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France in and France of the Indian Ocean

The second of the seminars was held in June, also at The Station. This time the subject was France, the country being in the unusual position of having territory within the region and, in addition, having a wider influence. For this event, the main speakers were the French Ambassador, His Excellency, Lionel Majesté Larrouy, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and now Health Minister, Jean-Paul Adam, and the Dean of UniSey's Faculty of Arts and Social Development. Ms Joelle Perreau.

As the Ambassador explained, France exercises great influence in the region and has done so over several centuries. During the eighteenth century it occupied a number of key territories, including Maurice and, of course, Séchelles. With the demise of the Emperor Napoleon, these two possessions were ceded to the British but France retained Bourbon (later renamed La Réunion) and the island of Mayotte. During the twentieth century, as part of a wider process of European decolonization, the inhabitants of La Réunion elected in a referendum to stay within the French realm and it was re-designated as an overseas department. Mayotte voted in the same way and resisted the option of becoming part of the neighbouring group of islands that were soon to comprise the Republic of Comoros. France also retains possession of some uninhabited islands to the south, which are of particular value in extending the parent country's access to valuable fisheries as well as enabling a military presence in the western Indian Ocean.

But French influence extends well beyond these particular possession and Joelle Perreau explained the importance of Francophonie in the region. In addition to the language, other forms of French culture have held their place. Even in Seychelles, where the British retained control for more than a century and a half, French influence remains and, indeed, the language is one of three official languages of the republic.

As a third contribution, Minister Adam was in an ideal position to show how contemporary France has been, and continues to be, a good friend of Seychelles. This has shown itself not only in its direct contribution within the region but also through the French Government in Paris, where support for the innovative debt-swap agreement and other diplomatic initiatives have been of great value.

The event (which was conducted in French) was ably chaired by Dr Erna Athanasius, who, like many in Seychelles, is proficient in all of the three official languages.