

Jean-Marie Tjibaou. *Kanaké, The Melanesian Way*. Translated by Christopher Plant. Pape'ete: Les Editions du Pacifique, 1978. Suva: The Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1978. Pp. 120, illustrations and maps.

The First Festival of Melanesian Arts or "Melanesia 2000" took place in Nouméa during September 1975. It was meant to be a meeting place, a cultural forum for the Melanesian people who had hitherto been widely spread amongst the French colonial possessions in New Caledonia (*la Grande Terre*), the Isle of Pines, and the Belep and Loyalty Islands. Jean-Marie Tjibaou's volume *Kanaké The Melanesian Way* was the belated upshot of these proceedings. It is a book which deals in general terms about the past and present life of the Melanesian people, seeks a reconciliation between European and Melanesian modes of existence and, above all, attempts to plot the way ahead for the Melanesians. In Tjibaou's words *Kanaké* will "present to the public a number of images and ideas which are glimpses of Kanake and his universe." Further, it aims to "re-sume the dialogue to rebuild to tell the world that we are not survivors of prehistory, still less archaeological fossils, but men of flesh and blood."

The study falls rather unevenly into two conceptually distinct parts. The first, consisting of Chapters One and Two, is polemical and terse. Tjibaou asks: "What will the Kanakas be in the year 2000?" To answer

this, he renders a highly colored account of the so-called "hazards of modernization" which confront the 55,600 Melanesians living in New Caledonia today: industrialization with its attendant relations of production, urbanization, and the increasing destruction of tribal life and social infrastructure. With the teachings of Third World theorists firmly in mind, Tjibaou represents the Melanesian on the urban labor market as exploited, manipulated, and undereducated. Of course, the author is mostly correct in these observations. He notes: "Of the 25% of the Kanaka people who comprise the working population of New Caledonia, 65% are employed as labourers or house-servants, needing no technical qualifications as established by the Labour Office." He is also on firm ground in pointing out the dysfunction of historical and ethical belief between Europeans and Melanesians over concepts such as labor, time, and relaxation. There are few aspects of cultural interaction which escape comment, least of all the alarming increase in alcoholism among many male Melanesians, the related attacks on family life, and the attempts by several associations such as the "Feminine Association for a Smiling Melanesian Village" to offset such problems.

Although Tjibaou's general conclusions have been spelt out more eloquently in the classic texts of colonial rule, he presents us with a timely update on the constant contradiction to the Melanesians "experienced between the collective life of the tribe and the individual society of the European, split between two value systems having their roots in two different worlds."

By way of examining this method, many cross-cultural analogies spring to mind. The plight of the Melanesian is not dissimilar to that of the Australian aborigine who, in his own country, still enjoys little or no social or political recognition and is generally ushered away from the mainstream of white Australian society. If the aborigine does drift toward urban Australia he usually finds himself unskilled work, low wages, and dismal accommodation. And we could expand upon many like examples because such encapsulation, whether race, religion or class biased, is known in all human societies to varying degrees.

The point is, however, that Tjibaou's work is of this genre which eulogizes the description and descriptive method but ignores the demand for action. If the author had presented his facts about the Melanesian plight with a plan for the future Melanesia 2000, then the book would have met its maximum claims. Reminiscent of the indecisive and vacillating attitude of the Australian government toward the aborigines in the 1950s and 1960s, Tjibaou never confronts the thorny issue he has raised. Should native peoples seek assimilation with their colonial rulers or should a retreat to the isolation of village custom be sounded? Naturally there are numer-

ous courses of action between these extremes, but Tjibaou shrinks from the task at a fundamental level.

The second part of the book and the real value of the study begins with Chapter Three, entitled "The Conical House and the Pines." Here the philosophy behind Melanesia 2000 is laid bare: to "enable the Kanaka to confront himself so that he may today rediscover and redefine his identity." Myths and legends narrated at the Nouméa festival are retold with color and interest. The Patyi myth from Koné and the legend from Ponérihouen--both remarkably similar--tell of the creation of the Melanesian universe. The tradition of the first born of the clan and the role of spirits and totems and the concept of space are carefully related. Prominent mention is made of the ceremonial recitation of tribal genealogy as an occasion which establishes the relationship between the individual and the universe itself.

Chapters Four and Five deal with the Melanesian sense of time and social hierarchy, the cultivation of yams and the marriage ceremony or *pilou* as it is observed in traditional village life. Considerations of taboo and guilt, ill-fortune, and sorcery are also described as phenomena very much a part of contemporary Melanesian life, even in modern Nouméa. Undoubtedly these chapters will interest cultural anthropologists and the general student both by the literary and photographic displays.

The brief concluding chapter attempts to capture the theme of cultural awareness in the hope that identity of customs, myths, and legends between the 319 discernible Melanesian tribes of New Caledonia will forge a common approach to an uncertain future.

But, the questions left begging in Tjibaou's study must be: Is cultural awareness enough? Will events such as Melanesia 2000 and *Kanaké. The Melanesian Way* generate a united Melanesian response? In the French possession, at least, the answer is so far a disappointing "No." Without effective political and social organization and leadership, without plans and goals, awareness of common bonds and customs will lay a dormant force. Tjibaou's study is, however, a good tool for the future: it does demonstrate a rich cultural thread running amongst apparently divergent clans and tribes.

Brian Babington
Department of Government
University of Sydney