

‘Words that go further than words’

The French language and writing in New Caledonia

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Résumé

Les conflits communautaires en Nouvelle-Calédonie peuvent-ils se résoudre par l'Art? La langue française relie les populations océaniques et européennes toutes francophones. Nous expliquons ce lien par le biais de la description littéraire kanak et calédonienne.

Abstract

Can art and literature help resolve ethnic conflicts in Kanaky-New Caledonia? The French language acts as a bond between the Pacific Island and the European communities, who are all francophone. We will explain this common thread through a description of Kanak and Caledonian literature.

We would like to thank the organisers of this symposium for giving us this opportunity to address you in our terrible English, on this Polynesian land, surrounded by this Polynesian ocean.

WE SHOULD START BY EXPLAINING the meaning of the title of our paper. French is the common language in some South Pacific Islands still under French administration. The French-speakers or 'francophones' of the Pacific Islands have no choice but to use this language, which was imposed through the domination of the French colonial empire. The inhabitants of New Caledonia live in a Kanak country where the Melanesian community, which has lived there for centuries, encompasses more than 28 languages and a number of dialects. The educational system is modelled on the French system, which evolved on the other side of the world. Since the 1980s, the Melanesian community has been asserting its identity as the 'Kanak People'. But the oddity of New Caledonia is the existence of a European population that has been present there for 150 years,¹ that is attached to the country and has put down roots there. Some immigrants came of their own free will, others as convicts or indentured labourers. Immigrant groups include Asians, Polynesians, Melanesians and Europeans (the latter to take advantage of the opportunities available). Out of respect for these identities, we will call the island Kanaky-New Caledonia.

Before considering the relationship between the French language and writing, we would like to illustrate our remarks by quoting an exchange that took place in 1988 between French President François Mitterrand and Jean-Marie Tjibaou. The pro-Independence leader wrote a letter to the French President that was published as: 'Address by Jean-Marie Tjibaou to François Mitterrand: in the name of the Kanak People', in the French journal *Politix*, from which we quote an extract:

Mr President, what kind of future are you preparing for us? Will we be the last of the Mohicans of the Pacific region in the same way as there were the last Tasmanians? As you know, the Kanak People have always refused to be considered as archaeological relics in the history of the world. It will refuse even more firmly to be a remnant of French colonial history. (Tjibaou, 1988)

Two months later, on the eve of the presidential election in France, the French President made a partial response to these remarks in his 'Letter to the French People':

(Mr Tjibaou) is fighting for the independence of New Caledonia and, for him, New Caledonia means, first and foremost, the Kanak People. Maybe I am not doing justice to his thinking. Mr Tjibaou and his party are not asking for the exclusion of the French and other ethnic groups. If I may say so, they are merely asking for the right to make their own decisions, as they alone represent universal suffrage. I am familiar with this theory. I have been meeting Mr Tjibaou for the past seven years and his position has not changed. He is a man whom I respect, with whom *words go further than words*. But I do not believe that the historical precedence of the Kanak people on this land is an adequate basis for rights. History meets history: the New Caledonians of European origin have also, through their work, fashioned the soil, nurtured themselves on its fruits and put down deep roots. (emphasis added)

Let me set aside the political conflicts for the moment and focus only on the relationship with the language. The erudite French President picked an apt phrase: 'words that go further than words'. This is characteristic of the singular relationship between contemporary Kanak literature and the way various Kanak writers use French, which is the communication medium held in common among the different language groups in Kanaky-New Caledonia. From the earliest writers, like the *natas*, shepherds for the most part, trained by Maurice Leenhardt, who translated the Holy Scriptures into Kanak languages, to the contemporary Kanak writers like Pierre Gope and Déwé Gorodé, the Kanaks are appropriating this foreign non-mother tongue. We will give you an insight into this later in the paper. Also, European New Caledonian writers have in some cases a different but equally singular relationship with the act of writing. The island's obsession with belonging to the land and having a New Caledonian identity is a leitmotif in literary works such as those of Nicolas Kurtovitch and Louis-José Barbançon. It also appears in historical works such as the story of the sons of *Chan Dang* (indentured Vietnamese labourers) in the work of an Asian writer like Jean Van Mai.

When you study the relationships between language and writing, one question that often comes up is how to grasp the difficult links between speech, language and thought. We will address this here in a very practical way: does a Kanak writing in French lose his or her historical and cultural identity? Does a fifth-generation European write in the same way as a metropolitan French writer? Further, in seeking its political identity, should the country not pursue a longer and less direct path than political conflict? By that we mean the cultural path, through a form of cultural expression, literature.

We would like to begin by considering the first aspect: French language and writing in Kanaky-New Caledonia. When you listen to Kanak speaking French, you often notice that the accent and the syntax are based on their mother tongue. For instance, the dual forms: 'both of them' for 'they' (whether masculine or feminine) and the expressions: 'for him' or 'for her' for 'his' or 'her', translate parts of speech from the syntax of Kanak languages. With writing, it should be stated at the outset that there was and still is a strong tradition of oral literature. Used in the customary context, this literature is rich in imagery. Discourse is never head-on or direct, to avoid offending a person who represents a region, a chiefdom or a clan. We are working on a book about writers and writing in Kanaky-New Caledonia in which we have chosen a representative sample of the communities inhabiting the island. In one of the seven interviews, we asked a Kanak writer about her relationship with the French language. We would like to quote an extract from that interview:

With regard to the relationship between what I want to write and the language I use, the French language, yes I do use this language, but I try to use it to express my Kanak perception of things, my Kanak thinking. I therefore want to subject this language to the thought that I want to express in the language. Concerning 'a poetic interpretation of history', if I start from my Kanak language, it is a poetic language. I'm going to quote another example: to say 'dusk', I would say 'when the grass turns blue'; if I want to use a term like 'countryside', I would say in my language 'the place where the straw blooms'. Those were two little examples to show that I had to tell the story in my own way, in this language which is for me a second language. (interview in MokkaDEM, forthcoming)

The author's mother tongue is *Paicî*, a language spoken in the northeastern central part of New Caledonia. She has a dual culture because she was exposed to both French and local cultures in her infancy. She heard stories and the history of Kanak oral tradition and also undertook degree-level university studies in France. Like others, the author transfers concepts from Kanak language and culture into the French language. Style devices such as metaphors and metonymy echo Kanak oral literature. We would like to finish this part of our paper by using a famous quotation from Jean-Marie Tjibaou, which is now known all over the world. In 1985, in an interview with the journal founded by French philosophers Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, *Les Temps modernes* (*Modern Times*), Jean-Marie Tjibaou responded thus to the oft-repeated question about tradition being an obstacle to modernity:

To return to tradition is a myth; I strive to repeat this. It's a myth. No People has ever done so. In the quest for identity, you must look forwards, never backwards. It's a matter of constant redefinition. And I would say that our struggle now is to introduce as much of our past and our culture as possible into the type of person and society that we wish to build for our community. Other people may have a different analysis but that is my personal way of seeing things. Our identity lies ahead of us. When we are dead, people will take our image and put it into pigeonholes and use it to build their own identity. Otherwise we will never manage to kill our own father and we will be doomed.

Tjibaou was from Hienghène, where four languages are spoken. His first language was *Nemi*. His mother's language was *Fwaî*. Behind his French words are hidden the words of the Kanak language. In fact, the dead are never completely absent. They turn into the spirits and then the ancestors of the clan. In Kanak mourning literature, the speeches use the metaphor of the reversed image to refer to the world of the departed. The words that allude to the ancestor and the image in *fwaî-nemi* are respectively *danu* and *banu*. The *danu/banu* wordplay echoes behind the way Tjibaou used the French language. The blood of the dead remains alive and, after a one-year cycle, is converted into the land that sustains the yam that feeds the men who cultivate the yam field.² During this cycle, the spirit of the dead person is changed into an ancestor (*danu*), who maintains a continuous relationship with the clans. The spirits live

around the living but in a reversed-image world. They are looking out from behind the mirror. The image that the living build from the ancestors is a reversed image. In an interview, Mrs Déwé Gorodé said the same thing:

. . . death is not an end, it is just the other side. This too is the classic Kanak conception of death. We are living on the other side in this reversed world. Like the flying fox, hanging upside down, for us (Kanak), it is the generations that matter, that come and go, and that will always continue to do so for as long as there are Kanaks in this world. (in Mokaddem, forthcoming)

The Kanak identity sustains itself by being rooted in its ancestors, but it does so in order to reformulate itself differently in the generations who must 'kill their father', in other words who must surpass the traditional model or change it. The living look at tradition as if it were a mirror. To close this section of our paper, we will say that one thing Kanak society must master is the French language.

François Mitterrand was right: 'words go further than words'.

Kanak literature and culture influence the writing of other non-Kanak writers. To illustrate this, we would like to conclude by quoting some examples from contemporary literature. Nicolas Kurtovitch has written a paper with a significant title: 'Writing in a dominated country when your culture and language are the instruments of domination' (1995). Although the poetry, essays and stories of this writer cultivate a form of oriental detachment, they also borrow extensively from Pacific and Kanak sources. However, as he himself explains, to borrow is not to plagiarise and it is certainly not a cultural hybridisation (*métissage*). To write is a second birth, a step towards the Other; it enables one to detect what is universal in what is specific. Writing is not a way of expressing domination, but a metamorphosis. It is writing from the inside and not the outside of the country:

My writing is my path, it takes me to the knowledge and awareness of the universe in which I am. Its purpose is also to build a bridge between our communities in New Caledonia, bringing into the equation the beauty and the full scale of the culture and the experience of the Kanak people. (Kurtovich, 1995)

For too long, the country suffered from silence in the field of artistic expression. The economy was all that mattered. Since the Matignon Accords in 1989, though, publications and forms of artistic expression have proliferated, this time from the inside and not the outside of the country. But as an author, Kurtovitch refuses the so-called cultural fusion, which is another form of exclusion. He applies the principle of the cultural interface by borrowing elements from Kanak culture:

I have the feeling that I am living in a place of borrowings, of meetings, of confrontations, or friendships, of love and of rejection. A space which is that of a blank page, a theatre or dance stage, a path where two or more cultures have decided to meet. (1995)

The same can be said of a writer like Louis-José Barbançon, although his style and path are quite different. His two books borrow components from Kanak culture. *Le Pays du non-dit* (*The country of the unspoken*) and *Le Pays du lézard* (*The land of the lizard*) draw their points of reference from Kanak-language stories. 'The country of the unspoken' comes from a Kanak saying. The clans own their own history. They are not entitled to speak in the place of another clan. If a clan transgresses the taboo and unveils ancient stories, it is committing blasphemy and runs the risk of awakening old conflicts. The 'land of the lizard' refers back to the lizard myth, which, behind that image, symbolises the history of the first settlement. However, Louis-José Barbançon does not plagiarise Kanak culture. In an interview, he also explained his position on this singular relationship to Kanak culture.

Without place we are nothing. The unspoken is what comes on top of that. It's firstly the word 'country' and the word 'land' which are important. And that is very Kanak. What I mean is that I have been influenced by my impressions of the Kanak world. You can't spend your time listening to people and then think that there's nothing you can learn from them. (interview with Barbançon, in Mokaddem, forthcoming)

The powerful Kanak bond with the land influences his way of writing. However, this is not in any way a kind of cultural fusion that some politicians would seek to impose. It is not a suggestion that the European Caledonians

mimic the Kanak people. This so-called cultural mixing is non-existent and may exist only in some people's fantasies. To come back to the words of Nicolas Kurtovitch:

Our generation will never see the integration and it is fallacious to assert the contrary and it is indeed the best way of never getting there because what is true for the Americas is far from being true for the Pacific. The interface as a mental attitude is the attitude which makes it possible to guarantee an intellectual and mental equilibrium, to keep the field of spontaneity open, to remain within oneself and at the same time to be closer to the other, while avoiding *fusion*. (Kurtovitch, 1995; italics added)

In fact, this merging or fusion—decried by Kurtovitch between the two principal communities is a Utopian vision that the first governors hoped would occur. In 1979, Alain Saussol concluded in his book *l'Héritage (The Heritage)* that this had been a failure:

After more than a century of colonisation of the main island, *fusion* of the two peoples [the Kanak people and the European people] hoped for by Governor Tardy de Montravel has not occurred. Because it was not able or did not want to be culturally or racially mixed, Caledonian society today is dual in nature. (Saussol, 1979: 461; italics added)

In addition, fusion can only be confusion. We could say that an identity cannot be built with fantasies or pretence. It can only be built over time and by history.

We read into the writing of some New Caledonians an attempt to surpass these categories that are as gross as they are hollow.

This quick overview demonstrates that the relationships between the French language and literature written in French are as rich as they are complex. The idea of a universal principle, which can be imposed only as an outside model, all too often expresses the imposition of one particularity on another. To understand differences and disputes, others and the Other, from the inside is to understand what is common to mankind's cultural heritage. The literary distinctiveness of this French-speaking island does not mean that this

is a French country. So far, the communities have not yet been able to find a name for their country. That is why we have referred only to French language and literature in Kanaky New Caledonia.

Notes

1 The date of the French annexation of New Caledonia was 24 September 1853.

2 The pamphlet put out by the *Foulards rouges* (red bandana militant movement) in the 1970s was called *La terre est le sang des morts* (the land is the blood of the dead). Anthropologist Jean Guiart also used this Kanak saying as the title of one of his books (1983).

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