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Population & Societies

More than half of all adults living in Mayotte were born elsewhere

Version
française

Claude-Valentin Marie*, Didier Breton**, Maude Couzet**

The island of Mayotte, a French overseas department, has experienced rapid population growth and transformation as a result of migration. Using data from the Migration, Family, and Ageing survey, Claude-Valentin Marie, Didier Breton, and Maude Couzet retrace the history of Mayotte's population and describe the factors transforming it.

Counting 256,500 inhabitants in 2017, the island of Mayotte (Box 1) has the fastest-growing population in France [1]. From an estimated 23,000 in 1958, it has risen more than fivefold in less than 40 years (Table), and the annual rate of increase between 2012 and 2017, at more than 4%, is ten times higher than that of France as a whole. This trend has accelerated since 2012, with a mean annual net increase of 8,800 inhabitants, well above that of the previous five years (2007–2012). As a consequence, the island, measuring 374 sq. km, is densely populated, with 685 inhabitants per sq. km. Mayotte is the poorest department (*département*) of France [2] and faces severe economic, health, and environmental problems.

A sharp increase in births to foreign parents

In 2017, the annual birth rate in Mayotte was 38 births per 1,000 inhabitants, equivalent to that of Senegal or Nigeria. Following a period of relative stability up to 2013, (around 7,000 annual births between 2007 and 2013), the birth rate has risen steadily, with a growing contribution of foreign mothers (74% in 2017), mostly from the Comoros (69%). Half of the fathers are French and half foreign, again mainly from the Comoros. But the most remarkable development is the upsurge in births to two foreign parents (42% in 2017 versus 28% in

Table. Population of Mayotte since 1958

| Census year | Population | Annual growth (%) ^(a) |
|-------------|------------|----------------------------------|
| 1958 | 23,364 | - |
| 1966 | 32,607 | 4.2 |
| 1978 | 47,246 | 3.1 |
| 1985 | 67,205 | 5.2 |
| 1991 | 94,410 | 5.8 |
| 1997 | 131,220 | 5.7 |
| 2002 | 160,265 | 4.1 |
| 2007 | 186,452 | 3.1 |
| 2012 | 212,645 | 2.7 |
| 2017 | 256,500 | 4.1 |

Source: Population censuses, INSEE.

^(a) since previous census

2014).¹ This finding is important because these are the first children potentially affected by the new nationality code introduced in 2017 which modifies the *jus soli* right to citizenship by birth. Henceforth, children born in Mayotte enjoy this right if at least one of their parents has been living legally on the island for at least three months before their birth.

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¹ In 2014, 39% of children were born to a couple of mixed nationality (foreign father or mother) and 19% to two French parents.

Box 1. A colonial exception

The island of Mayotte, located 8,000 km from metropolitan France in the Mozambique Channel between East Africa (400 km) and Madagascar (300 km) is 70 km from the Comoran island of Anjouan (see Figure 1). From the fifteenth century, Mayotte occupied a strategic position in the Indian Ocean, serving as a hub for the slave trade on the sea route to India. Settlers of Bantu origin who arrived between the fifth and eighth centuries were later followed by immigrants from East Africa, and the Arab invasions of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries brought Islam to the island.* The population of Mayotte has surged over the last decade, and its structure is now evolving under the combined effects of high birth rates and large-scale migration.

Mayotte's earliest ties with France date back to 1841, when the sultan Andriantsouli offered to hand over the island in exchange for protection from his covetous peers on the other islands of the archipelago. In 1887, the French protectorate extended across all the Comoro Islands, with Dzaoudzi on the island of Mayotte serving as its capital. In 1946, the Comoros obtained "overseas territory" status (TOM) and were governed by a Territorial Assembly and a Government Council with extensive administrative autonomy. The strengthening of this autonomy in 1961, followed by the transfer of the capital from Dzaoudzi to Moroni on the island of Grande Comore in 1962, were contested by many Mahorans (inhabitants of Mayotte) who feared the prospect of a more dependent relationship with the other islands.

This fear was exacerbated in 1972 when the Territorial Assembly voted for independence. The Mahoran elites strongly opposed the 1973 agreements between France and the Comoros. Independence was confirmed by referendum in 1974, with an almost 100% vote of approval on the three other islands, but was rejected by 64% in Mayotte. While ratifying the independence of the Comoros, France proposed a second referendum in Mayotte to make a final decision on its status. It was held in 1976, and more than 99% of Mahorans voted to stay in the French Republic. In 2011, Mayotte became the 101st French department and the fifth overseas department (DOM) alongside Réunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana.

* Today, more than 90% of the population of Mayotte is Muslim.

family, and ageing, young women below age 25 reported wanting 4.3 children on average.

The survey also revealed that fertility is higher among Comoran women and more specifically those from Anjouan (4.7 children versus 3.7 for Mayotte natives). This difference mainly reflects the educational deficit of women from Anjouan; for an equivalent level of education, they have no more children than women born in Mayotte [3].

From a "land of immigration" to a "land of emigration"

From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, net migration to Mayotte was strongly positive, accounting for almost 30% of its population growth. The trend then reversed, initially in response to the new "Balladur visa" introduced in 1995 in place of the automatic three-month visa previously granted to Comorans entering the island. This reduced the numbers of legal immigrants but did not curb overall inflows.

Despite the danger of shipwreck and drowning, many men, women, and children continue to risk their lives by squeezing into small boats (known as *kwassas-kwassas*) to cross the 70 km of ocean between Anjouan and Mayotte in the hope of starting a new life there.² Expulsions to the Comoros have increased accordingly, often reaching levels well above those recorded for the whole of metropolitan France. They average around 25,000 per year and peaked at almost 26,500 in 2010. "Undocumented" Comoran immigration is now a key political challenge in Mayotte.³

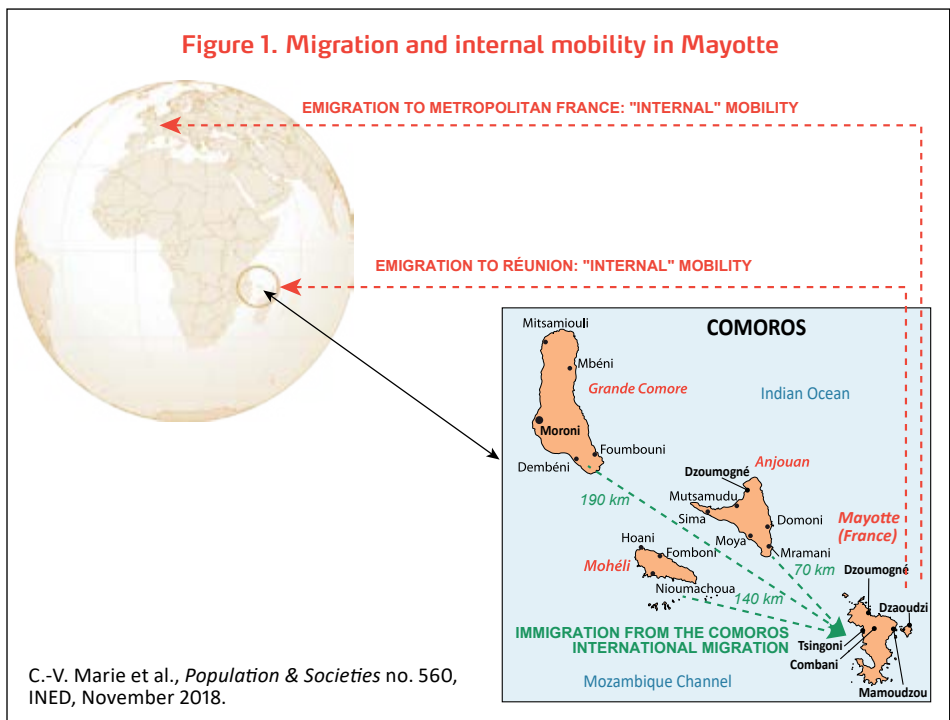
But today's negative net migration is due largely to an increasing outflow of young natives. This trend is even more pronounced in Mayotte than in the other French overseas departments, which are similarly affected [4]. Departures to Réunion, a more long-standing phenomenon, mainly concern low-educated or poorly qualified men and women on the margins of society; in 1999, 86% of Mahorans living in Réunion were unemployed. Today, departures to metropolitan France are more frequent, especially among young people wishing to continue their education, find a job, or obtain a qualification. The government-backed support provided by LADOM⁴ encourages this type of mobility, as evidenced by the large share of young Mahorans aged 18–24 who

Four children per woman in 2015–2016

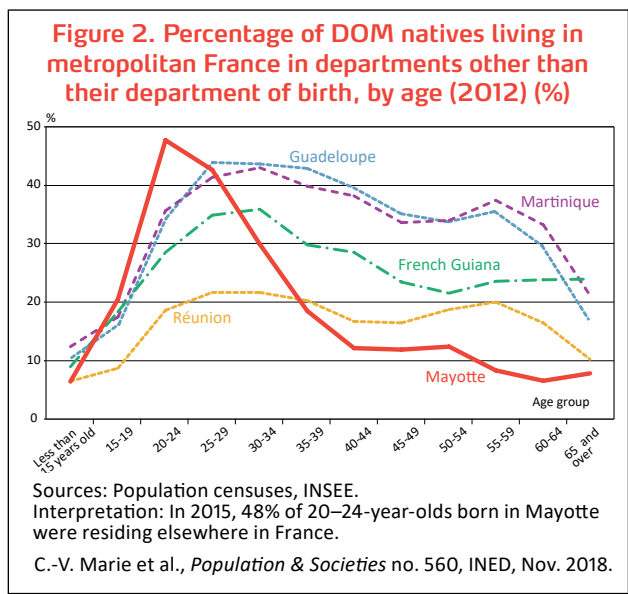
The total fertility rate was four children per woman in 2015–2016, but fertility is plummeting. Between the cohorts born in 1940–1949 and those born in 1970–1976, the share of women who have had seven or more children has fallen by half. Fertility intentions nonetheless remain high. When interviewed for the MFV (Migrations, Famille et Vieillesse) survey on migration,

² Several thousand Comorans have died in their attempt to reach Mayotte. A 2012 report by the French Senate gave an estimation of "between 7,000 and 10,000 deaths since 1995".

³ The migrant crisis is destabilizing the entire archipelago. In recent years, groups of Mahoran inhabitants have organized numerous raids to "dislodge" suspected illegal Comoran immigrants from their homes and chase them away in the belief that they are responsible for the "growing insecurity" on the island. This includes drawing up nominative lists of the people who house or employ them.



appeared for the first time in Mayotte in the 2007 census. It illustrates the accelerating trend of migration in early adulthood, mainly towards metropolitan France. A further characteristic of this mobility is a tendency for native emigrants to return to the island, sometimes after a long period of absence. In 2016, 30% of all native adults living in Mayotte, and almost half of those aged 25–34 were “return migrants”. The majority of these young people (60%) had previously left the island under the mobility support programme.



have settled elsewhere in France (45% versus less than 10% among those aged 35 and above) (Figure 2). Without this emigration, the majority of adults living in Mayotte would be natives (57% versus 45% at present).⁵

The evolution of Mayotte’s population pyramid illustrates the changes that have marked the demographics of the island over the last 30 years (Figure 3). The steady broadening of the base from 1997 reflects the rapid increase in births and, from 2012, the recent record upsurge. These births are themselves strongly linked to immigration, since almost three-quarters are to foreign mothers, who outnumber foreign men on the island, as shown by the skewed sex ratio in favour of women at young adult ages.

Another remarkable feature is the notch that deepens at around age 20 – mirroring a long-standing pattern observed in the French Caribbean and Réunion – which

A transformation of the population structure

While high birth and immigration rates are producing exceptional population growth in Mayotte, their combined effects are having an equally spectacular impact on the population structure, with native Mahorans now being a minority on the island. In 2015–2016, the MFV survey shows that more than half of the adults (aged 18–79) living in the department were not born there: a large majority are from the Comoros (42%) and more specifically Anjouan (30%).⁶ Another 12% were born further abroad, and 8% were born elsewhere in France.⁷ In total, more than 40% of these “immigrants” are foreigners, of whom a majority have no residence permit and are living on the island illegally. Here too, the situation in Mayotte is exceptional.⁸

The challenge of educating the new generations of Mahorans

In this context of rapid population growth, one of the first challenges for Mayotte is to educate its children. In this

⁴ The role of LADOM (Agence de l’outre-mer pour la mobilité) is to promote vocational training among natives of the French overseas departments by facilitating travel to metropolitan France. Funding is provided by the French government (€23.6 million) and by the Overseas Collectivities (€5.5 million). In 2017, 43% of the 19,444 LADOM student travel grants were awarded to young Mahorans.

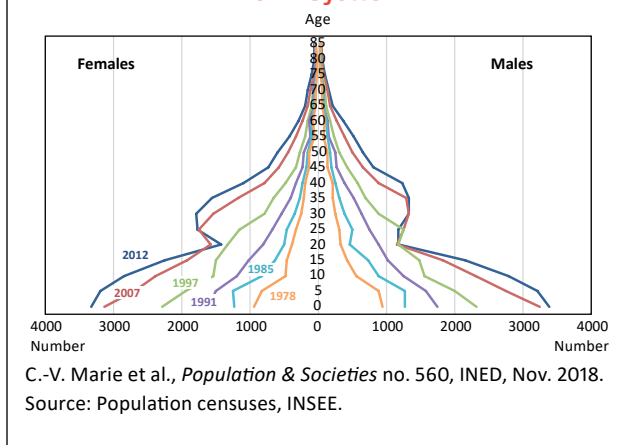
⁵ In all, in 2015, more than 25,000 Mahoran natives were enumerated in metropolitan France, of whom 60% were aged below 25.

⁶ In 1985, only 12% of the population of Mayotte were non-natives.

⁷ Mainly natives of metropolitan France (known as M’Zoungou) and Réunion

⁸ Only French Guiana has a comparable dynamic, though smaller in scale.

Figure 3. Changes in the population pyramid of Mayotte



area, Mayotte lags well behind the rest of France and is confronted by a severe lack of resources that has led to oversized classes, poor academic performance, illiteracy, and record school dropout rates; in education too, Mayotte is an outlier.

In 2014, 100,400 Mahorans aged 15 or above had left school or had never attended school. In September 2018, there were more than 100,000 school-aged children – an increase of 4.2% in one year and an all-time record – of whom more than half were at primary level, the most chronically under-resourced section of the education system in Mayotte. One-third of nursery and primary schools still operate a “rotation” system whereby pupils attend school for half of each day: the same classroom is occupied by two different classes, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. As the MFV survey shows, this arrangement affects the children of foreigners in particular. Mayotte also has record illiteracy levels. In 2015, more than half of all young people had literacy problems, and 75% aged 17–24 had severe difficulties with reading.⁹

The efforts required to raise educational levels and develop the economy represent a major challenge for Mayotte, and expectations are high, as the mass demonstrations in recent years have shown.

⁹ The vernacular languages in Mayotte are Shimaore and Shibushi.

Box 2. The Migration, Family, and Ageing survey (MFV)

The MFV survey in Mayotte follows on from those conducted in 2009 and 2010 in four other French overseas departments (Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, and Réunion). It forms part of a general project to develop and improve the production of demographic and social information in the French overseas departments and regions. Between September 2015 and March 2016, 3,200 people aged 18–79 were interviewed.

The survey aims to establish a detailed picture of sociodemographic change in the community, such as the scale and characteristics of migration, changes in fertility and family structures, young people’s school careers and labour market integration, the extent of social deprivation, and changes in traditional forms of mutual aid.

The survey was conducted by INED (survey design and scientific oversight) in collaboration with INSEE (project management).

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Abstract

With around 23,400 inhabitants in 1958, the population of the island of Mayotte has increased by more than tenfold in the last 50 years, reaching 256,000 inhabitants in 2017. Three-quarters of children have foreign-born mothers, mostly from the Comoros. Immigration, which has long contributed to population growth, is coupled with considerable emigration, notably among young people. More than half those aged 20–24 who were born in Mayotte reside in metropolitan France, for example. What has emerged is a transformation of the population structure: more than half of adult inhabitants of the island were not born there and are from the neighbouring Comoran islands. Mayotte’s population is very young, with educational deficits. One of the island’s first challenges is thus to improve education.

Keywords

Mayotte, Comoros, French overseas department, fertility, births, immigration, emigration, population growth, education

