

The Black and the Red

Radicalising anti-colonialism in 1970s New Caledonia

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Résumé

Les « Événements » tragiques en Nouvelle-Calédonie dans les 1980s, période pendant laquelle deux versions concurrentes de nationalité causaient de la violence interethnique, produisaient les accords de paix en 1988 et 1998 qui proposent un « destin commun » pour les habitants. Mais l'autonomie élargie que Paris donne actuellement au territoire pendant quinze à vingt ans était déjà accordée en 1956–58 puis retirée dans les 1960s. Une conjonction de quatre forces historiques vers 1969 a radicalisé l'anticolonialisme local, et ainsi polarisé la société multiraciale qui émergeait dans l'après-guerre: la France a retiré l'autogestion malgré les protestations, le boom du nickel a conduit à un nouvel essor de l'immigration, le premier parti politique du territoire, l'Union Calédonienne, était en déclin, et des étudiants universitaires Kanak et calédoniens sont rentrés de métropole ayant appris des idéologies de libération telles que le Marxisme. Ces derniers considéraient ce qui se passait dans leur pays comme une « recolonisation ». Mais si les êtres humains peuvent créer de telles structures, ils peuvent aussi les rectifier, grâce aux leçons que leur histoire moderne leur a données dans la douleur.

Abstract

The tragic 'Events' of the 1980s in French New Caledonia, when competing versions of nationhood caused inter-ethnic violence, led to peace accords in 1988 and 1998 that proposed a 'common destiny' for the inhabitants. But the increased autonomy Paris is now granting to the territory over fifteen to twenty years had already been granted in 1956–58 and then taken away in the 1960s. Four forces converged in about 1969 to radicalise local anti-colonialism, and thus polarise the multiracial society that had begun to emerge in the postwar period: France's unilateral withdrawal of self-government, despite protest; renewed immigration because of a nickel boom; the decline of the first political party of the territory, the Union Calédonienne; and the return home from France of Kanak and Caledonian university students, after their exposure to the ideas of Marxism and other liberation ideologies. The latter regarded what was happening in their homeland as a 'recolonisation'. But if human beings can create such structures, they can also amend or re-adjust them, thanks to the hard-learned lessons of their modern history.

The tragic death of [Chief Atai in 1878] who was the apostle of the unity, freedom and independence of his people, must be for both natives and European New Caledonians the symbol of hope . . . that one day Caledonians, black and white, will form a single people.

Apollinaire Anova-Ataba (1984: 218)

It is in Libya that everything started. In Tripoli. In the office of Mohamar el Khadafi.

Gilbert Picard (1995: 7)

PEOPLE WHO ARE FAMILIAR with contemporary history in Oceania know that the 'Events' of the 1980s in New Caledonia brought tragic ethnic violence to that French Overseas Territory. The Events led to the peace accords of Matignon in 1988 and of Nouméa in 1998, which put the country on a gradual path to increasing self-government, with the challenge of building a 'common destiny' (Nouméa Accord, 1998: 2). As the two quotations at the head of this paper suggest, explanations for the causes of the Events range from long-term resistance to French colonisation to Cold War conspiracy theories. But I would

like to suggest that the immediate causes for the radicalisation of anti-colonialism in New Caledonia from 1969 onward were *structural* changes in the 1960s and 1970s, when several historical forces converged to increase ethnic polarisation.

Those forces include first, France's unilateral withdrawal of the political autonomy that Paris had granted to New Caledonia in the 1950s. That change occurred primarily because of an economic boom in nickel mining, a strategic industry that Paris regarded as a key national resource at a time when it was beginning its nuclear testing programme in French Polynesia. Secondly, the nickel boom brought a new wave of immigration into New Caledonia that would tip the demographic balance and thus the voting electorate increasingly in favour of loyalists to Paris. Thirdly, Kanak and Caledonian university students returned to the territory in 1969, after having been exposed to Marxist and other liberation ideologies and having experienced the May 1968 student and worker uprising in France. They regarded the unilateral withdrawal of autonomy and the flood of new immigrants as a 'recolonisation' of the territory, just when the rest of the Pacific was moving toward self-government. Finally, the dominant political party in New Caledonia, the *Union Calédonienne* (UC) was in disarray, in part because of its powerlessness to stop Paris from reducing the territory's powers of self-government. The Melanesians who provided most of the UC's votes felt increasingly that their backs were against the wall. The primary cause for this crisis, whether directly or indirectly, was France itself, where Jacobin centralism and Gaullist status-seeking intertwined.

Retaking possession

On 24 September every year, Caledonians loyal to France celebrate the unilateral *prise de possession* (taking possession) of the archipelago in 1853 by a French admiral. This act of nineteenth century imperialism in the name of Napoleon III laid the basis for the collective identity of immigrant groups in New Caledonia, since it is their French citizenship that has made them 'Caledonians' by birth or by adoption. Indigenous Melanesians, or 'Kanak', however, trace their identity to many centuries of occupation prior to 1853, and they have sometimes argued for a continuity in their resistance to French colonisation, from nineteenth century revolts like that of Chief Atai in 1878

through the anti-colonial protests of the 1970s and 1980s. Loyalist critics of this 'heroic' genealogy have pointed to what they regard as the 'inexplicable' violence of the 1878 revolt (Cornet, 2000: 98) and the outside influence of global leftism, including French Socialists, that pushed the 1980s toward 'fratricidal tribalism' (Doisy 1988: 257). Yet the preamble of the Nouméa Accord admitted that colonial *dispossession* had 'harmed the dignity of the Kanak people and deprived it of its identity'. Only decolonisation could build 'a lasting social bond between the communities . . .' (Nouméa Accord, 1998: 2).

In reality, decolonisation had already been tried, and then stopped. It was political reform after World War II in New Caledonia, and its sudden reversal in the 1960s, that polarised the territory. During the war, New Caledonia rallied to Charles De Gaulle's Free France in exile and accepted a large United States military presence. This new flow of money caused an economic boom in the territory, the first of two that would affect local politics. Not only French businessmen profited from the American presence, but also indigenous Melanesians, who, working for the allied army, made better wages than ever before. François Burck calls this change the first Kanak 'awakening', because Kanak became aware 'of their possible equality with whites, of their power of liberation . . . that the colonial regime could be overcome' (Burck, 1984: 13). Conservative *colons* had long backed a policy of keeping the more numerous natives in check (Lambert, 1999: 83); they now envisioned autonomy for the territory with themselves in charge, not native people or immigrant Asian contract labourers. But Charles de Gaulle's 1944 speech at Brazzaville promised political equality for colonial subjects that rallied to him, and the postwar era became what Caledonian historian Ismet Kurtovitch calls an 'exit from a juridical ghetto' (Kurtovitch, 2000: 88).

Most Melanesians had been segregated into native reserves and subjected to forced labour, so that the 'two communities, French and Kanak, lived juxtaposed, but without inter-mingling and indeed virtually incommunicado' (Thompson and Adloff, 1971: 266). But in 1945 the settler-elected General Council of New Caledonia was controlled by progressive reformers, and in 1946 Paris abolished the 'native code' (*indigénat*), allowing Kanak to move more freely about the territory and to visit their ancestral sacred sites. A small Communist Party in the territory, born from the wartime alliance with the

Soviet Union, began to recruit members among disaffected Asian workers and Melanesian war veterans, wage-earners and chiefs, distributing tracts in indigenous languages to inform people of their new citizenship rights. In reaction, Catholic and Protestant missionaries organised moderate indigenous associations to lobby for improvements. The rapid postwar expansion of the Melanesian electorate enabled the territory's first political party, the UC, to win legislative and territorial elections in 1951 and 1953, respectively. With support from local liberals and labour unions, the multiracial UC challenged the old colonial order and continued to win local elections for about twenty years on a platform of 'two colours, one people'. The United Nations supported decolonisation, but postwar France hoped to revive its status as a world power after years of humiliating Nazi occupation. It would decolonise by granting its overseas subjects French citizenship and autonomy and by encouraging French emigration overseas, to defuse 'separatism' (Aldrich, 1993: 55).

In 1956, a Socialist-led government in Paris passed the *loi cadre*, which created a Territorial Assembly (TA) elected by universal suffrage and a Governing Council (GC) led by a local Vice-President, whose cabinet members would have ministerial powers. Opponents of the UC would criticise Maurice Lenormand's autocratic style as party boss and his government's efforts to act more autonomously in the region, but he argued first, that it was only through unity that the UC could stand up to French and local business interests and secondly, that the UC was committed to developing the 'Caledonian personality'. In reaction, in June 1958 a protest march by loyalists in Nouméa demanding the ouster of Lenormand turned into a manhunt for UC officials. De Gaulle quickly dissolved the TA, but in the next election the UC again won a majority. De Gaulle then appointed Laurent Péchoux as High Commissioner, because he had previous experience suppressing anti-colonialism in French West Africa. In early 1959, Péchoux took away from Lenormand his Vice-Presidential power over the local civil service, police and radio station, and then forced Lenormand to choose between his Vice-Presidency and his elected post of Deputy to Paris. Loyalist author Pierre Maresca has written that the Gaullist Premier, Michel Debré, was 'of an intransigent Jacobinism, partisan of the centralisation of power . . . horrified by the statute in practice in the Territory' (Maresca, 1978: 30).

By late 1959, Péchoux proclaimed satisfaction that his 'rapid return backwards' had achieved the territory's 'definitive reattachment and confident relations with the Mother country' (Péchoux, 1959: 1). He left New Caledonia in 1962, just when Western Samoa became the first colony in the South Pacific to regain independence. The following year, in 1963, the *loi Jacquinet* took away the ministerial powers of the GC, and by 1967 Paris took over direct control of secondary and technical education in New Caledonia; both changes were justified by claims that local funds and staff were inadequate. In January 1969, the French National Assembly passed the three *lois Billotte*, despite years of vocal opposition by Caledonians, who called them the 'villainous laws'. The new laws removed the TA's power over mining, large-scale investments and local commune elections (Colombani, 1999: 59–67). New Caledonian nickel, chrome and cobalt were classified as strategic national resources, in the same category with atomic energy and hydrocarbons. Even loyalist Senator Henri Lafleur called the Billotte laws 'an act of distrust' by France (Lafleur, 1968: 8). The UC had still won 69% of the ballots in the 1967 TA election, when it campaigned on a platform of internal autonomy. It sent a delegation to Paris in 1968, but to no avail. DOM-TOM Minister Pierre Billotte wanted to 'put a brake' on local proposals that INCO, the Canadian nickel mining firm, be allowed to compete with the French-based *Société Le Nickel* (SLN), which practically monopolised the mining industry in New Caledonia (*Le Monde*, 20 Janvier 1968).

This political regression was part of a larger French Pacific strategy that included nuclear testing in French Polynesia, since Algeria had won its independence in 1962 and no longer permitted tests in the Sahara. New Caledonia was also an important naval base for France (Firth, 1987: 110). Part of that strategic vision clearly included nickel, a metal that hardens other metals against severe stress or corrosion, for use in precision tools, aeronautics and armaments (Hodée, 1976; Yost, 1988). France also wanted the foreign exchange profits from ore sales to Japan, which bought about half the territory's nickel. The value of ore exports from New Caledonia rose 39% in 1967 and another 63% in 1968; between 1966 and 1969, the tonnage of nickel exports tripled. Then in 1969, INCO of Canada, the world's largest producer, experienced a protracted labour strike, so Caledonian sub-contractors responded

to the new global nickel shortage by expanding local extraction to provide ore to the SLN. This massive economic boom affected all inhabitants of the territory to varying degrees and also increased the population by 20%, as about 10,000 Europeans and 5,000 Polynesians from other French Pacific territories immigrated between 1969 and 1971 (Institut d'Emission d'Outre-Mer, 1971: 18–20, 32); altogether about 25,000 new settlers arrived by 1976 (Colombani, 1999: 78–9). The French state actively encouraged this process with an official Bureau of Migrations to New Caledonia. About 2000 of the new immigrants were influential anti-independence *pieds noirs* from Algeria, and Nouméa Mayor Roger Laroque went so far as to say that New Caledonia needed to 'breed whites' (Bobin, 1991: 304; Lyons, 1986: 122). By 1972, Premier Pierre Messmer was explaining to his DOM-TOM's Minister that 'the indigenous nationalist demand will be avoided only if non-Pacific communities form the majority . . . in an operation of overseas colonization' (Henningham, 1992: 62–3). It is not just a coincidence that the UC lost its first TA election to loyalist parties that same year. France had taken possession again.

Radical anti-colonialism

While this political, economic and demographic recolonisation was underway, young Kanak and Caledonian student activists returned from France in the summer of 1969. Many had experienced the student–worker uprising in the *métropole* in May 1968 that had helped to undermine De Gaulle's presidency. In a sense, the university education that France gave students from New Caledonia would contribute to the radicalisation of politics in the territory, because the democratic and liberationist ideals they had learned clashed with the influx of thousands of 'new voters, complete strangers to the history of this territory who had no interest in the slogan "two colors, one people"' (Freyss, 1995: 26). Even local-born French often resented opportunistic *métros*, who sometimes had better job qualifications. This problem had already been discussed in Caledonian student newsletters in France in the 1960s, along with the needs to reduce economic dependency on nickel and to improve Melanesian education for more balanced social development (*Trait d'union*, 1965–66).

Radical leftists of the era saw contemporary economic restructuring by transnational corporations as a colonisation process that was penetrating into the last frontiers of self-sufficiency. It was even turning people in 'developed' countries into media-controlled 'spectators' of their own orchestrated lives (Debord, 1967; Jameson, 1984: 207). In this context, the United States war in Vietnam symbolised ongoing capitalist imperialism against the threat of true decolonisation (Rosaldo, 1993: 35). In part because of New Caledonian nickel ore exports, Japan was making US\$1 billion a year selling military supplies to the American armed forces during the Vietnam war. Moreover, those same sales benefited mainly Nouméa businessmen with ties to the SLN, whose primary owner, the Rothschild Bank, took most of the profits right out of the territory, along with the tons of red laterite ore strip-mined from the land. Local wages did increase, but immigrant Polynesian workers competed with long-marginalised Melanesians in the labour force (Lyons, 1986: 113; Colombani, 1999: 81; Forsberg, 2000: 85). Thus, New Caledonia's entanglement in colonial ties to France, in Western imperialist wars against perceived liberation struggles, and in the broader financial networks that manipulated governments, all seemed to Marxists to justify their own 'internationalism', which Trotsky had once defined as 'a theoretical and political reflection of the character of the world economy, of the world development of productive forces and the world scale of class struggle' (Trotsky, 1969: 133). Che Guevara and Mao Zedong became heroes to radical students, because they opposed domination by capitalism (Jean-Paul Caillard, in an interview with the author in Nouméa, 2001).

Comparatively few Melanesians went to France for higher education, except through the Protestant educational system. But in the student newsletters, Nidoish Naisseline, the son of a high chief on Maré island, addressed the issues of cultural identity and colonial racism. Influenced by such anti-colonial authors as Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, he began as early as 1966 to write about Canaque (later, Kanak) relations with whites. The coloniser, Naisseline said, had used Christianity, European law and capitalism to break Kanak civilisation, without respecting its right to exist and grow. He argued that, in his own experience, Caledonians of French descent in Nouméa urged Kanak to imitate the West with guidance from whites, but in France the

young whites he knew regarded the process of change as a mutual process of adaptation. Ironically, he said, he rediscovered his own originality in France, not in New Caledonia! His writings stirred debate among Caledonian students, but he replied in another essay that white Caledonians spoke to Kanak in the familiar voice (*tutoiement*), as if the latter were children, and he espoused Fanon's writings on Third World liberation. He did not, however, adopt Marxism, as some of his Caledonian colleagues did, because he said that Marxists, like colonisers, still talked down to the colonised (*Trait d'union*, 1966–68; Nidoish Naisseline, in an interview with the author in Nouméa, 2001).

In July 1969, six months after the *lois Billottes*, anti-colonial graffiti appeared on the walls of public buildings in Nouméa, attacking racism and calling for independence. Small groups of radical students on summer vacation and local sympathisers organised study groups and action committees, tested the racial segregation customs in local restaurants, and distributed anti-colonial tracts in indigenous languages. The government arrested Naisseline and other radicals, but their trials simply provoked more publicity. A Nouméa riot on 2 September 1969, by Maréans who protested their chief's arrest, is regarded by many supporters of independence as the real 'Kanak awakening' (Déwé Gorodey, in an interview with the author in Nouméa, 2000). The *Foulards Rouges*, or red scarves, emerged as a small activist group that gathered Caledonian leftist and pacifist allies and inspired the formation of *Groupe 1878*, a movement on Grande Terre to reclaim alienated lands. As Kanak priest Apollinaire Anova-Ataba's writing on the 1878 revolt became known, Kanak radicals adopted Chief Atai as an anti-colonial precursor (Burck, 1984: 17). These activists created their own newspapers, such as *Réveil Canaque* and *Les Nouvelles 1878*, and negotiated with established politicians such as Yann Céléne Uregei, who broke with the UC and formed his own party, the *Union Multiraciale de la Nouvelle-Calédonie* (UMNC). The *Union Jeunesse Calédonienne* (UJC), led by leftist young Caledonian students, supported multiracial independence as early as 1973 (Jean-Paul Caillard, in an interview with the author in Nouméa, 2001) but by early 1975 *Groupe 1878* demanded 'Kanak independence' (Elie Poigoune, in an interview with the author in Nouméa, 2000), a term that would exacerbate ethnic tensions, including within the anti-colonial ranks. To the

Kanak, it meant recognition of their indigeneity, but to non-natives it sounded like reverse domination (Jean-Pierre Deteix, in an interview with the author in Nouméa, 2001).

Political polarisation

The UC had lost supporters and leaders for some time, partly because of its inability to stop France's withdrawal of New Caledonia's self-governing powers. Faced with drastic political, social and economic change, Uregei accused UC leaders of behaving in paternalistic ways toward their Kanak voters and colleagues (Uregei, 1972: 918) and of engaging in the same business and mining activities as the conservatives. He developed close ties with the young student radicals and demanded 'internal autonomy'. Then after the crucial 1972 election, he allied with conservatives in the TA to become Vice-President and soon expelled the 'anarchists and communists' from the UMNC (Dornoy, 1984: 178–80). The UC at first criticised the tactics of the young radicals and continued its demand for autonomy, not independence. In 1975, with the support of the French administration, Jean-Marie Tjibaou organised an arts festival called *Melanesia 2000*, which was an attempt to bring together Caledonians and to inspire recognition of indigenous culture (Tjibaou, 1978). Senator Lionel Cherrier spoke out against SLN monopolism and for land reform and the return of autonomy. But the end of the nickel boom in 1972–74 created a new crisis of unemployment that made Caledonians look to France for financial aid (Lionel Cherrier, in an interview with the author in Nouméa, 2001). In fact, Paris would increasingly transfer funds to the territory to subsidise its own vision of attaining the rank of a medium-sized world power; it already ranked third in world arms sales (MacLellan and Chesnaux, 1998: 84; Freyss, 1995: 172).

Would France restore autonomy, now that the boom was over? Paris offered the territory a degree of administrative (*gestion*) autonomy, but not a return to the *loi cadre* (Colombani, 1999: 110). In June 1975 Uregei, Lenormand and ten other delegates from the TA traveled to Paris, but President Giscard d'Estaing said he was too busy to meet with them, and DOM-TOM Minister Olivier Stirn opposed a referendum on internal autonomy. Uregei left in a rage.

Gaullist Premier Jacques Chirac told the remaining delegates, ‘There is no choice: it’s the current statute amended as much as possible, or independence’ (*France Australe*, 13 Juin 1975). Uregei allied with the radicals again and called for Kanak independence. In 1976, Kanak radicals formed Palika (*Parti de Libération Kanak*), calling for the return of alienated Kanak lands and the end of Western cultural and economic domination. They occupied lands on Grande Terre, protested the deaths of several young Kanak under contested circumstances, and by 1977, seized the New Caledonian student Foyer in Paris. That same year, Tjibaou’s UC came out in favour of autonomy as a transition to full independence (Dornoy, 1984; Henningham, 1992).

But Caledonian businessman Jacques Lafleur formed a ‘national’ coalition in 1977 that rejected independence. Lafleur offered multiracialism instead of racial separatism, and capitalist development instead of socialism. Some Melanesians supported his quasi-assimilationist programme of ‘Melanesian promotion’, and most immigrant Asians and Polynesians voiced their loyalty to France out of economic necessity. By 1979, ongoing immigration had helped to double the electorate from 35,000 to 70,000, and the new arrivals had come as opportunists, not social reformers. Paris divided the territory into two districts, each of which elected a Deputy to the French Parliament, in effect creating a northern ‘black’ seat and a southern ‘white’ seat. It also required local parties to win at least 7.5% of the votes cast to have a seat in the TA. Lafleur’s *Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République* (RPCR), which was affiliated with Chirac’s Gaullists in France, was able to gain control of the TA, by allying with local centrists. But anti-colonial groups formed their own coalition, the Independence Front, and in 1982, they lured the centrists away from the RPCR, and thus controlled the TA for the last time. When the Socialists won both the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in France in 1981, they criticised the colonial situation in New Caledonia and proposed concessions to Kanak nationalism, while also safeguarding the rights of non-Kanak. But the 1983 round table at Nainville-les-Roches failed to produce a viable peace accord amid escalating polarisation and violence (Henningham, 1992: 70–5; Colombani, 1999:110–11). Two opposing concepts of nationhood would confront each other in the Events from 1984 to 1988.

The Past as Future

Many aspects of this story are no doubt already familiar to you, and this brief summary does not do justice to the complexity of New Caledonian politics. But my goal is to highlight certain key factors: the withdrawal of 'autonomy' in the 1960s, which is only gradually being restored today; the political impact of intensified immigration during the nickel boom; and the anti-colonial ideas that circulated among Kanak and Caledonian students in France, which altered local politics then and still affect it today, as the rise of Palika to second rank among pro-independence parties shows. The tragic Events that still haunt the memory of today's leaders were thus caused by a particular convergence of historical forces. But if people can create such structural forces, they can also adjust them, so that future generations can struggle to find a common destiny. The lessons are clear and, considering the current economic trend in New Caledonia toward yet another nickel boom, they are worth repeating here: do not take away rights once granted; do not let outside forces adversely dictate the path of local economic development; do not leave some parts of the population behind as others move ahead; and above all, keep the communication channels open, however difficult that challenge can be. Some see the Nouméa Accord as a model for multiethnic decolonisation in the region, while others see it as a recipe for neo-colonialism (see Chappell, 1999). Critics, for example, point to the controversy over the ten per cent that INCO will pay the territory from the revenues of its new mining and processing project at Goro/Prony (*Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 20 Novembre 2002). Promises about creating a local citizenship, restricting the electorate on major issues to long-term inhabitants, favouring local people in hiring and collegiality in sharing political power need to be respected. Otherwise, Kanaky New Caledonia's evolving self-determination, now regained at the cost of precious lives lost, may be ruined by Boom III.

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