



29th of April, the Wiki starts, a backward “Kiwi race”, return to the Tropics. Like in the movies, convicts planned their escape long in advance, and it wasn’t as easy as stealing candy from a baby... Alcatraz, Whangarei, something in common.

Last minute Kiwi gift for our departure: heavy weather forecast 30 knots winds and rough sea that led to a quick crossing of 6 days to New Caledonia.

Anchored in “Baie de Kuto” on “Ile des Pins”, we are very proud of this great escape, even if it is like jumping into the lion’s den as New Caledonia was first populated with criminal prisoners in order to de-saturate the Guyana Cayenne penal colony (the death rate was too high) then the “Commune reds” (kind of pre-communists) and Algerians from the Kabyle rebellion in 1870 (Caledoun).

Landing into this French Overseas Territory means for “Yo!”, the end of the Polynesian world and the arrival into Melanesia, the land of Papus and Aborigines. It is the last island of the South Pacific, a remote country that preserves its cultural, social, organisational and economic peculiarities. For the crew, it means access to real cheese, real wines, real food after the Kiwi purgatory.

Sailing for two months in the huge lagoon which is the dead end of the South-East trade winds – leading to tense navigations -, exploring Noumea and its surroundings, the Loyauté archipelago (named of Cook as usual, he thought the local very loyal) and part of the East coast led us to discover a bafflingly complex social structure whose future in the 2018 independence referendum perspective is uncertain.

## TRIP INTO LAUGHING KANAKIA

The society is mainly divided into three main groups: the “Caldoches » former convicts that became landowners (mines and agriculture) ; the “Kanak”, indigenous Melanesians ; the “Metro” or “Z’oreilles”, French from mainland France who came for a “second chance” or to pile expat bonus from the Administration ; then more or less minor groups: Vietnamese hired at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to work in the nickel mines (in close slave conditions as the local did not want – idem the Fidjis under the British with Indian) then immigrating after the Indochina war and now managing all the stores, people from Wallis & Futuna and French Polynesia lured by the Caledonian miracle and lastly new migrants working in the mines.

They all appear to mix well, but in fact these groups just live apart from each other, focused on making fast money related to the Nickel value, as the industry (and related businesses) concentrates more than 50% of the jobs, mainly located in Noumea where 2/3 of the population live.

Everyone? Except the Kanaks who since the 70’s claim an identity they can hardly define. This claim has been strongly supported by the historic chief of the nationalist and separatist movement Jean-Marie Tjibaou intimately linked to the violent recent history of the ‘Ouvea tragedy’ which led to the Matignon Agreements in 1988 and whose sanctified ghost, keeps on haunting the social organisation and political future of the island.



*Tjibaou Center in Nouméa*

The Kanaks represent 40% of the total population. About 2/3<sup>rd</sup> live in 'tribu' (tribes), the rest in Noumea and among them 60% in squats, temporary houses outside the city. Nevertheless this exodus does not isolate them from the clan and does not exempt them from sharing their income with members of the 'tribu'.

The Matignon Agreements signed in 1988 by a separatist delegation led by Jean-Marie Tjibaou and the Loyalists led by Jacques Lafleur, under the patronage of Michel Rocard, the French Prime Minister at that time, define the framework and the stakes of the New Caledonia of today. They rely on a sharing of political power, thanks to the division of the Territory into 3 provinces and a voluntarist strategy of economic balancing in favour of Kanaks. They were approved by a national referendum in 1988. An auto determination independence referendum was scheduled in 1998. The Noumea Agreements signed in 1998 delay the referendum about Independence to, at the latest 2018 and organise the progressive transfer of all competences away from Paris to the Territory except Defence, Internal Security, Justice and Money.

Simultaneously, these agreements encourage and define the existence of a civil custom ('coutume') status beside the common republican civil one. By these agreements, Kanaks are endowed with a personal status guaranteed in the constitution, but are not subjects of the Civil Code. They are subjects of the 'Coutume', a term that describe both the oral code that governs the Kanak society (a set of rules, practices and rituals), Melanesian "art de vivre" and the exchange ritual (exchanges of words and gifts). This exchange is bound to disappear even in the Loyauté Archipelago but the rest of the 'Coutume' slows down the integration of the community in the 21th century world.

The clan structure, relying on a named common ancestor, is the foundation of the organisation. Clans unite in tribes inside 'coutume' districts, which are administratively grouped in 8 'coutume' areas created by the Matignon Agreements in 1998. The institutional functioning is fixed in the organic law n° 99209 of the 19 march 1999 relating to French Caledonia. Relations between individuals are based on family relationships, age, birth right, matrimonial regime all underlined by a strong codification of gifts and counter gifts. Similarities with any feudal system would be pure coincidence.

The competences of the 'coutume' law comprise family matters, inheritance or property business, particularly 'coutume' lands which are declared inalienable, non-transferable and cannot be repossessed. It relies on 'palabre' or a discussion organised by Kanak law and undergone under the authority of the chief of the clan, of the tribe or of the big chief, at the request of individuals under 'coutume' law, to rule on dispute, a precision demand or a question about this status or a 'coutume' property.

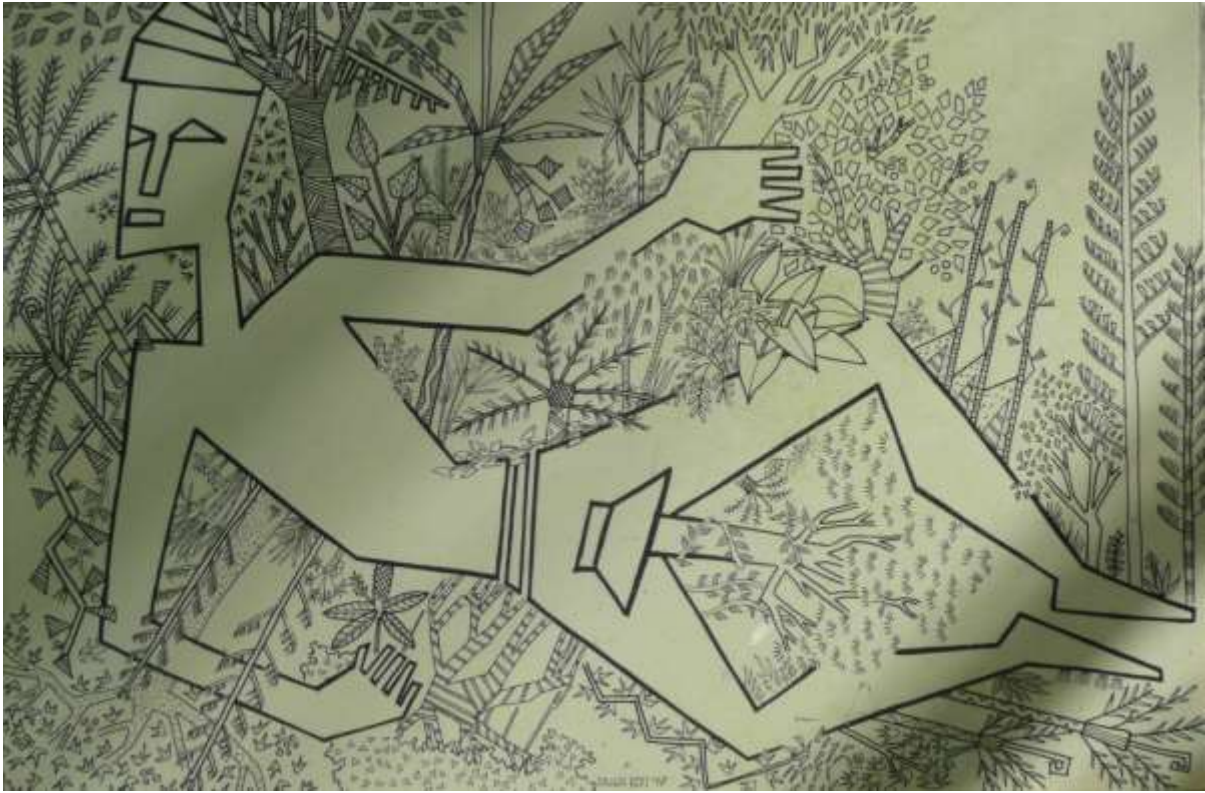
Of course, the limits of this practice of law are thin and regularly go into the newspapers. For the same reasons, the Republican authorities most often remain discreet.



*Hut in We - Lifou*

## YAMS AND TAROS

They are said to be the Ying and Yang of the Kanak culture! The yam (male principle) at the core of the Melanesian food takes a strong symbolic force and remains one of the main element of the 'coutume' exchange... (Ah Mariette, if only I could put my yam into your taro...).



*On the Kanak trail in Tjibaou center.*

The objective of keeping the 'coutume' alive, beyond folk customs, is to bring a stability and continuity virtue to ensure that a society and its people are not wiped off by forced acculturation into Westernised life style.

However we ask ourselves about the reality and the vitality of the Kanak culture so to speak.

Some 60 000 years ago, during the ice age, current South East Asia and the Indonesian islands –**Sunda**– could be crossed by foot and only a small strip of sea separated them from **Sahul** –a combination of actual Australia, Tasmania and Papua New Guinea (PNG).

The crossing of Homo Sapiens from Sunda to Sahul is often dated from 40 to 60 000 years [for biology aficionados, the separation between Sunda et Sahul affects flora and fauna, and constitutes what is called the Wallacea line after the biologist co-inventor of the evolution theory].

In short, those were ancestors of Papus, Aborigines and Melanesians who crossed the strait, slowly settling in actual Australia and PNG then colonising East archipelago, without going beyond the 160° longitude because of the complexity of deep sea sailing.

At the end of ice age, 6/7000 years ago, the sea level went up, cutting off the blocs which generated the actual cultural diversity. The configuration of the close Oceania was almost set.

Between 2000 BC and 1500 BC, occurred a second stage in the migration process, the extension known as Lapita referring to a special kind of pottery, extended the limits of the Austronesian domain to New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa. [Later, at the beginning of the first millennium, having departed from Taiwan with an identified stop in the Moluccas, those who will become Polynesian, sailed on the fringe of the Melanesian country/areas without mixing and reached at last the Marquesas from where they would colonise the invisible continent].

Because of their isolation, New Caledonia Melanesians did not know about iron before Cook arrived. This may be a cause of the poorness of Kanak Art: architecture and sculpture are limited to the big hut and mainly represent ancestors and the clan symbols.

Neither had they developed proper writing before the arrival of Europeans which makes spatial representation complex and still disturb the learning of geometry in primary school.

Dialects, derived from the Austronesian stock do not have concepts of past or future, which makes time representation difficult and made the conversion to Catholicism by missionaries so easy.

The first stage of virtualisation as the use of paper money is very recent.

Finally, there is no cosmogony, exists only a world of Spirits from which individuals come from and to which they return.

Overall, quite an innocent society that burst into rejection and violence.

It is probably the economic boom linked to Nickel in the 60's and 70's that started it all. Confronted to a risk of being a minority by the arrival of Colons and to a forced assimilation into the modern world, the Kanak population took refuge in violence such as 'caldoches' farms arsons. The fireback was quick: murder of separatists of the JM Tjibaou tribe in 1984 and violence escalation which culminates in the hostage crisis of Ouvea in 1988.

A period of appeasement followed, embodied in the Matignon Agreements and which brought unreasonable amounts of money without the Kanaks, still prisoners of the 'coutume', feeling anyhow concerned. It looks like a peace compromise wanted by politicians in mainland France, somewhere in-between an utopic vision by Kanaks and high profit expected by capitalist firms of the 'Caillou' (i.e the Rock).

Today the uneasiness of young Kanaks is perceptible. At odds with their clan, they find themselves projected in a highly connected world, without frontiers but where nothing is in easy access to them despite specific programs like "400 managers". Rejecting the tribal culture, isolated, sad, they sink into a reggae culture to which they have nothing in common except being a peaceful rebel, kava, cannabis and alcohol.

## NOT SO NICKEL CHROME



*Hienghène Marina – one pontoon, 12 boats, forbidden to anchor in the river... so the tribe decided.*

To slow down depopulation of far out Provinces and in an appeasement concern after the events of 1988, New Caledonia Government initiated the '400 managers' program to promote the training and insertion of Kanaks and built infrastructures like roads, hospitals, college, marinas...

This willingness to encourage and privilege autonomy is especially illustrated in the founding of the SMSP (Mining Society of the South Pacific) from scratch with the awkward support of the French Government, for the benefit of the Kanak community which is in charge. Of course it is not always easy, capital is missing, industrial installations do not perform, competences are scarce but the SMSP is functioning and is starting to fulfil its missions of training, structuration of the economy, and is a source of pride in a smart mix of 'coutume' and craftiness.... That angers some, may Lafleur rest in peace.



*Mining terminal in Ugue*

The Territory twice as big as Corsica, concentrates 25% of the world Nickel stock, essential to the manufacturing of stainless steel and new electronic technologies ; in summary, a highly strategic component.

Until the 80's, the nickel exploitation was done by simply scraping the soil, extracting the Garnierite and putting it on carriers. Refining was done and profits made by the buyer. Easy-Peasy. Mines were owned by big families (Lafleur, Ballande, etc...), the French Government and its engineers from the "Grandes Ecoles" (the local OxBridge) were facilitating the process through Eramet (the head office of SLN), without any strategic vision.

To the extent that now, only one metallurgic factory operates in New Caledonia under the management of Eramet. The second one under chaotic management since 2011 is controlled by Vale (a Brazilian company), and the third one (SMSP, yes the one operated by the Kanaks) is under construction –this is the biggest hydro-metallurgic project to this days- in the North, under Canadian capitalistic control.

One can only be utterly surprised to see how local individual interests and ministerial collusion led to leave 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of both technical and financial control of the mining business to third parties. Lack of vision, lack of ambition, no leadership.

Fortunately the control of the maritime space and its positioning close to Asia can still justify to keep the 'Caillou', not maybe from a French but from an European perspective.

New Caledonia maintains ambiguous relationships with its near neighbours which furthermore accentuates its isolation. The status of Overseas Territory and protected economic routes with the European Economic Union and Mainland France, apart from exchanges with Australia, Asia or other Pacific nations by the application of dissuasive trade barriers, penalizes its integration in the Pacific economic zone.

The GDP, because of the relative wealth brought by the Nickel industry and low population (260 000), is close to New Zealand and Australia's. Tourism, the second biggest sector after mining, is trying to attract Australian cruise ships to Vanuatu, poor cousin which enables a cheap exoticism and humanitarian justification.

Exchanges with French Polynesia are few, a simple comparison to shiny Papeete leads to an inferiority complex from Noumea, despite Papeete being so old fashioned and so overtly dependent on Paris (the participation of mainland France into the New Caledonia GDP only reaches 13% as opposed to 25% for French Polynesia).



*Orphelinat bay in Nouméa.*

## KEEP GOING

Sailing across the South Pacific is over. As the XV<sup>th</sup> Pacific games are about to begin in Port Moresby under high security scrutiny to divert the Roskols attention, we sadly leave but convinced to come back for their cool way of life despite displays of brutality and desolation spread by the “whites”, the myriad of atolls and lagoons, micro States coveted and looted by Australia and New Zealand, becoming Nations, aware of the obvious slow death of misfit cultural originalities, forcefully integrated into the strategic games played by the region’s leaders.



*XV<sup>th</sup> Pacific games – Advertisement in Nouméa.*

After passing through the Torres strait, a sailing challenge –coral sea, sand shoals, tides, currents, cargos...- and a disturbing illustration of Australian hegemony in the territorial division of waters and the treatment of Papuan minorities, the next months will be dedicated to sailing across the Indonesian archipelago from East to West to reach Singapore at the end of the year. A trail to discover another world, highly populated, with a Muslim majority, deeply engaged in its century and stuck between China and Australia.



Louisiades (PNG) – Torres strait: July  
Molucas: August  
Sulawesi: September  
Nusa Tenggara: Flores, Komodo, Sumbawa, Lombok, Bali: October  
Pulau Belitung, Bangka, Riau Islands: November  
Singapore, for Christmas... hope to meet some of you there...

A trip of 3500 nm among 18000 islands....



Best wishes, Sanity and Sobriety,

Stéphanie / Christophe

Noumea – New Caledonia

30 Juin 2015

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