

THE SEYCHELLES

Unquiet Islands

Marcus Franda



THE SEYCHELLES

PROFILES • NATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

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To Stephanie
Pour qu'elle comprenne



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Preface

This book was written between November 1978 and June 1981 as part of my coverage of the Indian Ocean area for Universities Field Staff International (UFSI). Formerly the American Universities Field Staff, UFSI is a consortium established in 1951 of eighteen universities, research institutes, and other educational organizations.¹ The presidents of the universities that founded the Field Staff felt the need for a career corps of area-based scholarly journalists who could report to Americans on contemporary affairs around the world. With its change of name in 1981, the present leadership of the Field Staff has dramatically set forth its aspirations to expand the organization to include non-U.S. associates and universities and to report to a global rather than a U.S. audience.

The Field Staff espouses no causes, promotes no ideology, aligns with no political group, has no governmental connections, and favors no particular social science theory. As a Field Staff associate since 1971, my principal charge has been to write readable and balanced short articles (called Field Staff Reports) on events of significance for a predominantly U.S. audience. The Field Staff also publishes a journal called *Common Ground*, makes educational films, prepares television documentaries, and hosts conferences. It is funded in part by the eighteen educational institutions that sponsor it, in part by the sale of its books, articles, films, and television programs, and in part by grants from foundations, private corporations, and individuals interested in the study of world affairs.

Special mention of appreciation for getting me started on this book must go to Drs. Lloyd Lewan and John Tymitz of the Institute for Shipboard Education, who first introduced me physically to the Seychelles, and to Dr. Larry W. Bowman of the University of Connecticut, who suggested I write the book. Lewan and Tymitz got me through the stormy seas of the Indian Ocean—on occasion, even without boilers—while Bowman guided this enterprise through the stormier climate of university life in the United States. I am especially grateful to the Field Staff for

funding the research on which this book is based and for allowing me to publish it in the Profiles/Nations of Contemporary Africa series of Westview Press. Lynne Rienner, Jeanne Remington, and Susan McRory of Westview Press deserve praise for their excellent work.

My family—Vonnice, Charlie, and Stephanie—have earned more tributes than I can pay them for their help in collecting data and writing. They ran errands for me, took pictures, edited manuscripts, and provided the warmest camaraderie and companionship that a father and husband could hope for. By now they understand the foibles of a cantankerous writer better than anyone else in the world. Mrs. Soundara Raghavan of the American Institute of Indian Studies in New Delhi merits special mention for typing this and most of my other manuscripts over the past few years.

There are many other people in the Seychelles—in the government, in the party, in the army, and elsewhere—whom I would like to thank, but I hesitate to do so because mention of their names could cause some of them difficulties. They will recognize the thoughts, materials, and discussions they so generously shared with me reflected in the pages that follow. My hope is that the book will exhibit the balanced judgment and accurate use of data their contributions deserve. Errors of judgment and fact should be ascribed entirely to me.

It should be pointed out that, despite their failings, the present party and government contain large numbers of people who are enthusiastic about the experimental enterprises in which they are engaged, are open about their plans and methods of proceeding, and have been candid with me about their failings. Because of these people, Seychelles does not yet have a government like so many others in Africa and Asia that have been lost entirely in machinations to stay in power. It is still possible for a foreign journalist or scholar to move about in society and discuss important issues.

My personal hope is that the government will shift further in the direction of greater openness while maintaining the dedication and hard work that have been exhibited by its young and vibrant members and adapting its programs to realities when it recognizes clear failures. In that event, it could have an outside chance of legitimizing the very brutal methods it used to come to power and remain there. It would certainly be an appropriate future scenario for a set of idyllic islands whose motto has been for more than a century, *Finis Coronat Opus*.

Turtle Bay, Mahé
Seychelles

Marcus Franda

NOTES

1. Members of the consortium are the University of Alabama at Birmingham, University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, Brown University, California State University at Fullerton, California State University at Northridge, Dartmouth College, East-West Center, University of Hawaii, Indiana University, Institute for Shipboard Education, University of Kansas, University of Malaya, Michigan State University, University of Missouri, University of Pittsburgh, Ramapo College of New Jersey, Utah State University, and the University of Wisconsin system.



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History

The Republic of Seychelles is one of the tiniest nations in the world. The total area of all its lands is no more than 171 square miles (444 square kilometers), about one and a half times the size of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. According to the 1977 census, the population of the entire country was 61,898, slightly less than Kalamazoo, Michigan, or Troy, New York. Like many other small countries, Seychelles has a romantic appeal, particularly to those who value the intimacy and individualism usually associated with small geographical size, but the islands are being challenged by a number of problems resulting from their past parochialism and their diminutive world stature.

How can a tiny country like Seychelles survive economically? Where can it mobilize the human and other resources to make itself viable in a world of rapid change? How can it preserve its distinctive national identity and cultural values? Is it possible to maintain anything resembling its past peacefulness and unspoiled beauty? What is to prevent it from being overwhelmed by the massive world forces of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?

These questions are perhaps felt a bit more intensely in Seychelles than in other small territories because the country was historically far more isolated than other lilliputian states and yet now finds itself in the midst of a destabilized ocean area of considerable strategic importance. Completely uninhabited until two hundred years ago, and then only sparsely populated by ex-slaves, European adventurers, and Asian traders, the country was suddenly opened up to major influences from the great powers with the building of a U.S. satellite tracking station in the 1960s and construction of a first-rate international airport in 1971. A massive boom in international tourism has since proceeded apace with conflicts over conservation, fishing rights, and oil exploration. Strategic and commercial factors have stimulated the interests of, among others, the Soviet Union, China, France, India, Tanzania, Kenya, and the United States, as well as a number of Arabs and South Africans. The coup d'état that took place on 5 June 1977, and the abortive coup attempt of