventually build small distilleries which are now synonymous with local production of the coveted oil, which by 1971 made up 25% of export value.<sup>88</sup> In 1957 this process was furthered when 21,000 hectares of land were redistributed via a negotiation managed by Said Mohamed Cheikh, the governor of Comoros.<sup>89</sup> By 1974, at the eve of independence, the SCB land holdings were reduced to 2,500 hectares.<sup>90</sup> As both town and country were deeply enmeshed in kinship networks, this social form was essential to mediating networks of production.

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<sup>86</sup> Mouhssini Hassani el-Barwane. 67

<sup>87</sup> ID: Initiative Développement. *Analyse de la filière ylang-ylang à Anjouan pour les NRSC: Rapport Finale*. ID: Initiative Développement. 2014. 7.

<sup>88</sup> Ministère du Développement Rural. *Direction de l'Agriculture, de l'Élevage et des Eaux & Forêts*. Territoire des Comores, 1971.

<sup>89</sup> Mouhssini Hassani el-Barwane. *Le système foncier comorien de 1841 à 1975*, Thèse de doctorat d'Histoire, Université de la Réunion, 2010. 52.

<sup>90</sup> Mouhssini Hassani el-Barwane. *Le système...* 221.

## The Reemergence of the Smallholder

When French ethnographer Claude Robineau conducted his socio-economic survey of Ndzuani from 1960-1964, he found an immiserated and overcrowded population confined to small plots on surplus company land.<sup>91</sup> Nyumakele in the south of the island greatly suffered this fate, hosting the largest concentration of people under the virtual domination of NMKL. With little room for subsistence-based plots, locals were barely able to scratch out a living. In the words of Nabouhane Abdallah “The main [food] crops grown at the time by the majority of farmers were upland rice and corn. These crops were planted very close to the village. The harvest was always insufficient to feed a family for the whole year.”<sup>92</sup> The SCB maintained a delicate balance between imports of food and exports of cash crops (though towards the later years this proved difficult), and with mountain rice production undermined, white rice imports amounted to five times more than local production.<sup>93</sup> The SCB and NMKL could leverage piecemeal wages supplemented by the smallholder’s subsistence farming.

Robineau witnessed a largely female workforce who picked ylang-ylang every 10 to 15 days out of the month whereas men labored in the distillery.<sup>94</sup> Sisal and copra production made up a substantial portion of the wage of the male peasant-worker, but both were swiftly outmoded by synthetic fibers and replaced by the growingly lucrative ylang-ylang.<sup>95</sup> Though just 20% of ylang-ylang production was in the hands of individual Frenchmen, Wandzuani landlords, and

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<sup>91</sup> Claude Robineau. *Approache socio-économique d’Anjouan*. O.R.S.T.O.M, 1964. 71.

<sup>92</sup> Dahari: Komori ya leo na meso. “Anjouan deforested, Anjouan to be reforested”. *Dahari: Komori ya leo na meso*. December 16, 2021

<sup>93</sup> Newitt. 75.

<sup>94</sup> Robineau. 77.

<sup>95</sup> Sidi. 193.

peasant-workers, vanilla production had been integrating into the peasant-worker household and collection into the hands of local elites throughout the century.<sup>96</sup> The outsourcing of vanilla originated from the time of the abolition of slavery, where cash crops, predominantly vanilla, began to be sold on indigenous reserve land in exchange for rice.<sup>97</sup> Following the land reforms of 1949-1953, the *makabaila* and the middling urban dwellers began creating small trading posts in highland villages.

The vanilla system, greatly resembling today's system of ylang-ylang production, was gathered by these collectors from village households, prepared in Wandzuani and Indian facilities, and sold to intermediaries who brought it to the world market<sup>98</sup>. The labor of vanilla cultivation was, per Robineau, mostly done by men, who sometimes also devoted 60% of their day to sisal and ylang-ylang preparation.<sup>99</sup> NMKL lands became central to this emergent system of production as they preferred outsourcing cash crops to the SCB, the latter maintaining a centralized operation.<sup>100</sup> The village shops served as the nodes connecting the urban to the rural, the urban classes slowly increasing their influence out of the company structures and into their own hands. With land retrocessions increasing in pace, the companies found themselves undermined and disintegrating in their then contemporary form.

Robineau came away with the conclusion that "full employment" could remedy the ratio of land to labor, which could in turn be done by transferring cash crops to peasant households

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<sup>96</sup> Sidi. 195.

<sup>97</sup> Robineau. "Société..." 180.

<sup>98</sup> Robineau. "Société...": 192

<sup>99</sup> Robineau. 69, 137.

<sup>100</sup> Sidi. 196-203.



that were outside of the plantation system.<sup>101</sup> From 1962-1970, the number of small vanilla farmers went from 440 to 2,800.<sup>102</sup> By 1969, the newly established *Société des développement des Comores* (SODEC) distributed 10,000 ylang-ylang trees to farmers while emphasizing the importance of food crops.<sup>103</sup> In 1971 reported numbers of ylang-ylang trees among peasants was reported to be around a million, and in 1972 transfers for land continued to be issued to peasants and buyers.<sup>104</sup> It became the official recommendation of the rural development ministry to “establish [agricultural] programs adapted to each of the islands in the archipelago” and as a result increase small producers via SODEC.<sup>105</sup>

The process of retrocession and decentralization was not by any means peaceful. Land transfers were chaotic and fundamentally mismanaged. Many plots were issued out to surplus land where other peasants were already settled as squatters. This created the condition which is today described as “spatial anarchy”, whereby conflict between squatters on former company land and those allotted plots in the same place led to further dispossessions and migrations around the island.<sup>106</sup> These fomented chronic conflicts between villages over land tenure and

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<sup>101</sup> Robineau. “Approache socio-économique...”. 101-105.

<sup>102</sup> Ministère du Développement Rural. *Pour une nouvelle politique Agricole*. Territoire des Comores. 1971.

<sup>103</sup> Ministère du Développement Rural. *Direction de l’Agriculture....*

<sup>104</sup> Ministère du Développement Rural. *Direction de l’Agriculture....*

<sup>105</sup> Ministère du Développement Rural. *Direction de l’Agriculture....*

<sup>106</sup> Nourddine Mirhani, et al. “MUTATIONS DES PAYSAGES AGRAIRES COLONIAUX D’ANJOUAN” in *Africana Studia*, Vol. 32. 2016, pp. 68-89. 82-83.

land-use.<sup>107</sup> Those who found themselves unable to wade through the convoluted schemes fled to other parts of the island.<sup>108</sup>

Among the many migrants from Nyumakele, traversing through winding paths in the mountains toward urban centers, was Mohamed Soulouhou, the current tenant farmer of Oumadine Mahoumoud. During the turbulent time between disarrayed land retrocession and independence, Soulouhou found himself stuck in a congested and land scarce Nyumakele. Much like others in what he describes as a “rural exodus” he was brought by his parents to Ouani, one of the three cities home to the majority of elite urban families.<sup>109</sup> There he began working on a new distillery and gaining the knowledge necessary to operate one on his own.<sup>110</sup> Having gained this experience, Mahoumoud offered to employ him to administer his inherited plot in Bandrani, a small village situated between Ouani and Jimilimé, another village abundant in ylang-ylang trees. Arriving at the plantation as a teenage boy, he became essentially a member of the family, “like a little brother” to Mahoumoud.<sup>111</sup> Free of a monetary rent obligation Soulouhou was master of the field, cultivating and distilling ylang-ylang flowers for Mahoumoud and receiving a cut of the final pay. In his words, “He [Mahoumoud] owns the land, but I am the real boss”.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ainnoudine Sidi. “LES CONFLITS FONCIERS ENTRE LES VILLAGES” in *ANJOUAN: L’HISTOIRE D’UNE CRISE FONCIER*. (Paris: L’harmattan, 1998,) 211-239.

<sup>108</sup>In Grande Comore, on the other hand, lack of groundwater and arable land made ylang-ylang production much less suitable to the island and thus restricted SAGC production mostly to the island’s north. Large estates were not sold off but purchased by other landowners and remain large centralized operations to this day.

<sup>109</sup> Mohamed Soulouhou. Interview. August 13, 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Mohamed Soulouhou. Interview. August 13, 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Oumadine Mahoumoud. Interview. August 16, 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Mohamed Soulouhou. Interview. August 13, 2022.

Mahoumoud was thus one of many urban dwellers of the salaried middle classes, being a gym teacher and seller of construction materials, to re-establish the urban-hinterland dynamic, pointed once again at the world market. The *sultansque* system was subsumed into international capitalism. Knowledge of ylang-ylang cultivation and distillation was disseminated across the countryside, those such as Soulouhou taught others how to build artisanal distilleries, those with only small plots came to learn and rely on piecework flower harvesting, and those with substantial plots either sold their flowers directly to owner-operators or brought flowers to their relatives to sell in part with a larger harvest.

Ylang-ylang, grown well around subsistence crops, integrated into women's labor obligations alongside of food crop harvests and child-rearing. Distillation, a twelve-hour, three-day cycle that often lasts into the late hours of the night, was done on the other hand by male members of the household. It was mostly women who began to cross the hills to work on different plots, large and small, to harvest flowers. Men, such as Soulouhou in his early years, were hired as distillation assistants. Other salaried individuals who had small plots without tenants, such as Soulouhou, created their own distilleries and sourced from family members and later other families unrelated to them.<sup>113</sup>

Members of the *makabaila*, such as Said Bacar of the Moya-based Alaoui family, were now in a favorable position to expand their operations towards the collection of oil, much as they had the collection of vanilla. Bacar began his exploits as an accountant for a collector named BaThaouriya.<sup>114</sup> In exchange Bacar received a 90kg bag of rice and 15,000 Comorian francs. Eventually, Bacar grew thin of working under a collector and went directly to Mamadaly, a

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<sup>113</sup> These owner-operators eventually proved to be the most durable to crisis, see: Chapter 3.

<sup>114</sup> Said Bacar. Interview. August 8, 2022.

powerful Indian exporter who initially sold the distillery blueprints to small distillers.<sup>115</sup>

Mamadaly gave him immediate pay before the sale, contrary to his French competitor. In addition, he allowed him to become an intermediate collector of oil from various distilleries by extending him a large sum of credit. With the earnings from Mamadaly, he purchased a field and began his distillery while still collecting for him.

Acting as a collector in Moya allowed him to go from family to family, household to household, earning rapport among farmers in and around his town. He built more distilleries until building a large one with four stills and expanded his network and his size. Access to capital made him the premier producer of Moya and today most growers and even small distillers report selling almost exclusively to him, the latter mostly during a downturn. Family networks throughout the town's periphery rendered their collective product to him. The combination of agrarian reform under strong peasant demand, *makabaila* thriftiness, and what Robineau described as "a family around which are circles of exchange [of commodities]" birthed a decentralized system in which access to the latter allowed the middle classes and upper elite to reconstitute their role over the countryside and become owner-operators, collectors, and distillers.<sup>116</sup> The peasant-worker emerged triumphant over the plot, only to be chronically made victim of repeated price shocks and low-yield subsistence; perpetually drifting between both over the years since independence. The new Comorian state accommodated the transition, granted that they could benefit from it.

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<sup>115</sup> Blanchy. "Anjouan..." 47.

<sup>116</sup> Robineau. *Société et Économie...* 148.

## Revolution, Restoration, Crisis

The end of French colonialism brought about at first an administration of radical social transformation and aspiring self-sufficiency to one of *makabaila* restoration, cutthroat administration, and a bolstered export sector. Independence triumphed in 1975 and Ahmed Abdallah, the vanilla rich mastermind behind the land reforms, became the first president of Comoros. He was quickly overthrown in a 1976 coup orchestrated by the infamous French mercenary Bob Denard and the revolutionary self-styled Marxist Ali Soilihi. Soilihi's short and violent reign redistributed the remaining company land, sought to develop self-sufficiency, and even attempted to break up some *makabaila* estates, though most elites held on to their positions.<sup>117</sup> Some instances of violent appropriation occurred, such as a *wamatsaha* uprising against the Marhani family in 1977, but after the overthrow of Soilihi the Marhani struck back and forcibly reclaimed ownership from the villagers.<sup>118</sup> Soilihi was executed by firing squad in 1978 following a mercenary coup by the same man who placed him in power, Bob Denard.

Ahmed Abdallah returned with his former enemy and now partner, Denard, backed and funded by several leaders of the cash crop sector including the Gujarati Kalfane family of the AGK group, which was established in 1943 and is now one of five of the major export firms operating in the archipelago.<sup>119</sup> Abdallah quickly restored the traditional order with the backing of Denard's mercenary force, the *Guarde Presidential*, though it eventually grew out of Abdallah's control to his ultimate demise. Known for distributing a calendar of his import-export business in place of a presidential portrait, Abdallah restored the export market which was

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<sup>117</sup> Walker. 180

<sup>118</sup> Adjimaël Halidi. "Comores: colonisation, insularité, et imaginaire national," *Cahiers d'Outre Mer*, no. 278, 403-432. 2018. 421.

<sup>119</sup> Walker. 187-188.

diminished under Soilihi.<sup>120</sup> In 1985 his government set specific fixed dates and sanctioned methods by which vanilla could be harvested, establishing government control over production and distribution.<sup>121</sup> Abdallah and Denard also created *Establishments Abdallah & Fils* as co-owners, dominating much of the vanilla trade while leaving ylang-ylang and cloves to Kalfane and other exporters.

Simultaneously, the Abdallah administration realized that the smallholder/kinship system could not be *fully* diminished. Even on lands purchased back from previous retrocessions, squatters would not be evicted. The peasant-worker had wrested their plots away from the companies after several bitter decades, they were best made useful with vanilla in their hands and ylang-ylang flowers in their baskets. The SCB morphed into Tropikal SA, now an export company that uses networks of collectors to gather oil and flowers, which merged into a subsidiary of the Elixens company, a French international synthetics firm.<sup>122</sup> The transformation was complete and could only be negotiated with; mixed production held a monopoly on the island. In 1981 the administration outlined their support for a “reciprocal potentiation” between food crops and cash crops, accomplished by freeing up arable land to add food crops to cash crop production.<sup>123</sup> This was meant to stabilize productivity and offset the negative deficit of cash crop exports to rice imports. The consensus became that “the development of cash crops must take place in parallel with an even stronger development of food crops”.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Newitt. 64; Walker. 187-188.

<sup>121</sup> Republique Federale Islamiques des Comores, Le Gouverneront de Ndzouani. Arrete no. 64-16. 1984.

<sup>122</sup> Sophy Blanchy in correspondence with the author. December 7, 2022.

<sup>123</sup> La Republique Fédérale Islamique des Comores, Ministère de Finance de l’Economie et du plan. *Rapport d’Orientation: promotion des exportations de la vanille du girofles et d’ylang-ylang des Comores*. June, 1981. Projet 4\_509\_080\_57\_26. 10.

But three years earlier in 1978 a crisis had shocked the burgeoning and transformed ylang-ylang sector. Where the company system could balance deficits and absorb price shocks on its own, the peasant-worker was left exposed to the raw force of the international market, the exporter only bearing bad news of fallen prices. Total export of ylang-ylang oil fell from 40 tons to 10 tons in 1985.<sup>125</sup> Trees were cut down, flowers were burned, and farmers were distraught.<sup>126</sup> Some owner-operators, such as the father of BaYasmine Youssef, gave up distilling altogether and shifted towards food crops and fishing.<sup>127</sup> The government outlawed the burning of flowers and attempted to impose an indemnity for losses, alongside proposing future preventative measures to lower costs by improving productivity and taking defensive positions such as limiting harvests.<sup>128</sup> These measures proved futile, and while production rose again by 1990 to 71 tons, and in the subsequent decades the ylang-ylang sector (along with vanilla and cloves) was plagued with what the government identified as crises generated by “profitable production creating overproduction”.<sup>129</sup>

### Conclusion

The old consolidated SCB distillery lies shuttered in Bambao Mtsanga, the gate is locked and it now stands as a piece in the spatial layer of de-industrialization alongside the ruins of failed oil exploration sites and forgone hydroelectric plants. The sugar warehouses of Pomoni

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<sup>124</sup> La Republique Fédérale Islamique... 9.

<sup>125</sup> Pierre Vérin. *Les Comores*. (Paris: Éditions KARTHALA, 1994,) 238.

<sup>126</sup> Republique Federale Islamiques des Comores, Commissariat à la Production. *Rapport*. 1979

<sup>127</sup> Basmine Youssef. Interview by Adam Benjamin. July 15, 2022.

<sup>128</sup> La Republique Fédérale Islamique des Comores *Rapport d'Orientation...* 13-14.

<sup>129</sup> International Monetary Fund. “IMF Staff Country Report No. 97/115: Comoros Statistical Annex”. *International Monetary Fund*. November 17, 1997. 10; La Republique Fédérale Islamique des Comores. *Rapport d'Orientation...* 13-14

and Patsy still stand in ruin, though the former is a warehouse for construction materials and the latter houses nothing but shrubs and grasses. While most all SCB and NMKL land was parceled out and sold in Ndzuani, the domains in Ngazidja still stand in their old form. Leon Humblot V, the fifth-generation grandson of Leon Humblot himself, owns the old SAGC domain in Mitsamiouli. It was only in Ndzuani and to some extent Mwali where the middle-peasant broke through to become the owner-operator.



**Women dry cloves outside of Sunley's old sugar warehouse in Pomoni, now used to store construction materials. (Photograph by author, 2022)**

As an agricultural commodity ylang-ylang is somewhat set apart from most cash crops. Unlike cloves, its regional sister crop, it is not sold on the world market as a flower. It is transformed in a second process which turns the flower into the desired essential oil. This makes



it more similar to many other perfume crops, seed oils, and in some ways sugar. Yet in contrast to the latter two the oil is not a calorie to be consumed or much of a valuable commodity on its own. The oil becomes more valuable as an input when added to perfumes, detergent, and candles. Because of the nature of its production, and as we have seen the disaggregation of production itself, it gives way to a semi-industrial landscape. This patchwork of small industry throughout Ndzuanani is now placed firmly under the ebbs and flows of demand from the French perfume industry, contingent on its needs and production quotas.

These technical changes did not necessarily favor productivity, in fact, distillation is far more efficient and productive in Ngazidja. But they did contribute to an internal class differentiation, allowing certain members of the peasant-worker class to own distilleries and form a rank of small capitalists. Some of them became intermediate collectors, gathering bottles of oil alongside their own to be sold to a wholesale collector. Members of the *makabaila* became either wholesale collectors or independent exporters themselves, dealing directly with intermediaries in Grasse. Small towns such as Jimilimé and Limby became home to some of the most prominent intermediate collectors who could take home profits of their own.

This differentiation also led to a gendered division of labor as described above. Men operate distilleries, chopping wood, stirring flowers, and tending the fire through the darkest parts of the night alongside livestock duties. Women are expected to look after children and teach them the Quran, farm subsistence, harvest ylang-ylang flowers, and when unmarried travel to different fields and pick flowers for a wage. At the same time, this class differentiation is not stable or fixed. The roles that each individual may play function more as guidelines than fixed places along the ylang-ylang supply chain. The nephew of Said Bacar, Ahmed Aloui, who currently runs the operation has acted as an exporter, factory owner, field owner, and collector.

Many owner-operators have fields of their own and produce their subsistence, some have no field at all. Some smallholders sell their flowers and also work for a wage in a different field. Other smallholders collect flowers from relatives.

As will be seen below the rural classes of Ndzuani are, in the words of Banaji, “an ensemble of groups who stand in no fixed or stable relation to each other”.<sup>130</sup> Each role can change during a downturn, positions can shift according to the viability of participation in a low-paying sector. As Banaji puts it succinctly, the “‘peasantry’ is both amorphous and profoundly divided”.<sup>131</sup> In the following section I will explore the different levels of the supply-chain, those who fulfill each role within it, and the role of kinship in cohering that system together through the crisis.

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<sup>130</sup> Jairus Banaji. “Illusions about the peasantry: Karl Kautsky and the agrarian question,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp.288-307, 1990. 297.

<sup>131</sup> Jairus Banaji. “Illusions about the peasantry...” 297.

### Chapter 3: The Crisis of 2018

“In Ndzuani you cannot have only one job” – Ali Soidri

Dusty bottles of raw essential oil fill the shelves and closets of Mahmoud Aboud’s large operation in Ngazidja. Before he entered the sector he worked as Comoros’ diplomat to the UN. He has been featured in special reports on the industry from CGTN and DW. His factory is located in the town of Itsandra not far from Moroni and consists of six stills that run on kerosene. Unlike the artisanal distilleries, his operation can produce *extra*, *super*, and *premier* oil in only six hours as opposed to a 12-24 hour cycle. His enormous field, located around Mitsamiouli in the north of the island, is the old property of the SAGC and is rented from Leon Humblot V (see: Appendix Figure 8). It is so large that his assistant reported that he has never seen the end of it. But now the trees in his plantation are overrun with weeds as he is no longer able to pay laborers for maintenance. The factory has been shuttered since 2018, when the crisis arrived.

The bust, of course, was preceded by a boom. According to Aboud and others, from 2010 to 2018 the price of ylang-ylang oil had skyrocketed to an average of 2,000KMF per degree, making a bottle of the highest quality oil worth \$265.<sup>132</sup> This provided a massive influx of income to peasant-workers and distillers alike. Many were able to send their kids to school or at the very minimum afford weekly bags of white rice and fish from the local market. Ever increasing demand led to volatile competition and bidding efforts for flowers. Those such as Aboud who used a large estates and hired wage laborers, as opposed to outsourced smallholder production, could avoid the competition for flowers.

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<sup>132</sup> See “Introduction” for an overview of qualities and prices.

Those in Mwali recall such fierce competition that they slept in their fields to ward off potential flower thieves.<sup>133</sup> Exporters and NGOs alike gave trainings to owner-operators in Ndzuani and energy-efficient technology was introduced. Long-standing owner-operators invested in new stills while those seeking fortune built their first. Drove of peasant-workers entered the sector. Planting ylang-ylang overtook vanilla, and unlike cloves the easy dissemination of the tree on the plot brought in more planters and meant easier access to cash payment. However, with the vast majority of the product being shipped directly to Grasse, the stocks of the Mediterranean perfumers were filled, a glut had formed, and the Indian Ocean ylang-ylang belt found itself trapped in a downturn. The price subsequently fell from 2,000 to 200KMF.

Large firms such as Aboud's had to close. Many in Ndzuani, especially in Pomoni and Ajoho, cut their trees and grew food for the market.<sup>134</sup> The galvanized steel distillery components stretch rusted across the roads and alongside the village paths in Ndzuani, joining this landscape of uneven de-industrialization (see: Appendix Figure 1). Other long-standing distillers held on to their production and remaining demand through their kinship networks. That is, networks of smallholder families that sell exclusively to their selected owner-operator over of decades. As will be analyzed, the social relation of kinship responds to the suffusion of the base to existing social formations, as put forth by Stuart Hall in his analysis of the base-superstructure model.<sup>135</sup> Kinship has, in effect, become a relation of production. Thus, in times of crisis, kinship serves to

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<sup>133</sup> Tommy Trenchard. "The Perfume Isles: The tiny archipelago of Comoros off the east coast of Africa dominates the world's supply of the essential oil ylang-ylang. But dominance comes at a cost," *Geographical*. January 1, 2021.

<sup>134</sup> Nourddine Mirhani, et al. "MUTATIONS DES PAYSAGES AGRAIRES COLONIAUX D'ANJOUAN," *Africana Studia*, Vol. 32, pp. 68-89. 2016. 78-79.

<sup>135</sup> Stuart Hall. "Rethinking the Base and the Superstructure," in *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*. Ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. 81.

*strengthen* economic cooperation among producers in Ndzuani, as similarly observed by James Ferguson in Zambia.<sup>136</sup>

Unlike the production of Darjeeling in Assam, for instance, where workers are bound solely to the tea plantation and kinship determines the inheritance of jobs, Wandzuani peasant-workers drift from occupation to occupation.<sup>137</sup> Some will venture outside of the plot, going into fishing and construction or migrating to Maore, typically those with less relation to the kinship bond, or maybe selling to any owner-operator who has extra money or credit to purchase flowers. Others will market their food crops and harvest and sell cloves while continuing to pick ylang-ylang. Those most tethered to the kinship bond are those who continue to produce for the owner-operator.

The globally dominant French perfume industry has captured a flexible labor market of transient semi-proletarianized workers. On the one hand, it has a large labor reserve which can be summoned during times of high demand.. On the other hand, it has at its disposal tethered households and owner-operators for when increments of oil are needed during a glut. For the Wandzuani, especially the owner-operators, this greatly hampers their ability to develop their operations over time. Peasant-workers are increasingly informalized, constantly subject to the ebbs and flows of the international market, in the market but not of it.

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<sup>136</sup> James Ferguson. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life in Zambia's Copperbelt*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 161.

<sup>137</sup> Sarah Besky. *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014,) 7.

## **The Transient Classes and the Kinship Bond**

Moustali Houmadi and Andjilou Ali Salim wait patiently around the distillery. Wearing tattered clothes and straw hats, they wait as the flowers churn slowly into the condensed ylang-ylang oil. Moustali works the still for Ibrahim, the owner, who is also absent from the scene. Andjilou is a flower harvester, gathering flowers from his own plot for the distillation process to earn income. Sourette, an ylang-ylang field and distillery owner, as well an independent exporter, wanders the scene pointing out each detail of the distillation process. He hopes that, as an American living in Los Angeles, I will be able to eventually provide him with new wholesale markets for his struggling independent export business. He is eager for my partnership despite my insistence that I am not, in fact, a businessman. He shows me this distillery to demonstrate how the good local professionals employ to people of Nzduani.

This distillery does not belong to Sourette. Rather, he purchases oil as a wholesale collector and kicks down a portion of the profit to Ibrahim, an intermediate collector. At times, he helps Ibrahim to find clients, people like Aindjilou who can tap into large kinship networks to accrue enough flowers for distillation. Each relative, in this case, contributes a small amount, around 25kg, to the total supply. Sourette manages production from a distance, even making marginal investments in distillation equipment now decaying from little use. In obtaining flowers through those peasant-workers via the kinship bond, he taps into a vast network of labor from a distant point. Sourette's relationship with Ibrahim's distillery is a classic case in the ylang-ylang sector. Exporters, such as Sourette, can attach themselves to other functioning distilleries in times of crisis to continue to obtain oil, sometimes even on credit. During the downturn, they wait patiently for a sale. From the kinship networks comes the supply of flowers.

Sourette belongs to the Abdallah family, the powerful political clan from Domoni from which Ahmed Abdallah ascended. Sourette's branch of the family built their distillery in 1974 during the remaining days of the transfer of company land. Large and powerful families, such as Sourette's, took their share in large portions. Beyond that, any specifics of how his family obtained this land were swiftly avoided in conversation by Sourette. He was baffled as to why I would even want to know in the first place. He simply wanted to discuss business. Today he hammers strongly against the role of big exporters and the French monopoly on ylang-ylang imports. To him, the large exporters deeply constrain their access to French markets and the only solution is to find new ones, such as in the US.

Andjilou is unaware that he even buys oil. To him he was just a man on the scene from time to time, arriving in an SUV with a button down shirt tucked awkwardly into slacks and a cell phone hanging off of his belt. He helps him sell the flowers to the distillery, but his role as exporter is unknown to him. Like most peasant-workers in the ylang-ylang sector, they do not know what the oil is used for or why anyone would buy it. They use *troisieme* oil for inflammation and pain in the knees, but otherwise they "just sell it". Like many in the sector, it is not their only job, and becomes growingly tangential to their livelihoods in times of crisis. During the boom, it is the primary source of income. During the bust, it is a piecemeal occupation that still remains substantial to their upkeep. Some find other informal work, such as construction and fishing. Others, as will be seen, continue on their plots while shifting more labor towards food crops.

Through the crisis Andjilou still plucks the ylang-ylang flowers from the winding, twisting branches of the trees on his small plot. He owns four cows and four goats, and was mostly a livestock farmer before planting trees during the boom, around 21 years ago. It was his

boss on a larger ylang-ylang plantation, at the time, who brought him into the fold when the price was skyrocketing. While his boss had a field of his own, he also cut labor costs, made up for the small orchard size, and added to his supply by sourcing from smallholders such as Andjilou. He was able to average around 500,000KMF a year during the boom time. He continued to raise and breed cattle, and even work the harvest on other ylang-ylang orchards. Before the crisis began he reports having at least one bag of rice at home every week. Now, he can go up to a week without having sufficient income for the staple rice. As a result he has turned to selling coconuts from his plot in Jimilimé.

After having placed more flowers in the still Moustali sat to talk and was as puzzled by my questions as he was interested in speaking with me. He has been working at the distillery for around six years since 2016. He began planting his trees around 2010, when the boom saw its beginning and the yellow flowers passed through everyone's hands; when the musky and pungent steam of the stills permeated the air from the highlands to the coast. Then he began operating the distillery. Today he secures flowers for Sourette from members of his family, occasionally works on Sourette's plantations, and before the crash he would even sell his food crops in the local market. Now subsistence must be reserved for family needs. Unlike Andjilou, his position in the distillery and his deep kinship network allow him the necessary wages to avoid marketing his subsistence crops. He can deepen subsistence production while staying entrenched in the ylang-ylang sector. This set-up, by which large owner-operators attach themselves to other distillers and farmers, and by proxy their kinship networks, is the basis of the fluidity of capital accumulation in this model. It underpins the ability of Ndzuan, an island roughly the size of Connecticut, to undercut other areas of the ylang-ylang belt.



## Owner-Operators

The owner-operator makes only an average of 4,500KMF (9\$) per bottle of oil when the costs of supply are factored in, regardless of the current price of oil.<sup>138</sup> This makes the quantity of oil produced, as determined by existing demand, decisive in the ability for the owner-operator to accumulate profits. Intermediate collectors can usually earn more by acting as middlemen.

Wirdane Said operates a small distillery on a ridge near Ouani. The distillery, like many others, overlooks a shallow valley that is cut through by a large, though gradually diminishing, river. In boom times its musky odor penetrated the mountain air and churned nearly every other day. The ripe flowers scented the forests and drifted into towns. Today it seldom operates on the weekends. Wirdane is still able to hold on to the production of oil and when I first met Wirdane he had a few clients awaiting distillation.

The essence of Wirdane's ability to continue producing illuminates the durability of the owner-operator model, but also elucidates class divisions in the ylang-ylang sector. Wirdane has been in the business since independence 1976, during the final days of the land reform. Wirdane obtained his land not from the government but from a willing seller. He entered the business so he could fund his studies at the university and loosen the burden on his father's finances. By 2000 he was able to produce a new still and buy a truck with the substantial savings he had made with his reliable clientele and suppliers.

Like other owner-operators his field is supplementary to his weekly stock of flowers. Much of his tree yield is insufficient for weekly distillation so he adds to the stock by buying from his suppliers. This makes his operation viable and creates a relative economy of scale; he can save personal labor and produce more at the base level. With local land consisting mostly of

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<sup>138</sup> Ideas Development. *Analyse...* 2

small parcels, this operation allows Wirdane a consistent amount of flowers and in boom times more oil to be produced. As described earlier, it is because of the smallholder system that the owner-operator model can maintain its stronghold over the island, with owner-operators relying on other suppliers to provide flowers by default. In the downturn, these supply flows become whittled down to small groups of individuals tied together through kinship. It is these people who are capable of enduring through the crisis, reallocating labor to subsistence while avoiding the descent deeper into non-agricultural informal labor.

Wirdane's primary suppliers are three small networks of interrelated peasant-workers. Different individuals will sell to one family member who sells to him, forming a kinship network on which he can rely. During the current price collapse he continues to buy exclusively from them. In return, they sell exclusively to him. They can continue to push deeper into subsistence but also hold aside a certain amount of ylang-ylang for Wirdane. According to him, he always pays, even if on credit. If one individual can no longer afford the labor to shore up the amount of kilos necessary, the suppliers will combine flowers with others in the network and share in the payment. This way subsistence production can continue to be deepened and more energy can be expended on growing food for household consumption or sale in the local market. Some even go as far as to cut ylang-ylang trees down to be replaced with food crops. Some exit the sector entirely, this is more common for those outside the kinship bond. Where ylang-ylang revenue shortens, cassava and coconut harvesting will take its place to make up for losses. Cash wages, though growingly minimal, can be saved and sometimes rice and fish can be purchased.

This system, while seemingly technologically inferior to the productive capabilities of large distilleries, tethers both the peasant-worker and the owner-operator in the ylang-ylang sector for decades. It prevents a specific section of the local working class from exiting the

industry altogether or relying on other informal work such as fishing and construction, and reinforces the structure of the kinship bond by which labor is pooled. The interplay between cash crops and food crops, neither of which is sufficient on its own, maintains the durability of the system while blocking a path towards centralization.

Accumulation for the exporters and owner-operators alike is thus both enabled and constrained by this system. The artisanal model, with access to kinship networks on varying degrees of fluidity, allows for production to endure through crisis. In times of 'boom', with increased French demand, the system can call upon large amounts of peasant-worker labor to produce the necessary quantities of oil. In times of crisis, what demand is left can be continuously met through the owner-operator system. Due to its reliance on peasant-worker labor, subsidized by the subsistence plot, this model requires only the baseline capital necessary to buy flowers. Expenditure in field laborers is only done when necessary if the owner-operator possesses a field. It is both cheaper and less politically volatile for the exporter to pursue and allows them to easily set prices on oil through their collectors.

But on the other end, this system and its reliance on smallholder cultivation also prevents (in most cases) the centralization of industry necessary for local large-scale capital accumulation. In this sense, the owner-operator is also constrained in his ability to reinvest in fixed capital or land aside from basic machinery or a slightly expanded operation especially given the low profit margins. Even in the case of a large distillery such as that of the Aloui family, their small plot is not enough to feed all four stills and must accrue flowers from local networks of smallholders. While owner-operators are further advanced in the market, surplus still flows largely into the hands of the export firms. The small distilleries which dot the slopes of Ndzuani are nodes by which extraction can occur, continuously, on this commodity frontier.

Despite a seemingly uniform structure and class differentiation between producer, distiller, intermediate and wholesale collector, and exporter, there is an ever-present elasticity to the structure of individual roles in the ylang-ylang sector. Many exporters, and even some large export firms, own large plantations in Ndzuanani while sourcing flowers from other growers on a contractual basis, though this only accounts for 11% of production.<sup>139</sup> This is vehemently opposed by Wandzuani smallholders who fear encroachment on their land as well as being outproduced. Some owner-operators sell oil to others, others act as intermediate collectors for exporters who gather the oil via wholesale collectors. Others act as collectors, distillers, planters, and independent exporters at the same time, such as Sourette. In other words, the roles that each constituent group plays are more guidelines than set rules in this buyer-driven supply-chain. Some owner-operators, lacking significant kinship networks, return to only selling flowers or exit entirely during downturns while their distilleries collapse and become home to only to large spiders. Other owner-operators are tenant farmers with sprawling fields who sell directly to their landlord and only occasionally source from scattered villagers. But regardless of the fluidity of the occupation, the owner-operator is at the crux of production.

Sharifa Hamad and Said Halidi demonstrate the fluidity of these roles. Both are located in Jimilimé, an area known for being especially productive in ylang-ylang. Nestled in the hills of the north of Ndzuanani and only accessible through steep, rocky roads or boats. The town is rural, impoverished, and isolated compared to those on the coast. There is no winding medina packed with street sellers and mosques, there is only the shanties of small houses and stores. Sharifa and Said both began their adult lives as university students but could not find work upon graduation.

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<sup>139</sup> ID: Initiative Développement. *Analyse de la filière ylang-ylang à Anjouan pour les NRSC: Rapport Finale*. ID: Initiative Développement. 20

Ylang-ylang, then a lucrative business, presented the most accessible option with relative upward mobility and once consistent profits.

Sharifa began by collecting flowers from family members and selling them to distillers around Jimilimé. While the crisis endures she still manages to distill oil every Thursday but often operates at a loss. As a woman, she is not expected to operate the distillery itself, and hires help for the process. After the oil is produced, like many others, she stores the oil and either sells it on demand or stores extra to speculate on a price rise. While working as a distiller she also works at SONALEC, the electrical company on the island. This allows her to also act as an intermediate collector and purchase oil from other distillers on credit, paying them upon receiving her paycheck from SONALEC. Networks of debt and credit, much like the kinship bond, become deepened in times of crisis.

Many, such as Ali Soidri, trust her to buy their oil as it will reliably be purchased by “the Indian man” quicker. Indian and French exporters control the final end of the supply-chain, much to the chagrin of local independent exporters such as Sourette. While, according to her, there are countless distillers, she is the main distiller due to her simultaneous role as an intermediate collector. Because of large investments from export firms, particularly the one she refers to as “the Indian man”, she can sell oil more quickly and more reliably when the scant demand trickles in. Because of her role as a collector, while initially starting on the basis of family networks, she no longer relies on the kinship bond. Rather other distillers, such as Said Halidi, maintain their kinship network and sell any oil through intermediate collectors such as her in times of crisis. This allows them to reliably purchase from their network, while their network reliably sells them flowers. While both of them have fields, flowers, and distilleries in their own backyards, one commands labor by proxy while the other accrues it on the basis of kinship.

Said Halidi stays afloat with the help of his brothers. Much like Sharifa, he began by collecting flowers from his relatives and selling them to distillers. Having gained sufficient savings, he invested it in fixed capital such as the distillery and a truck. This allowed him to make a living and he maintained his brothers and cousins as his primary supply network. This allows him to tap into a network of kinship that sells exclusively to him, using it as a way to accrue the necessary amount of flowers to distill oil and sell it to Sharifa. Owner-operators and intermediate collectors such as Sharifa are the tip of the spear for Ndzuanis place in the market, Said is the facilitator.

Alayane is another distiller with an immediate network of in-laws and relatives. He runs a small general store in Barakani, a small town outside of Ouani. Like most others his entry into the business began during a run of bad luck after graduating from college. While his suppliers of in-laws sell exclusively to him they have greatly shifted their labor away from ylang-ylang and towards marketing their food crops. In a survey, 6 out of 10 of his in-laws report marketing their food crops as their main occupation alongside ylang-ylang. Others, however, outside the kinship bond, such as four women interviewed in Barakani, have husbands that work other jobs such as taxi driving or fishing. Those within and outside of the kinship bond represent a differentiation among peasant-workers. Workers within the kinship bond can continue on their plots, while those outside of it drift between occupations.

### **The Peasant-Worker**

The peasant-workers of Ndzuanis are themselves internally stratified. With dwindling subsistence production and chronic price collapses, peasant-workers in Ndzuanis typically vacillate between cloves, vanilla, and ylang-ylang production. While ylang-ylang continues in a

downturn few have turned to vanilla which faces a similar crisis. Those within the kinship bond have been seen to continue steady ylang-ylang production and remain tethered to their plots (either marketing more food crops or producing them for domestic consumption). Those outside of the kinship bond grow increasingly marginal amounts of ylang-ylang while exiting their plots to go about fishing, working construction, or making the journey to Maore. They are most likely to drift from distiller to distiller, selling where they can when demand meets capacity.

The next group of peasant-workers are the wage laborers, many of which lack any ylang-ylang trees of their own. Mostly women, these are often the extended family of field owners and work for a small wage at a piece rate per kilogram of flowers collected. They walk several miles on small winding trails etched into the jungled mountainsides to work different ylang-ylang fields or clove trees. With no professionalization or steady employment in the face of the crisis, their familial relationship with the field owner is essential to their continued participation in the harvest. While women of this category work the ylang-ylang fields, men of the same position work the distilleries, stirring flowers and adding wood to the fire for up to 12 hours. Most every group of peasant-workers belongs to the *wamatsaha* social class.

Khalarhoum Assane is a married woman with seven children. Around four years ago her husband began feeling mysterious pains in his arms and legs, and was one day accidentally hit by a tumbling stone in the chest. Traveling from doctor to doctor, Khalarhoum and her husband were unable to find a diagnosis. This predicament has left Khalarhoum with seven small fields (one from her father, six from her father-in-law) by which to cultivate ylang-ylang and food crops with the help of some relatives or sometimes even singlehandedly. Unable to afford a distillery of her own through a salaried occupation, she makes a trek to Hajoho on the other side of the island to sell her flowers to a relative of hers who owns a distillery. While it is

considerably less money than ylang-ylang, Khalarhoum has begun selling her bananas and cassava at the market to make up for losses during the crisis. Left with nothing alongside the hardships of childcare, she must make use of the kinship for bare survival.

Mountain routes such as the path between Ouani and Hajoho are also often traversed by urban dwellers, either of middle or high-status families with a plot of land or of other peasant-workers who frequent the hills in reverse; living in town and working harvest days on plots in the mountains to gather cash crops to sell during the week. Both systems allow a certain level of navigability through frequent economic shocks and unsteady access to cash-based income. Urban dwellers can harvest cassava and bananas during food shortages, while peasant-workers can find jobs in construction or fishing to subsidize the low cost of cash crops and short harvests of food crops. This particular spatial relationship between town and country forms a crucial basis for society in Ndzuani. It creates an inter-class reliance on the countryside for subsistence and cash crops and on the town for access to education, consumer goods and fish markets, Friday mosques, and healthcare.

After making the long and arduous hike through the rugged footpaths, I arrived in Bandani in the early afternoon. The village is small, consisting of only a few sporadically placed households. It is situated between Ouani and Jimilimé, and most villagers make the hours long walk to either town on a twice or three times weekly basis. This routine procedure is most often taken on Fridays for villagers who reside in the country to attend the *jumaa* prayer, stock up on amenities such as clothing, fish, and white rice to be brought back deep into the hills, and bring cloves and ylang-ylang oil to market. The relationship between coastal towns as a source of outside goods and the hinterland as a breadbasket has retained itself in form over time.



The trek itself is as long as it is taxing on the body. Most every villager I spoke with reported having several knee problems. The paths are steep, winding, narrow, and rocky. A single walk from town to village can take an entire day. My walk from Ouani to Bandani began at 6am and ended at around 2pm. I was escorted by my interlocutor, Mohammed Soulouhou, and six of his sons. The paths are walked by hundreds of other peasant-workers daily. They traverse the narrow trails etched into the mountainsides above the Mozambique Channel not to enter the city but for men to work clove harvests or, if work is available, for women to harvest ylang-ylang.

Known colloquially in this area as *le chef*, Soulouhou commands a certain kind of patriarchal respect in this region of the highlands. He walks with a kind of bravado and is often attended by an entourage of adult sons, in-laws, and small children. Each facet of production is overseen by him, be it the harvesting of cassava, the tending of livestock, or the distillation of ylang-ylang. Women, under his patriarchal power, are expected to harvest food crops and ylang-ylang while also cooking and childrearing. Through status and progeny, he is the master of his domain. He commands family labor. Yet, while in his own words he is the “real boss”, he is merely a manager of the land. An example of the *sultansque* system, his landlord is a store owner and former teacher based in Ouani who inherited the land from his father. All oil produced is given to him.

I arrived at Mohammed Soulouhou’s plot at around 2:15pm. By this time cloves were being bagged to be taken down the hills the next day and sold to a Chinese man in Mutsamudu.<sup>140</sup> Notably, the men bagged the cloves they had picked while the women cooked

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<sup>140</sup> Where ylang-ylang is almost exclusively sold to France, cloves have a variety of international buyers. The most prominent buyers these days are the Chinese. An interesting trade relationship between Chinese businessmen has formed in the highland town of Bazimini whereby local clothes sellers purchase clothes from the former who in turn

cassava, fish, and a bag of white rice that we carried in from town. Soulouhou roamed the fields and the houses to check that everything was in order. He began tending to livestock and tying his cattle to different posts. The gendered division of labor is clear cut, where men tend to livestock and leave to pick cloves while women reproduce the household. Ylang-ylang trees cooperate well with subsistence farming, thus making it easy to integrate into the category of “women’s work”. When talking to most people it seemed to be common knowledge on the island that women work more than men. However, the time dedicated to both is interspersed as the household is mobilized. Subsistence crops are harvested at the same time that ylang-ylang flowers are meticulously picked from their branches.

By 3:00pm the food preparation was paused, the women returned to harvest, and the cloves are fully bagged to be sent to town. There is a lull in the small village corner as the men linger in various thatched roofed dwellings. TikTok videos and French rap songs echoed distantly in the background as I walked each corner of the plot. Around 4:00pm the cooking preparation continued as Soulouhou’s wives arrived with *mataba*, the raw green leaves of cassava that are chopped and boiled into a dish. By 5:00pm the preparation was finished, the fires were lit, and the cooking began.

The village corner consists of two households, one for each wife, each equipped with a set of thatched roof buildings, and in the middle is Soulouhou’s house and a house adjacent for his many sons to sleep in side by side. It is surrounded by the ocean to the north and a receding stream to its east. The buildings consist of a wash station, a sleeping quarters for his wife and her children, a small mosque, and a kitchen area. Soulouhou’s bed is equipped with a mosquito net

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purchase cloves. This has made the town, which is more inaccessible compared to Mutsamudu, the main destination for those looking to purchase new clothes.

and a small mattress, other beds are constructed from palm fronds and sticks, sometimes even pruned branches from the ylang-ylang tree.

In the early evening, the preparations for the weekend ylang-ylang harvest had begun. Harvest baskets, an icon on the back of Diptyque's *Eau Moheli* perfume spray (essentially an exotification of tropicality, see: Appendix Figure 10), were woven out of palm leaves. Rice sacks were laid out and prepared for the harvest time. With a slight drizzle, the smell of the ripe, yellow flowers filled the air and lasted until the mists cleared in the early morning. At the same time, Soulouhou tends livestock downwards on a hill overlooking the ocean with the island of Ngazidja seen faintly in the distance. Women begin cutting select pieces of cassava to be replanted the following workday. The children tended the fields, harvesting peas and shucking more cloves. The entire household was mobilized, Soulouhou the patriarch of the workforce and manager of his bosses' operation.

120kg is the baseline for a flower harvest to produce 3-4 liters of oil, with additional kilograms possible. However, with the crisis in full swing, Soulouhou cannot afford to hire the amount of women necessary to harvest more. Instead, Soulouhou hires only his two in-laws as additional labor on the plot at a minuscule rate of 100KMF for 1kg of flowers collected in their overflowing baskets and bulging satchels. Their children working alongside them receive nothing. One of them, Eswati Salim, explained that with a rice shortage at hand and nutrient depleted soil causing cassava yields to grow smaller, she must resort to the low-pay, piece-rate work provided by Soulouhou. These pressures help to push peasant-workers into the field. During the crisis, what little wages are to be distributed are reserved to Soulouhou's relatives. Eswati has been working for Soulouhou for three years of the crisis.

Before the crisis the collectors came to the village and purchased the oil from Soulouhou directly, who then kicked up the money to his landowner. For the most part, during the crisis, Soulouhou now gives all oil to his boss to sell. Finding a buyer is also sometimes in the hands of Soulouhou, where he will contact other distillers and growers asking if there are buyers around. His supplier network also used to pay him to distill their flowers for him, giving him access to extra profits that he could usually pocket. At other times, if he came up short on the baseline 120kg or wanted additional supply, he could purchase flowers from his supplier network, either on credit or with extra cash that he might have.

I worked alongside both the women and children in the fields and the men around the still. The harvest of ylang-ylang itself is a labor-intensive process. Children scale the trees to access the upper branches which wind outwards as they are trained. The wives, Soulouhou, and his in-laws, fill basket after basket of ylang-ylang flowers, dropping them on a tarp near the distillery. The harvest was difficult on the wrist, and I experienced an odd soreness after the harvest was finished. Plucking the flowers and climbing the trees is a tedious and laborious process, going from tree to tree until a satchel is full. It is an exhausting task all the more so when combined with the labor of distillation. Each flower, yellow, elongated, and spiraling downwards as if reaching towards the ground, is valued as ripe when a small red dot can be seen by the pistil. A three day long process, Soulouhou harvests only one part of his field, saving the second part for the next week, making what is a bi-weekly process on small plots a weekly one.

The distillation process began around 2:20pm, when most women had returned from the field and proceeded to household labor. The ylang-ylang flowers are scraped from their tarps and stuffed into new baskets woven of palm fronds. Each basket represents a certain amount which must be added at a time. Water is diverted from his stream and is pumped into the barrel of the

still. Small embers of ylang-ylang wood are placed into a coconut shell and burned into charcoals. Kindling is made of palm leaves and wood is brought to a slow burn. As the water boils the top of the still is removed, and a cloud of smoke and steam bellows over the shabby, rusted, shanty rooftop that covers the operation. I threw the flowers into the rolling boil, basket by basket, as the smoke and steam poured coarsely into my eyes.

By 4pm the operation was in full swing. Each male member of the family shifted between playing endless games of dominoes and tending the fire. Slowly, over the hours, different men turn in for the night. By 9pm, amid the starlit darkness, a group of five was playing dominoes while another slept warmly by the fire, awakening from time to time to poke it and ensure the rolling boil. A small snack of roasted cassava was prepared on the outskirts of the firepit. Many snacked and went to sleep, but Soulouhou and I slept outside on a bed of blankets until the first batch of oil arrived at 2am. The rich oil poured into the first bottle surrounded by a pungent vapor. We slept for two hours before we brought the bottles down the hills to be delivered to the landlord.

As we made our way into Ouani Soulouhou exhibited a noticeable shift in demeanor. In the hills and his fields he is *le chef*. People there are eager to remind me of his nickname. They shake his hand and are sure to make small talk along the trails. His reputation as a purchaser of flowers, employer, and savvy networker precedes him. Entering Ouani, however, there is a transformation of behavior. Wearing tattered jean shorts and a dirt-stained shirt, as opposed to the more polished clothing of those in town, he held his head down while walking through the streets. Soulouhou does not greet others unless they greet him, representing a sharp longstanding social class distinction between the city-dwellers and the highlanders. In the presence of his

landlord he stands to the side. He is meek and keeps to himself, quietly obeying the orders of his boss or sitting to the side.

Oumadine Mahmoud, Soulouhou's landlord, is a retired gym teacher. Presently, he owns a business selling housing construction materials. He is married with 4 children and, as described above, has been employing Soulouhou steadily since the late 1970s. Soulouhou's role as a tenant and his relationship with Mahmoud has made him akin to family, in his own words a "brother". He divides the share of ylang-ylang profits, giving some to Soulouhou to purchase rice. As Soulouhou's family is essentially a unit of production, Mahmoud has invested a substantial amount into their livelihood. He purchased his hens and a cow, as well as constructing several houses in the village corner. He continues to re-invest in them as the crisis endures and is a stable buyer through the price collapse. When the time comes, he can sell consistently to a collector, the second step in the process delineated by these kinship relations.

### **The Collector and the Exporter**

The relationship between the collector and the export firm is essential in the competition over flowers. The wholesale collector, an often resented figure said to be mischievous and sometimes cruel, goes from village to village, distillery to distillery, measuring the quality of oil and sorting it categorically based on the grade. The quality of the oil is measured using a hydrometer. If kept in the right conditions, the oil will not degrade in quality. Like Soulouhou and other villagers, export firms keep stocks of oil and wait for the price to rise. The wholesale collector is an elusive figure, difficult to track down and only momentarily shows up at the point of production. The large exporters mobilize their networks of wholesale collectors which can attach themselves to intermediate collectors.

Mohamed Ali Majani is the chairman of an unspecified distillers export association in Comoros. Formerly working for *Initiative Developpement (ID)* overseeing production and assisting workers and distillers, he now works for a distiller focused export cooperative in Bambao Mtsanga. As an export staffer, he has established a tight network of wholesale oil collectors which have themselves established networks of distillers. He intends on eventually building a distillery, not only to distill ylang-ylang but also to distill cloves and ginger. While he identifies as an exporter, he essentially functions as a wholesale collector. His cooperative firm assists in the export process, selling to small trading companies such as Cadimaphé and NatGreen and attempting to ensure a fair price. His network of collectors allows him to accrue the oil from owner-operators to sell to larger export companies on their behalf.

I interviewed Salim (alias), a junior employee at the Bernardi Group, in a dimly lit office with the blinds closed so as to limit any knowledge that the interview took place. The Bernardi Group is one of the major exporters of ylang-ylang oil to France. After the largest export firm *Huiles Essentielles des Comores (HEC)* was purchased by rival Biolandes, whom the Bernardi Group purchased from frequently, the Bernardi Group was forced to find other ways of sourcing essential oil. As a means of investing and establishing relationships directly, the Bernardi Group has given trainings and cash investments to distillers, including credit to purchase flowers and build upgraded distilleries. Having established reliable distiller networks, the Bernardi Group can rely on small distillers to meet occasional demand and avoid additional expenditures running their distillery. This way, they can remain tied to the unspecified company in France by relying on those distilleries intimately connected to kinship networks. In the meantime, their distillery remains shuttered.

El-Badaoui Said is a top wholesaler. He refused to state whom he works for. He operates through intermediate collectors, one example being a man named Bakida in Limbi, who has an extensive network of flower collectors and also a large field. As he knows many people, and has much experience, he is regularly fronted 50 million KMF (\$110,192) in boom times with the expectation of delivering large quantities of oil in two weeks. Bakida, much like Sharifa Hamadi and Alayane Ahmed, are reliable in their ability to tap into the large kinship networks of peasant-workers that undergird Ndzuan's ylang-ylang production. However, with the present situation, profits are marginal at best while those successful owner-operators cling to their established relationships on both ends of the industry.

Other collectors are mobilized by el-Badaoui when demand hits, to the extent that his company has even built a special warehouse for him called V5. For intermediate collectors, the only ones who continue to bring oil are small farmers and former distillers who can sell for a lower price. However, many collectors are also challenged having purchased and produced stocks of oil for a higher price before the collapse. Their reticence to sell a certain portion of their stock allows them to continue buying from small farmers within their given network. At the same time, el-Badaoui keeps a close eye on where the oil is coming from and which distillers are the most reliable. They keep meticulous records on those whom they purchase from and choose to invest in, safeguarding them in both times of competition and crisis. However, with the enduring crisis, this system has been stripped to its bare bones.

### **Conclusion:**

During the tail end of my research trip I took a trip to Lake Dzilandzé. Far from the cities, this is a tranquil and lush environment located right beneath Mt. Ntringui. Dotted



alongside the path up to the lake are small shrines where offerings are placed to djinn who are said to inhabit the lake alongside a monster. The ancient lake, the source of much of the island's freshwater supply, is also home to sacred ducks. Considered a holy site, at the time a woman was being exorcised right next to it by a witch doctor. The city-based friends who accompanied me were quick to tell me that these were the original inhabitants of the island, those who still believed in magic and spirits. But far from the tranquility of the deep highlands, a rice shortage was growing more and more dire in the cities. Some townspeople began holding out cups in the streets and begging for the others to place rice in them. As the remaining bags grew more expensive others had relatives in Maore bring back rice to Ndzuani. The situation was growing worse.

When we descended from the calm of Dzilandzé the chaos in Mutsamudu, Mirontsy, and Ouani had begun. As a truck loaded with rice passed through Mirontsy, a group of youth armed with machetes blocked its path and began unloading the rice for the residents of the town. In Mutsamudu, the military had blocked the road to Mirontsy and used tear gas to disperse crowds of growingly angry youth. The military was soon deployed to Mirontsy to disperse young rioters and put out the burning barricades in the road. Still, through the night one could hear chants of *Vive Anjouan!* in the distance, a cry for a secessionist cause in a long neglected island. Throughout the night, however, it was not the smell of burning tires or tear gas that flooded the air, but the gentle sweet aroma of budding ylang-ylang flowers.

A year and a half later I was told by many a friend on the island that the price of ylang-ylang oil had only continued to stagnate. Instead of a shortage of rice, there was now a shortage of bread. With rice shortages, diminished food crop yields, and stagnant prices being recurrent many have progressively exited the ylang-ylang sector. With no end in sight to the downturn

those that turned their livelihoods to ylang-ylang are constantly confronted with the reality that they cannot be nourished by essential oil. Even those within the structure of kinship are now considering exiting the sector altogether, signs that the system might be at its limits. There is also evidence to show that while production persists through booms and busts, production of ylang-ylang oil is declining in the long-term overall.<sup>141</sup>

Without a company such as the SCB or NMKL to directly strike against, the distance created between producer and firm has to a large extent politically neutralized any organized form of peasant-worker struggle. With those in the sector drifting between occupations and becoming increasingly informalized, it is difficult for organization to take place in any one sector. The existence of distillers cooperatives does signal an effort to cut out collectors and establish direct relationships with export firms, creating potential for a bargaining scenario between owner-operators and exporters. In the shadow of a downturn this has yet to occur.

Caught between a riot and outward migration, one of the key mechanisms the peasant-worker has is to simply withdraw. This has been seen in the aforementioned decline in essential oil production over the long term. But what ability does the peasant-worker possess to “hold the market at arm’s length” when they can only exit one sector to enter another, often a more precarious one?<sup>142</sup> In the short term, as some peasant-workers leave the plot and others only shift the burden of labor to food crops, this could potentially work to lower oil supply if demand were to increase and the stock was sold off, thereby raising the price. Perhaps in the long-term this push and pull is in itself a method of bargaining over wages.

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<sup>141</sup> Olivier de Bontin. “Ylang-Ylang Production in Madagascar and the Comoros,” in *Proceedings IFEAT Intl. Conference in Cape Town, South Africa, 27 November – 1 December 2006: “The Industry in sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean Islands*, pp. 123-135.

<sup>142</sup> Frederick Cooper. “Africa and the World Economy,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2/3, pp. 1-86, 1981.

This element of supply response is open to further investigation, especially in light of the recent commodity super-cycle. However, beyond the surface of supply and demand is a web of social relations and social formations that enables the production of the commodity in the first place. It is this which has been laid out in this study, to look at the limits and extent of capital reproducing itself in an extreme geographic location. Contrary to economic logic, often in the most “backward” do we find the advanced. Often in the “traditional” do we find what is most adaptable of the modern.



## Appendix



**Figure 1. Rusticated artisanal distillery outside of Moya, Ndzواني. (Photograph by Author, 2022)**





**Figure 2. Budding ylang-ylang flowers on a pruned branch. (Photograph by author, 2022)**





**Figure 3. A ripe ylang-ylang flower after a light morning rain. (Photograph by author, 2022)**





**Figure 4. Flowers awaiting distillation outside of Bambao Mtsanga, Ndzuani. (Photograph by author, 2022)**





**Figure 5. Mohammed Soulouhou surveys his plot during the ylang-ylang harvest. (Photograph by author, 2022).**





**Figure 6. The distillation process begins at Mohammed Soulouhou’s plot. (Photograph by author, 2022).**



**Figure 7. Smallholder plots encroach into the highland forest, Nzduani. (Photograph by author, 2022)**





**Figure 8. The winding road in Mahmoud Aboud’s expansive plantation in Mitsamiouli, Ngazidja. (Photograph by author, 2022).**



**Figure 9. Ndzuaní. (Photograph by author, 2022)**





**Figure 10. Diptyque *Eau Moheli* perfume spray featuring an image of the woven harvest basket. (Photograph from Diptyque website [https://www.diptyqueparis.com/en\\_uk/p/eau-de-toilette-eau-moheli-101.html](https://www.diptyqueparis.com/en_uk/p/eau-de-toilette-eau-moheli-101.html)).**

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