

## **Comorian or French? Mayotte between two worlds.**

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### **Abstract**

While the dichotomy old world/new world generally refers to the Americas, the encounter between old and new also frames constructions of identity elsewhere. The island of Mayotte, a French department but one of the Comoro Islands, sits between an “old” world, the Comorian world – part of a wider western Indian Ocean world – within which it has been embedded for centuries, and the “new”, French colonial world that has incorporated Mayotte as an integral part of both France and the European Union. Politically French, promises of prosperity that prove to be illusory, accessible only to immigrants from metropolitan France, nevertheless attract large numbers of irregular immigrants from neighbouring Ndzuanis. Both groups of immigrants are like and unlike the Mahorais islanders; Immigrants from France are, like the Mahorais, French, but unlike the Mahorais they are not Comorian. Immigrants from Ndzuanis are not French, but like the Mahorais, they are Comorian.

How are the Mahorais driven to construct a hybrid, creole identity based on memories of migrations and recognition of heritage, both colonial and Comorian, all while recognising the dangers of both, in an attempt to thread a path between the two identities, neither of which either fully accessible or entirely desirable? For both the French state and for the Mahorais, material heritage is more effectively represented by colonial vestiges, ruined sugar mills and barracks; public representations of Comorian heritage – be they mosques or myths – risk running counter to the national narrative of belonging and the discourse, politically essential, that Mayotte is not Comorian. Nevertheless, Mayotte is Comorian, and in this paper I analyse how Mahorais confront the paradox of being at once and yet not fully either French and/or Comorian.