

Why monsters are afraid of the dark

Twenty-seven heavily armed mercenaries, their faces blackened with charcoal, silently paddled ashore from an ancient trawler on a moonless May night eight years ago. They landed on Grande Comore, largest of the 675 square miles of flyspeck islands known as the Comoros that lie 400 miles off the coast of East Africa.

The men split into three groups. One headed off to capture the island's sole radio station. The second went to the prison where the former president was being held in a dungeon. The third, led by the group's chief, Bob Denard, moved swiftly upward toward the hilltop villa of Comoro's Supreme Ruler, President and Prophet, Ali Solih.

This was the Comoro Islands in 1978, a wretched, tortured little nation of 400,000 blacks and mixed race people, 90% illiterate, with no telephones, eight doctors, endemic malnutrition and a madman for a ruler. Three years previously the Comoros, except for the one island of Mayotte, had proclaimed their independence from France. Almost at once came a coup, then another, and another for three chaotic years.

Then a mild-mannered bureaucrat named Ali Solih came to power. Within days he revealed a new, sinister personality. Solih proclaimed himself supreme leader and ordered the Comoros to be immediately transformed into a people's republic modelled after Mao's China. All government officials were fired and replaced by illiterate, teenage school dropouts. Administrative records dating back nearly 140 years were burned.

Teenage gangs roamed the streets searching out



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“counter-revolutionaries” while Tanzanian troops, funded by Canadian aid money, guarded Solih.

Religion and the press were banned. Everything was nationalized.

Meanwhile, the supreme leader passed his nights in a bacchanalia of teenage girls, hashish, whisky and the narcotic shrub, gao. To come down the following morning, Solih breakfasted on bennies and Valium.

After a few months of this regimen Solih proclaimed himself a divine prophet — and the only true one. Everyone was ordered to worship Solih. At the same time a nightmare of terror descended over the islands as Solih's teenage thugs raped, robbed and murdered. After the prophet had a bad dream about dogs, he had all the island's canines exterminated.

In the spring of 1979, two wealthy Comoran exiles in Paris contacted Bob Denard, one of the last of the renowned French mercenaries, known as *les affreux*, who had fought their way across the Congo, Katanga and Biafra. They gave Denard \$2.5 million. Three months later he produced a little band of Belgian and French mercenaries and the trawler *Masiwa*, which,

after a long voyage, arrived that fateful May night off Grande Comore.

The radio station and prison quickly fell to the surprise attack. Then Bob Denard and nine men, armed with sawed-off shotguns and sub-machineguns, quickly killed the guards around Solih's villa and burst into the prophet's bedroom. A dazed and most surprised supreme leader was hustled away from his nymphets and hashish and thrown into prison.

Two weeks later the new president arrived from Paris and Comorians danced for joy in the streets. On that same day Denard and his men went to the prison and pumped two bullets into the ex-prophet. Denard draped Solih's body over the fender of his Land Rover and drove through the capital to show people that the monster was well and truly dead. Then Denard drove to the top of a nearby mountain and dumped the body there.

Twenty-seven men had captured a nation and rid it of a demented tyrant. But so great were protests from the rest of black Africa that Bob Denard was denied his fondest wish, to settle down peacefully in the Comoros. Off he flew into obscurity.

But in the Comoros, I am told, people still speak in awe of *l'affreux* (the frightful one) who came one night to save them from the monster Solih.

Black Africans have a fatalistic acceptance of despots and madmen like Solih, Emperor Bokassa or Idi Amin. Today a few, such as Liberia's Samuel Doe, still remain. But each night before retiring, Doe must double check his door locks and fearfully listen to the night sounds. It just might be Bob Denard and *les affreux*.