

**Groupe de Démographie Africaine**

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**POPULATION SIZE  
IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES :  
AN EVALUATION**

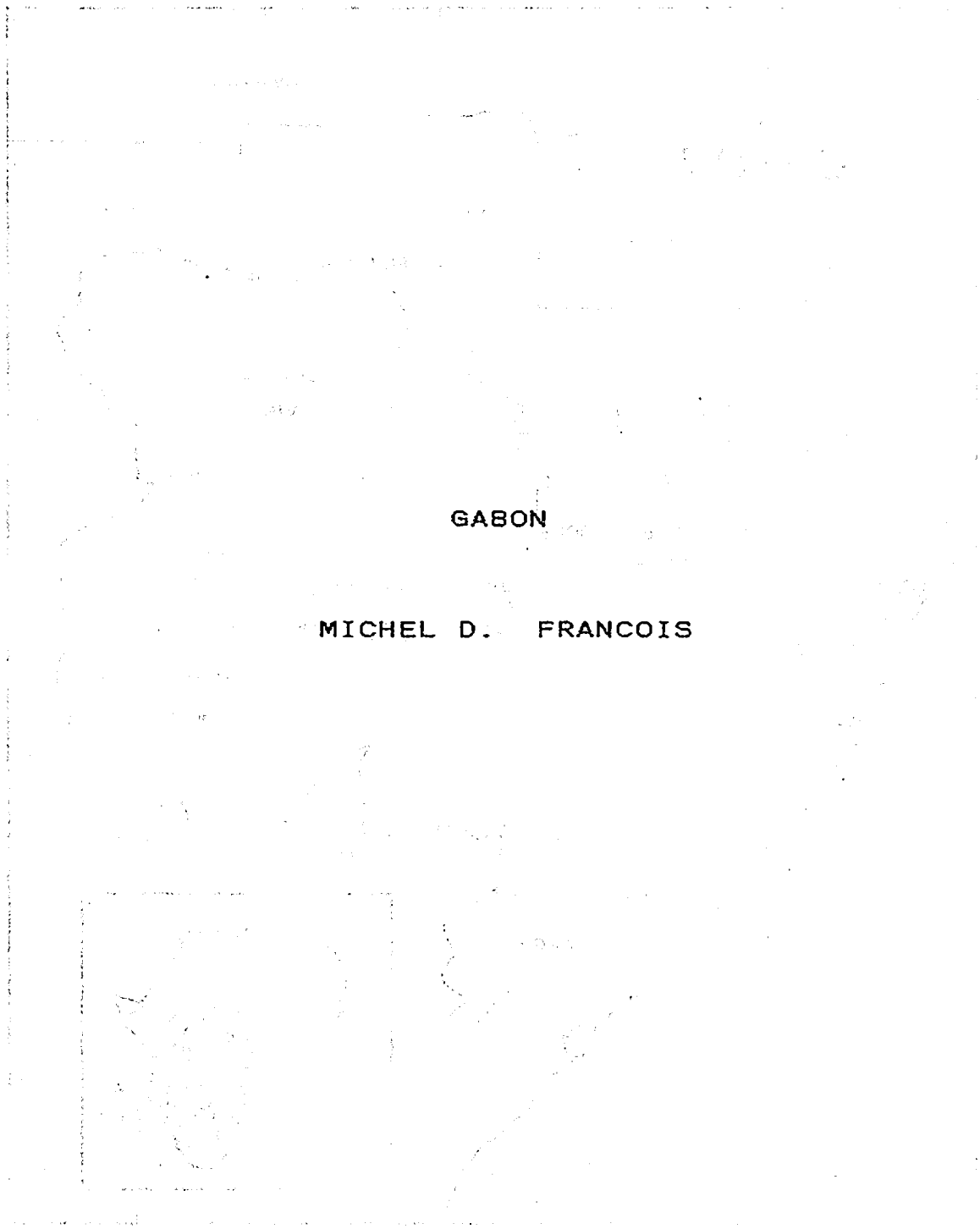
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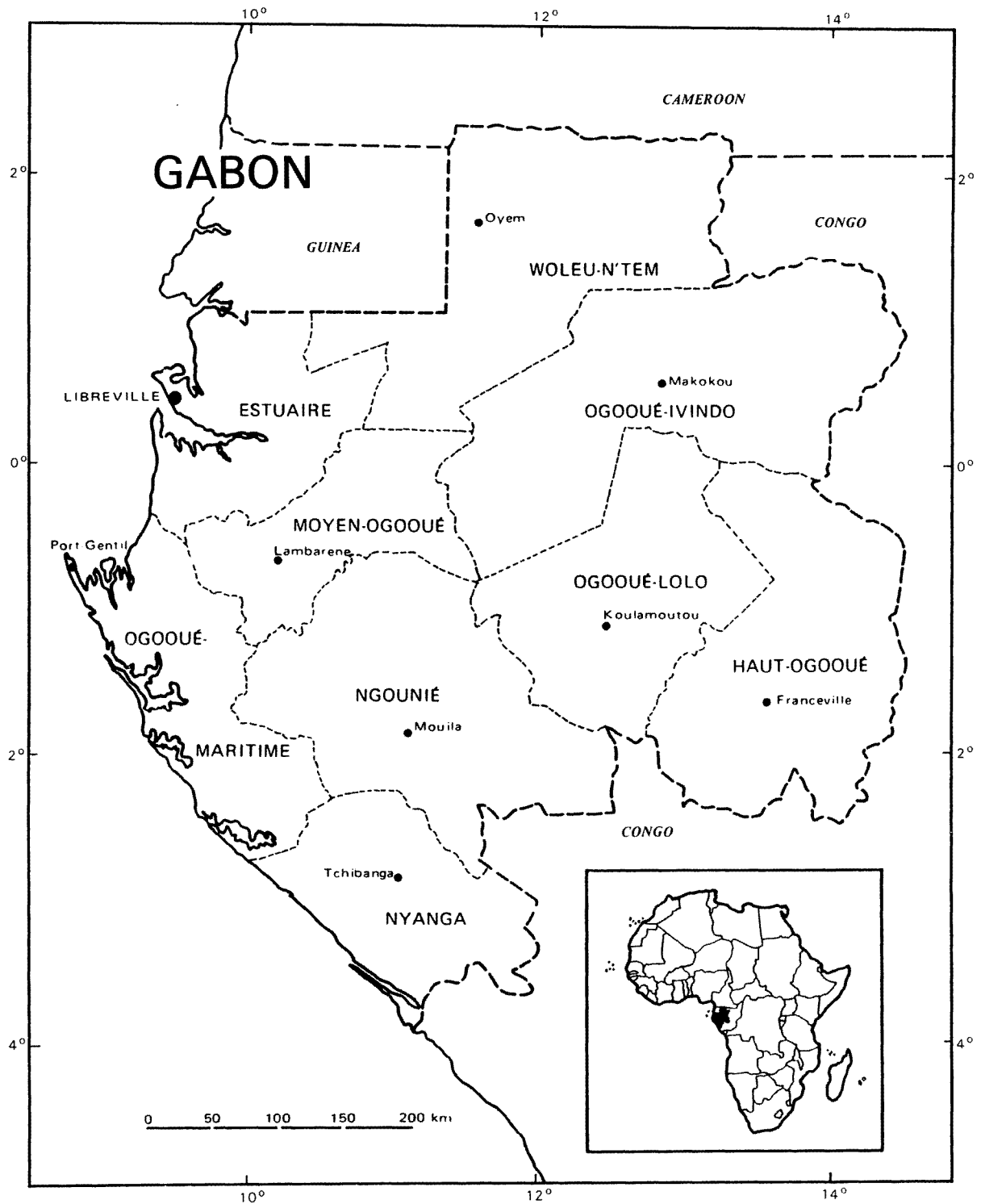
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## G A B O N

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Equatorial French Africa, a unitary colony acquired by the French in 1882, was a General Governorate of four territories, namely Gabon, Middle-Congo, Oubangui-Chari and Chad, which were divided into twenty administrative districts called departments.

Gabon became the Independent Gabonese Republic in 1960. This is situated on the West coast of the African continent and straddles the equator, covering over 268,000 square kilometres. It shares 1,600 kilometers of frontier with Equatorial Guinea, the United Republic of Cameroon, the People's Republic of Congo, and has 800 kilometers of coastline.

From a traditional geography of forest landscape, temporary plantations, small villages and scattered encampments, a modern geography of mines, derricks, worksites, buildings and roads has developed since Independence, centres of attraction for the rural population and also for foreigners.

It is only for the last ten years that the population of Gabon has again exceeded two inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. Today the population composition still reveals significant consequences of a profoundly perturbed demographic history. Gabonese demography cannot exist without the use of historical data; nor can there be any correct adjustment if the role of history in natural and migratory movements is ignored. The evolution of the population size in Gabon is first and foremost a reflection of its history, and all the more so since its numbers are low (less than 700,000 Gabonese).

**II. DATA SOURCES****1) Historical Estimates**

The existence of documents dating back to the 15th century, the forest reduced almost everywhere to the secondary state, the certain existence of a pre-history, are all factors which go to prove the occupation of Gabon four or five centuries ago. Although a proportion of the present people seem to have come from elsewhere, and some of them could have been there for generations, we have no knowledge as to the extent to which the forest might have provided shelter and refuge with regard to extensive geographic mobility on a continental scale.

Secular States do not seem to have existed in Gabon. The study of Gabonese ethno-history is, as yet, still not advanced enough to provide significant indices on ethnic groups with no writings, which today number about forty.

The first descriptions of the Gabonese hinterland, giving an idea of the population, date back to the 19th century. These records are numerous

and detailed enough for comparison with the situation of the 1960's and for an hypothesis to be formed of a Gabonese population of approximately 600,000 inhabitants at the end of the last century.

## 2) Data from the Colonial Period

There are no national archives available on the subject. No attempt appears to have been made, up until now, to rectify this: few documents are therefore available. These include:

- An official note from the Office of Political Affairs and General Administration (APAG), dated 1951, which gives sixteen reports on the population of the territory between 1917 and 1950 (in the form of an annex);
- The chapter entitled "Demography" in the 1938 annual report of the General Inspection of Health and Medical Services by the physician Ledentu;
- The supplement to the 1938 XXXth monthly report, by the International Public Hygiene Office, with a paper on the demography of the French colonies.
- The statistical yearbook of French Possessions, in its provisional edition of 1944, for the pre-war years;
- The statistical yearbook of AEF, 1936-1955, 2 volumes.

From these and other documents Table 51 was compiled. This table takes into account the annexing of the Department of Haut Ogooué to Middle Congo between 1926 and 1938. In 1936 this province accounted for 47,000 inhabitants.

The first official census of Equatorial French Africa (AEF) dates back to 1933 and the last quinquennial census to 1936, but for Gabon only the results obtained during this time by "population sampling" are available and the technical basis of this "sampling" is unknown.

From 1947 onwards, the AEF Department of Statistics centralized in Brazzaville and extracted the data from the annual economic and political district reports, based on village monographs or population registers.

TABLE 51 - GABON - POPULATION TRENDS FROM 1908 TO 1960

YEAR	POPULATION	YEAR	POPULATION
1908	650 000 [4]	1950	405 000
1917	482 000	1953	393 000
1936	455 000	1955	402 000
1939	443 000	1956	408 000
1943	438 000	1957	412 000
1946	421 000	1959	416 000
1948	411 000	(1960) [16]	(448 564) [16]

In 1950, a Population and Demography Commission was created in AEF (decree of August 2nd 1950) and in this context a survey on the sex ratio (1951-1955) was conducted by the Department of Statistics of the High Commissionership of AEF in Brazzaville.

### 3) Recent Population Data

a) The General Population Census (1960-1961): financed by the French Co-operation and Assistance Fund, and conducted by the Gabonese National Department of Statistics with the aid of the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE - Paris cooperation). Crude result published: approximately 448,564 inhabitants (Gabonese and foreigners).

b) The Demographic Sample Survey (1960-1961): carried out simultaneously with the census. The sample was based on three strata (villages, worksites, urban centres); the sampling frame was a list of population clusters; the sample was systematic (1:10 or 1:5, according to the strata).

c) The General Population Census (1969-1970): financed by the Gabonese Government and conducted by the Gabonese National Department of Statistics. Crude result: approximately 526,884 inhabitants (Gabonese and foreigners).

d) Libreville, the capital of Gabon: has had the advantage of good demographic observation: enumeration of 1943; municipal census of 1953; Lasserre study in 1958; the 1960-61 census; the 1964 census with the municipality; and the 1969 census. (Results published).

e) Civil Registration: very incomplete and sometimes non-existent in the rural environment; but it is useable for Libreville and it led to an ORSTOM study published in 1976.

f) Administrative Census: theoretically, each district chief should carry out an annual administrative census (count). By 1970, the National Department of Statistics had still not succeeded in centralizing even one of these censuses, carried out since 1960, for the whole of the country and a given year. The crude results of these counts were lower than the crude results of the 1960-61 and 1969-70 censuses by 5 to 6%.

g) The Counts and their updating by the Department of Major Endemic Diseases based on routine and annual visits, were very close to the crude results of the statistical censuses (underestimation of a few %).

h) Official Population: since 1971, the National Department of Statistics has given an 'official population' figure which it seems useful to mention here, as it is representative of an attitude common to several other underpopulated developing countries.

The detailed publication of data (by province, prefecture and sub-prefecture) on the evolution of the Gabonese population from 1970 to 1978, in a monthly report by the General Board of Statistics and Economic Studies in 1979, giving a total population of 1,300,151 inhabitants in 1978, is just as significant on the eve of the 1980 census. As in 1970, the real results of the 1980 census are unknown; and, as in 1970, the reason is the political desire to overstate the population size, without distinguishing nationals from foreigners.

TABLE 52 - GABON - POPULATION TRENDS FROM 1960 TO 1978 ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL STATISTICS

YEAR	POPULATION	MEAN ANNUAL GROWTH RATE
1960	630 000	3.1 %
1970	950 009	4.0 %
1978	1 300 151	

According to the table above, the population of Gabon has doubled in less than 18 years (the demographic survey of 1960-1961 revealed a crude birth rate of 35 per 1,000; a crude death rate of 25 per 1,000 for men and 31 per 1,000 for women; and a sterility rate in women between 15 and 49 years of 33 per 1,000).

### III. A CRITICAL STUDY OF SOURCES

1) 'Historical Data' (or descriptions) are good enough to suppose, by comparing with the situation observed between 1950 and 1970, a population of more than 600,000 inhabitants at the end of the last century.

2) 'Data from the Colonial Period' is seriously disputed in the 'Statistical Yearbook of French Possessions' (provisional edition of 1944), as the following extracts illustrate:

"The inadequacy of colonial statistical documents has been noted again and again.... non-existence, dispersal, partial destruction, plundering.... of the documents accumulated by the statisticians of the Colonial Ministry (Colonial Department of Statistics)".

"Available documents are rare and often in their crude form, and are also of very doubtful quality".

"The varying amount of information available, in most cases inadequate, but sometimes, on the contrary, too copious in view of its low significance, has resulted in the merging of the two chapters usually dedicated - in the yearbook - to 'climatology' and 'population'....into one".

"Following a ministerial circular in February 1909, very detailed annual statistics were thought to be indicated. It therefore seems that the problem - of the census - now become insoluble, has been dealt with moreover in complete ignorance of its difficulties. It is thus affirmed, 'a priori', that colonial population statistics can have no other value than that of a rather crude estimate".

"Since around 1910, in AOF (French West Africa) and in AEF, the government has been given the task of drawing up a nominative register of the inhabitants of the villages visited, based on the statements of the heads of households and, in principle, confirmed through tests. This system



can render good results, as long as the population is stable....A study of the colonial figures for tropical Africa usually reveals the same variations, the same distribution anomalies as those found in the statistics of the other colonies".

"Several authors, both past and present, give population information, which is perhaps surprisingly not reviewed here. But the origin of their data is not specified and the very confidence they express in drawing conclusions from it is enough to suspect that it was compiled without any kind of discrimination. On reflection it is clear that this could only have come from statistics provided by the administration - the only body to conduct, well or badly, a collective effort on such a scale. But these statistics suffered all sorts of vicissitudes, the trace of which can be seen everywhere, and in the course of which they were, quite unsuspectingly, abandoned to incessant changes. As a result, the material, already inadequate at the outset, became completely hazardous. This is why, apart from the documents provided by the Governors (of which only part are still in the Department's possession), the only reports used are those of the Health Services, where the part devoted to demography is directly based on official statistics".

"The functioning of civil registration faces the same problems as the enumeration operations and there is not one French possession where statistics do not show anomalies that reveal their shortcomings".

Added to the historic interest of these quotations is their topicality. For it has unfortunately been proven that these criticisms are, for the most part, still valid in 1980; and not only in Gabon.

If the information provided by population data during the colonial period is very modest, the overall observation by officials at all levels is clear enough to confirm a population decline up to the 1950's. The monographic works available, in particular those which deal with mortality, fertility, sterility, depopulation and their causes, maintain this assertion and we consider it was a mistake to scorn the village registers or monographs, or the records of the department of major endemic diseases, the quality of which was found to be superior to that of the majority of the 'recommended' cartographic and census operations.

The population figures proposed in Table 51 for the period 1908-1959 were established on the basis of administrative documents and, in particular, doctors' reports. But until 1927 "health action" took the form of curative medicine with stationary teams. It is from 1932 onwards that all the population surveys conducted in Gabon by doctors and the administrative bodies note a steady birth decline... This depopulation, already perceived by BRUEL around 1910 and by LE TESTU around 1925, was to become more and more widespread up to 1946, when a 'human reserve' was envisaged to arrest this decline and relaunch the birth rate.

The enumeration method which was most used at the beginning of the colonial period, consisted in multiplying the number of households by a uniform coefficient. From around 1910, the administration was to draw up a nominative register of the inhabitants in each village visited, which amounted to identifying the 'de jure' population. There was a distinction between, on the one hand, the French and the foreigners - in 1936, for example, there were 1,089 French in Gabon and 134 foreigners - and, on the other hand, the natives, who could be protected subjects or French

citizens. However, only one person per family was questioned and, moreover, an assessment of the children was provided by the adult. As a result there was a notable underestimation of children, which, in spite of an evident improvement in the nominative population recording, has not completely disappeared.

As for 'age' figures, individual data which is essential for civil registration and the demographer, these have always been 'collective' in Black Africa, where the structure by age groups and the family structures are the two backbones of society. This collective data has not yet totally disappeared, particularly in Gabon.

### 3) Recent 'Population Data'

Four operations collecting for population data have been carried out, on a national scale, since 1960. Such operations ought, normally, to have provided a good knowledge of the Gabonese population. But the 1970 census did not result in any official publication; nor did that of 1980. Nevertheless, some results of the computer processing of the 1970 census are available. These only confirm the results of the survey and census of 1960-1961, while specifying an improvement of Gabonese 'population growth factors', slightly quicker than was foreseen.

Given these circumstances, it is very difficult to describe the current situation accurately, especially as Gabon is subjected, periodically, to political migration movements. Foreign immigration also depends on economic development and its ups and downs, which can give significant momentary population fluctuations.

It is partly due to these reasons that it is always preferable to distinguish the demography of Gabonese nationals from that of the whole population of Gabon. (In 1960 there were more than 20,000 foreigners, and in 1970, more than 30,000. 1976 estimates put the number at 250,000 foreigners, of whom 200,000 were African. Currently the foreign population seems to be in the region of 150,000 people).

In the 1960-1961 and 1969-1970 censuses, all individuals were interviewed where possible and the 'de facto' population and 'de jure' population were distinguished (1).

Since Independence, and for both censuses, four types of population have been distinguished:

- The rural population;
- The urban population (on the sole criterion of the existence of an administrative centre, and not according to the size of the city);
- The population of work sites (permanent, forestry, mobile);
- The institutional population of the communities, whatever its size.

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(1) Some non-sedentary pygmy groups were identified in 1969-1970 and counted globally.

Each method used for collection operations since 1960 has been the subject of a publication.

Broadly speaking, for the Gabonese population, the comparative analysis of census data with data on population growth, reveals an underestimation. The table below gives the crude results and adjusted data for 1960 and 1970.

TABLE 53 - GABON - CRUDE RESULTS AND ADJUSTED DATA FROM THE 1960-61 AND 1969-70 CENSUSES (ONLY THE GABONESE POPULATION)

SOURCES	GABONESE POPULATION	
	CRUDE RESULTS	CORRECTED DATA
1960-61 Census	427 353	486 000
1969-70 Census	484 608	504 000

#### 4) Factors Influencing Data Collection and Analysis in Gabon

a) Geographic, climatic, cultural, socio-cultural and other such factors are traditional obstacles. They are, nevertheless, too often ignored or scorned. This takes on special significance in Gabon, where in a small population there are no less than 43 different ethnic groups.

b) The mistaken "knowledge" of age, natality, mortality, fertility and other concepts, reinforced by the excessive use of models for redressing everything or almost, in the lack of correct statistics before civil registration becomes available, largely contributes to maintaining costly collection procedures, both rare and ill-adapted, and to neglecting the progressive introduction of locally adapted structures for observing population events.

c) The absence, or lack of consideration of, local interests by those external organisations with the necessary financial backup, whose immediate goals concerned political prerequisites rather than actual data collection, (when it is not a total lack of interest by some countries to finance this collection).

d) As has been previously indicated, the retention of migration information by the authorities; and the significance of some of these migrations on a small local population size.

e) The situation of the Gabonese population considered of no interest for family planning financing.

#### 5) Consistency Between the Various Sources

Consistency between the different sources prior to Independence is primarily to be found in a permanent global depopulation agreement until the 1950's. It appears, moreover, that this phenomenon had a more or less direct impact on the whole of the Congo basin.

TABLE 54 - GABON - POPULATION TRENDS FROM 1900 TO 1980 (a)

REFERENCE YEAR	HISTORICAL RECONSTITUTION	CENSUSES : CRUDE RESULTS	ESTIMATES
1900			
1908	650 000 [3]		
1910			
1917	482 000		
1920			
1930			
	1936 455 000		
	1939 443 000		
1940			
	1943 438 000		
	1946 421 000		
	1949 411 000		
1950			
	405 000		
	1953 393 000		
	1955 402 000		
	1956 408 000		
	1957 412 000		
	1959 416 000		
1960		427 353	486 000
1970		484 608	504 000
1975 (1st January)			530 000
1980			556 000 (b)

(a) Only the Gabonese population.

(b) This estimate, made in 1981 corresponds to the projection calculated five years earlier.

There is also a certain consistency in the comparative analysis of data collected since Independence - this concerns known real data - which reveals a low increase due to a low birth rate (to the order of 32 to 34 per 1,000); a relatively high death rate (from 30 to 33 per 1,000); an infant mortality rate above 150 per 1,000; and from 30 to 35% of women between 45 and 54 years without children. The general fertility rate, estimated at 116 per 1,000, is the lowest in Africa.

For the period 1960-1969, the most commonly accepted estimate for the rate of natural increase is around 0.4%

For the following decade this rate is noticeably higher, due to a birth rate which, although still low, was improved; and to a lower death rate as a result of an intensive health campaign. The rate of natural increase is estimated at just over 1%. An estimate of the Gabonese population on January 1st 1975 can be given as 530,000 people.

The critical analysis of the population pyramids from the 1960 and 1970 censuses shows that anomalies cannot be accounted for by the usual errors and omissions alone, and that the observed age composition is primarily the

result of mortality and fertility trends in the history of the Gabonese peoples. This could well be the result of a superposition of two distinct populations, the most recent of which began to form between 1950 and 1960. The adjustment principle adopted is the historical reconstitution of past birth trends for each group of cohorts [8].

In such conditions, the proposed evolution of population size should be seen above all, as an attempt to define a margin of greatest plausibility within a set of very varied situations (some of which, however, are sufficiently monitored).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

"The contribution of demography to the comprehension of the African situation suffers two related difficulties: first, the technical preoccupation of the discipline; and second, its ideological orientation".  
(1)

When observations which contradicted the commonly accepted figures were encountered in Gabon they were set aside as insignificant, and it was emphasized that they dealt with figures which were too low, or, that they were marred by registration errors. A multi-round civil registration survey in several Gabonese cantons around 1965 was thus never exploited.

As a result of these facts it is obvious that an improvement in data sources is needed, based on the implementation of a structure for observing population events which would create an automatic reflex to declare the event - a fundamental factor of civil registration, as in the towns with the hospitals, maternity hospitals and mother and infant welfare clinics.

Gabonese demography does not yet come under established standards. Initiation to Gabonese demography begins with a sound analysis of the past, a good knowledge of current populations, an interest for fieldwork and for archives. By eliminating the abnormalities, plausible data for the past population can, nevertheless, be attained (with, for example, recourse to an historical calendar of known facts that have an impact on population development: famines, civil or military recruitment, epidemics - to quote only the major causes).

A further conclusion: there is a need for a separate study of the Gabonese population and the foreign population; and to continue to use regular population counts rather than censuses.

Visiting 'demographers' of the colonial period were criticized for making figures play a role in obtaining political, economic or social advantages. A similar criticism can be levelled against the politicians of to-day (as well as the adjustment specialists who would have us eradicate all traces of the past); we must ensure that this does not happen.

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(1) "La démographie africaniste ou la recherche d'une technicité qui devient biais idéologique" - Introduction. Joël W. GREGORY.

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