

## POSTCOLONIAL POLITICS AND COLONIAL MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS IN NEW CALEDONIA

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The signing in 1998 of the Noumea Agreement on the political future of New Caledonia was of great significance in conferring a limited form of nationhood on New Caledonia prior to a vote on independence in fifteen to twenty years' time. The agreement itself argues that the emergence of a "new sovereignty" requires affirmation of the formative place of Kanak identity and culture in the society. This requirement is particularly apparent within the European community, which has based its opposition to independence on a denigration of Kanak claims to an affirmative identity and peoplehood. This article interrogates whether there are signs that such a valuing of Kanak identity and culture is emerging within this community by analyzing the discourses on Kanak identity and culture in the territory's most influential mouthpiece: the daily newspaper *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*. I argue that the discourses, though changing, still evince considerable racism and therefore augur badly for the prospects of a genuinely postcolonial future.

THE EMERGENCE OF A CONSENSUAL AGREEMENT between pro- and anti-independence groups on the constitutional future of New Caledonia had been long anticipated, ever since the main signatories to the 1988 Matignon Accords touted the idea in the early 1990s. Nonetheless, the precise nature of the consensus reached in 1998 surprised many, as much for its symbolism as its content. This new agreement—the Noumea Agreement—sketched institutional structures that were to confer a substantial degree of political autonomy on a newly configured government and a more locally sourced bureaucracy. But its attention to the symbolic dimensions of this political shift testified most to the possibility of a "concerted transition towards a new

sovereignty" (Bensa and Wittersheim 1998:17). In New Caledonia's past, greater political autonomy has been given and greater political autonomy has been taken away.<sup>1</sup> What was fundamentally novel about this agreement was its call for the establishment of a New Caledonian citizenship and a "common destiny" for its citizens, which, the document asserted, must be premised on a "full recognition of the identity of the Kanak people" (Secrétariat d'Etat à l'Outre-Mer:17). This proposition suggested a fundamentally different future for a place that, despite its cultural traditions, geographical location, and the good work of many, has remained myopically transfixed by its colonial relationship with France. Could the emergence of a New Caledonian nationality deflect this tunnel vision? Could a common destiny be forged that is other than its hitherto common destiny with France? In short, could the agreement provide the requisite political and symbolic impetus for a postcolonial future?

The Noumea Agreement has in its sights the radical reconstitution of identity in the new nation, grounded in the acknowledgment and valuing of indigenous culture. This linking of postcoloniality with non-Eurocentric identity is prevalent in many definitions of the postcolonial. It is expressed most directly and uncompromisingly by Simon During, for whom postcolonialism is "the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images" (1995:125). Postcolonial studies have generally acknowledged the impossibility of achieving such an outcome, viewing cultural encounters as transformative of both dominant and subordinate cultures. What invariably results is a form of cultural hybridity, which, while falling far short of During's prescription, can itself constitute a basis for anti-colonial resistance (Pratt:1994). Whatever the spectrum of possibility, however, there is no denying that a significant shift away from Eurocentric identity is part of the postcolonial project. The Noumea Agreement echoes this understanding when it states: "Colonization harmed the dignity of the Kanak people and deprived it of its identity. . . . These difficult times need to be remembered, the mistakes recognized and the Kanak people's confiscated identity restored, which equates in its mind with a recognition of its sovereignty, prior to the forging of a new sovereignty, shared in a common destiny" (Secrétariat d'Etat à l'Outre-Mer 1998:17).

What are the chances that such a restoration of Kanak identity will occur? This question is particularly pertinent for those sections of the population—largely of European origin—who have hitherto been very disinclined to accord Kanak identity any such status. During the 1980s, the main public mouthpiece of this sizeable group was the monopoly daily newspaper *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*. At the time the newspaper vested enormous effort

in opposing Kanak demands for independence. Its hostility towards the pro-independence movement, and the racist tenor of much of its reporting, contributed substantially to a polarization of opinion over the question of independence and the emergence of political violence in the period 1984–1988. The Matignon Accords were intended to quell the violence and reinstate a form of respectful dialogue between Kanak and European political groups. After the Matignon Accords, public displays of respect for Kanak leaders featured frequently in *Les Nouvelles*. Was this new style of reporting evidence of an improvement in European attitudes towards Kanaks? Did it augur well for the type of postcolonial future foreshadowed in the Noumea Agreement? Unfortunately, a close analysis and comparison of the discourses in *Les Nouvelles* before and after the Matignon Accords suggests otherwise. Although changes did occur, they were more of form than of substance. Indeed, the discursive shifts that have occurred suggest, if anything, that little progress has been made in advancing the prospect of a postcolonial future based on a positive affirmation of Kanak identity and culture.

### **The Media, Identity, and Postcoloniality**

The investigation in postcolonial studies of colonialism's impact on identity has drawn heavily on poststructuralist notions of identity as discursively constructed and contested. If we are persuaded at all by Stuart Hall's claim that the media hold a privileged place in the discursive construction of our contemporary world (1985), then the media must be fertile territory for interrogating the effects of colonialism on identity. Those who access the media regularly cannot escape a continuous engagement with the various representations of femininity, masculinity, ethnicity, race, normality, and deviancy that they privilege. While the extent to which readers identify with the subject positions constructed in media discourse is always open to question, the particular power of the media must rest in large part in their popularity and everydayness.

*Les Nouvelles'* monopoly status rendered it enormously influential in the interpretation of the often politically tumultuous events surrounding the question of independence during the 1980s and 1990s. During brief periods in the 1980s, *Les Nouvelles* did have competition from other daily newspapers formed to give voice to more moderate pro- or anti-independence political views. The life span of each competitor was short and prematurely terminated by pressure from the leader of the anti-independence movement, Jacques Lafleur, whose vast business interests in the territory meant that he could enforce a boycott of advertising in these competitors. This fact alone suggests the extent to which *Les Nouvelles'* discourses generally sat

comfortably with the anti-independence movement. Although pro-independence weekly or episodic publications sometimes existed, these tended to be read almost exclusively by sympathizers. In contrast, *Les Nouvelles* purported to be a mainstream, politically neutral publication, and its daily presence meant that it, along with state-owned television and radio, was the means through which residents could know of events in the territory. Within the pro-independence movement and elsewhere, few believed *Les Nouvelles*' assertions of political neutrality. Noumea-based pro-independence activists nonetheless read the paper both to find out something about political developments and to appraise themselves of the copiously reported arguments of their opponents. Neither pro- nor anti-independence supporters denied the influence of this ubiquitous publication. All sides were required to engage with the framing of political events achieved by its discourses on independence as they developed and permuted on the pages of *Les Nouvelles*.

In my reading of the daily, it was apparent that a central aspect of this reporting on independence concerned the issue of identity. Indeed, surprisingly little space was given to discussions of political issues concerning independence per se—such as the economic costs and benefits of independence or governance issues—and much to claims concerning who could be considered rightful participants in the political process and who therefore could rightfully participate in determining the future of the territory. The experiences of colonialism had, of course, resulted in a foregrounding of identity and the subject in the political struggle. Not only had colonialism engendered new subjects and established the institutional bases of new processes of identification, it had, in New Caledonia as elsewhere, sought to eradicate, or at least fundamentally alter, the old. The insecurity of identity within the colonial context made the very issue of identity central to the political struggle. The result was a struggle over identity: a struggle over the meaning that could be legitimately derived from being “Caledonian,” “Melanesian,” or “Kanak.” As I argue, *Les Nouvelles* weighed in heavily and influentially in this contestation.

### **Identity in *Les Nouvelles* during the 1980s**

During the 1980s, *Les Nouvelles* manifested an increasing contempt for pro-independence activists, who were represented as having no rightful place in the realm of legitimate political debate. Indeed, a large part of the rhetorical work done in *Les Nouvelles* discursively constructed this group in a particularly racist, and therefore pernicious, way. Other identities also became the focus of discursive struggle in the pages of *Les Nouvelles*. In the discourses

surrounding independence, to be "Caledonian," "Melanesian," or "Kanak" signified an interestedness in the struggle, but in a place that was forever shifting according to the relations of force at the time. Indeed, the fluidity of the subject positions constructed in *Les Nouvelles* highlights the contested nature of identity in New Caledonian society and the centrality of the struggle over identity to the political struggle over independence. The discursive struggle over identity was a struggle over who could act as legitimate participants in determining the territory's future. It was, in effect, a struggle over who constituted the "real Caledonian," the "real Melanesian," and ultimately the "people" whose right it was to participate in the political struggle. Increasingly, the debate sought to delimit the "real," the "legitimate," and the "true" subject.

Pro-independence Kanaks had considerable stake in this debate. During the late 1960s, pro-independence Melanesians, who by this stage had appropriated as self-identification the hitherto derogatory term "Kanak," began to identify with the internationalist discourse of "the people" popularized in France and elsewhere through the work of such writers as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. This discourse linked the category of "the people" with discourses of liberation, decolonization, and independence. It was incorporated in various United Nations resolutions, particularly U.N. resolution 1514, which declared the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination.

This internationalist discourse of the people formed the backbone of Kanak demands for independence until the signing in 1988 of the Matignon Accords, which formalized the cessation of armed struggle between pro- and anti-independence groups. For example, in 1980, pro-independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou gave a rare commendation to a piece of legislation passed in the local Territorial Assembly, describing it as "a step in the process of restoring to the only legitimate people of the country, the indigenous people, the kanak nation" (*Les Nouvelles*, 16 May 1980). In the face of such claims to a primordial legitimacy, *Les Nouvelles* stepped up its opposition to this conception of Kanaks as "the people," providing a forum for those who opposed the idea as well as arguing against it in its own editorial content. Discourses appeared in the paper that constituted the people as the entire population of New Caledonia. Others appeared that advanced a conception of the people as those opposed to independence, as in the reference in one political advertisement to "the determination of the Caledonian people in their entirety to oppose every possibility of independence or separatism" (*Les Nouvelles*, 14 May 1983). Ultimately, the paper sought to undermine the claims to a historical and racial legitimacy inherent in the internationalist discourse of the people. The newspaper's editor-in-chief in 1987, Henri Perron, questioned the status of Melanesians as the "first occu-

pants” of the land, arguing that others had preceded them (*Les Nouvelles*, 14 Mar. 1987; see also 10 Sept. 1987). In his editorials, Perron sought to reinvigorate a discourse of pluriethnicity as a counter to the claims of the “Kanak people.” For example, in an editorial on a series of weekend sporting events, Perron laments that

those who cry from the roofs against French Caledonia; those who want the world to believe that Whites exploit Melanesians, that the tribes are confined to their reserves at gun point . . . they would have seen a white, black and yellow people, their hearts beating as one at the exploits of the heroes of the day. They would have seen a pluri-ethnic or multiracial crowd play, run, dance, sing, share a meal of friendship, commune better in an immense leap of joy and fraternity. (*Les Nouvelles*, 2 May 1987)

The rhetorical strategy of questioning the historical justification for the notion of the Kanak people was accompanied by a strategy of questioning its racial coherence. *Les Nouvelles* reported prominently the claims of one metropolitan French politician that New Caledonians “form only a single community. The Kanak people don’t exist. There are only mixed-race” (cited in Barbançon 1992:113), adding that “I am myself mixed-race and proud to be so” (*Les Nouvelles*, 7 Oct. 1987). With no historical or racial legitimacy, the Kanak people constituted a nonidentity within this conservative, anti-independence discourse of “pluriethnic fraternity.” In fact, within this discourse they no longer even constituted an ethnic group, for the presumption of some form of racial cohesion is usually required to establish ethnicity (Balibar 1991:99–100).

Kanaks fared no more inclusively in *Les Nouvelles*’ consideration of who constituted “true Caledonians,” the residents of an “imaginative geography” called the “true” or the “profound Caledonia.” This discourse of the “true” was closely linked to that of pluriethnic fraternity. The “true Caledonia” is a type of landscape with a type of people that, together, produce a type of political orientation. It is a place of unfettered harmony, both physical and sociological. In a photo of the “profound Caledonia,” a farmer of European descent stands at his farm on a stretch of flat land surrounded by chickens, a deer, and a dog, with a mountain rising in the background. The caption comments on the peacefulness of the scene, which, it suggests, reflects “*la Calédonie profonde*.” Mary-Louise Pratt has written of the “fantasy of dominance” inscribed in the panoramic shot, a fantasy inscribed in this scene that depicts the type of unfettered harmony that only complete domination can engender (Pratt, in Mills 1991:7). Harmony and tranquility were also key

to the discourse of the true Caledonian. In 1984, an article reported on the visit of French Minister for Overseas Departments and Territories George Lemoine to a small remote farm in the mountains. An old woman of European descent, whose husband had died, lived on the farm with her two sons. They lived a poor subsistence lifestyle but professed to be happy. Lemoine was quoted as saying that "Caledonia, it's this house, this old woman who had two children with a *canaque*" (*Les Nouvelles*, 20 Oct. 1984). The simplicity and harmony evoked by this description were echoed in the accompanying photo. The family was not only in harmony with their physical environment but also with their sociological one, reflected in the fact that the woman had had "two children with a *canaque*." The dream of pluriethnic harmony was as implicit to this conception of *la Calédonie profonde* as were the dominance and domestication of the land, as is evident in anti-independence Melanesian Senator Maurice Nénou's claim to be "the voice of the true Caledonia, of this pluriethnic Caledonia about which some still think that two communities oppose each other" (*Les Nouvelles*, 16 Apr. 1987). Similarly, another anti-independence Melanesian senator, Dick Ukeiwé, described one of his political proposals as "the echo that *la Calédonie profonde* sends to the incantations of the *indépendantistes*" (*Les Nouvelles*, 27 Mar. 1985). Political agitation played no part in this description of the true Caledonia. Kanaks, who sought to disrupt this harmonious social order, had no place as New Caledonians in *la Calédonie profonde*.

In essence then, New Caledonians were constructed as those who opposed independence. The noose of rightful identification around the necks of Kanaks was tightening all the time. Ultimately, they were even denied identification as Melanesians. Prior to 1984 the paper occasionally used the term "Melanesian" to signify pro-independence activists, such as when it commented that the gendarmes had found the "Melanesians" in Temala particularly aggressive (13 May 1983). This mobilization of "Melanesian" to signify pro-independence activists became increasingly contentious as the anti-independence movement sought to give increasing political and symbolic prominence to the small number of Melanesians in their ranks. During Lemoine's 1984 visit to the interior of the main island, the cool reception he received in pro-independence regions led to a front-page headline that declared, "He wanted to find Melanesians; he found *indépendantistes*" (5 Apr. 1984). Corresponding with this juxtaposition, a geographical divide later emerged between what *Les Nouvelles* described as the "good" and the "bad" side of the main island (6 May 1988). At times "Kanak" was juxtaposed with "Melanesian," but the term was generally too charged for common usage. Where avoidance was not possible, as, for example, when quoting from a pro-independence leader's comments on "Kanak independence" at a press

conference, the term was most frequently rendered as “Canaque.” There were even some attempts to appropriate “Canaque” as an anti-independence subjectivity, perhaps best exemplified in Henri Perron’s description of “true Canaques” as those who attended an anti-independence rally (12 Sept. 1987). Generally, the paper used a rich vocabulary of deviancy to describe Kanaks, which at times bordered on the surreal, as is evident in the description of one Kanak involved in a violent clash between activists and gendarmes:

But one thing is certain: We are in the presence of individuals ready for anything. The group seems to be under the authority of Camille Maperi, 34 years old, a violent individual without scruples, implicated in several cases of theft, rape, attacks, as well as in several cases of shooting on the forces of order and probably in several other affairs. This person seems never to separate from his weapon, which makes him doubly dangerous. He showed this weekend that he doesn’t hesitate in using it. (14 Mar. 1988)

This discourse on the extremism and deviancy of Kanaks, evocative of JanMohamed’s “economy of the Manichean allegory” (1985), led to the emergence of a further juxtaposition. This one contrasted the socially and psychologically dysfunctional “Kanak” with the reasonable, well-adjusted “Melanesian.” There was a prevalence of representations of Melanesian women and girls in this discourse of the “good Melanesian,” in contrast with the general dearth of representation of women in the paper’s political coverage. Several photographic representations of “good Melanesians” were published in a special supplement to *Les Nouvelles* in November 1987. In these photos, Melanesian women and girls are depicted in a range of festive scenes associated with anti-independence demonstrations and the greeting of conservative French politicians at the airport, and in a series of quasi-intimate scenes with Minister for Overseas Departments and Territories Bernard Pons during his 1987 visit. One photo shows Pons seated on the ground surrounded by several Melanesian women, two of whom have arms around his shoulders while a third is leaning against his legs. The prevalence of representations of women in this discourse suggests that such women were considered exemplary “good Melanesians,” rendered such by their childlike enthusiasm, spontaneity, and adoration. This infantilization of women evokes one of the central tropes of colonial discourse that Thomas argues was important to both missionary propaganda and French assimilationist policy, but which also had more general application: the infantilization of indigenous peoples (1994:133–134). The use of representations of women to mobilize this trope was possible because of their general absence in anti-inde-



pendence media discourses. This absence meant that media images of Melanesian women had escaped the difficult political contestation that had occurred. Women could still constitute a realm of purity, moderation, and bonhomie and could thus, along with children, represent one of the last realms of the "good Melanesian," well reconciled to the assimilationist imaginings of the French colonial project. That such representations were used to lure Melanesian votes by presenting what were considered to be positive representations of Melanesians attests to the prevalence of a deeply entrenched colonial mentality among journalists at *Les Nouvelles*. Not only could these images be read as colonizing indigenous people, they can also be read as colonizing women, thereby illustrating the congruence between dominative relations of power in two realms—the colonial and the sexual.

With the appropriation of the category "Melanesian" to the anti-independence position, the frontiers of exclusion for those who supported independence were pushed to their limits. Within the discourses in *Les Nouvelles* these people were neither New Caledonian nor Melanesian; they could not rightfully constitute themselves as "the people" and had no legitimate place in the notion of Caledonia. This was, in effect, an exclusion of Kanaks as legitimate human beings. Anthropologist Alban Bensa argues that this denial of legitimate subjectivity is a central feature of racism in New Caledonia and explains the extremist forms that racism has taken in the territory. Bensa has written that, within the French empire, the colonial phantasm of a complete disappearance of the colonized people was nowhere better embraced than in New Caledonia, and this explains the zeal with which the theory of the imminent disappearance of the Kanak people was embraced in the territory (1988:190–191). This theory was "less the product of an irrefutable total inquiry than an ideological extrapolation from sparse observations, treated as proof of the inescapable disappearance of the 'inferior races'" (ibid.:191). It was nonetheless, he argues, highly influential, for "[t]his ideology of the extinction of Melanesians defined the very particular form which racism took in this French colony, from 1853 to today: a racism of annihilation that only ever envisaged Kanaks as nonbeings" (ibid.).

Bensa's argument that anti-Kanak racism in New Caledonia in the 1980s renewed the worst of the colonial fantasies of extinction that had prevailed in the earliest decades of colonization is borne out in the discourses on Kanak identity in *Les Nouvelles*. In these discourses Kanaks constituted nonbeings in the sense that their purported deviance disaffiliated them from any legitimate human subjectivity. As in the earliest times of colonization, their status as nonbeings authorized some of the worst acts of violence against them, epitomized in the Hienghene massacre in December 1984 in which a group of Kanaks returning from a political meeting in the town of Hienghene were

gunned down by a group of settlers, resulting in the killing of ten Kanaks. This and other incidents of violence towards Kanaks illustrates the effects of power produced by their discursive annihilation (Foucault 1980).

### **The Media's Political Resurrection of Kanaks**

Under the political settlement expressed in the 1988 Matignon Accords, insurrectionary activity ceased and relative calm befell the territory. The Matignon Accords signified the political resurrection of its pro-independence signatories, in particular the more moderate elements within the pro-independence umbrella organization, the Front de Libération National Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS). The FLNKS was now a signatory to the accords and therefore a "partner" in the future of the territory.

The outward show of calm masked the uneasy and tenuous nature of the political situation. To many, the Matignon Accords signified betrayal of the militancy and political momentum forged throughout the struggles of the decade. There was a dire need to "sell" the Matignon Accords to this disgruntled constituency and this task was largely taken up by the dominant political signatories to the agreement: the French government, the FLNKS, and the dominant right-wing political party, the Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République (RPCR).

This new and fragile consensus had immediate ramifications for reporting in *Les Nouvelles*, which stepped into line with the discursive requirements of the new political program. This immediate transmogrification was still causing considerable grief to journalists in 1989 when I spent a period working in the *Les Nouvelles* newsroom. One can imagine the cultural shock to journalists whose consciences had been at ease with the style of reporting in the pre-Matignon period when they were suddenly confronted with a range of management directives that stipulated, in short, that they were "not to cause trouble for anyone"—particularly the pro-independence movement. They felt resentful and argued that their ability to exercise properly their journalistic duties had been compromised. The end result was a newspaper where *faits divers* were regularly elevated to front-page status, in keeping with the policy to avoid all suggestion of any political contention in the newspaper. Discourses of deviancy concerning Kanak activism gave way to officious discourse on the mundane and uncontentious activities of the FLNKS, which was now beyond criticism.

By the early 1990s, with a widespread appreciation of the political calm and a greater acceptance of, or resignation towards, the Matignon Accords, reporting in *Les Nouvelles* once again came to broach issues and tensions within the pro-independence movement. But by this time, the newspaper's

discourses on pro-independence activism had shifted considerably. Developments and tensions within the pro-independence movement—particularly where these occurred within official party structures—were reported on in a tempered, almost distanced manner that was a far cry from the type of palpable hostility and vilification that had characterized reporting of *indépendentistes* during most of the 1980s. Shortly after the signing of the Matignon Accords, the front-page headline—“‘Now build together’: Jean-Marie Tjibaou in an exclusive interview with *Les Nouvelles*”—was almost comical in light of the manner in which he had been reported on a short time earlier (1 July 1988). This shift in reporting was no doubt an enormous relief for the pro-independence movement, even if the change disconcerted some of its more radical members who preferred the enemy that they knew. It was tempting to conclude that the leopard had changed its spots and was now ready to accept—perhaps even value—the Kanak people’s right to participate in the political future of the territory.

But, while the “official voices” of Kanak political life acquired a respect and status that rendered their treatment in *Les Nouvelles* almost indistinguishable from that of anti-independence politicians, the paper’s critical eye was shifting towards other sights. Melanesian cultural practice became the object of *Les Nouvelles*’ considerable condescension. Indeed, the denigration and vilification accorded the politically active in the 1980s was directed at the paper’s reading of Melanesian cultural practice in the 1990s. Certain ritualistic aspects of Melanesian culture continued to receive favorable coverage in the 1990s as they had in the 1980s. However, underlying this surface respect a discourse developed on the inadequacy of Melanesian culture to respond to the exigencies of contemporary modern life and, even more pernicious, a discourse on the deviancy of aspects of Melanesian cultural practice. Neither discourse augured well for the possibility of postcolonial identity in New Caledonia.

### **Reporting on Melanesian Culture and Identity in *Les Nouvelles* during the 1990s**

Certain Melanesian customary practices regularly received prominent coverage in *Les Nouvelles*. Welcoming rituals associated with the arrival of foreign or local dignitaries, traditional feasts prepared by the Melanesian women of the community, and folkloric occasions including music and dance provided an exotic vision of New Caledonia as a place where tradition and modernity had come to a harmonious accommodation. An example was coverage in July 1991 of a group of New Caledonian students studying in France (the story suggested they were of European heritage) who had returned to

the territory for holidays and were invited to begin a “passionate adventure” that involved three days of encounter with “the Melanesian world and its way of life” (*Les Nouvelles*, 27 July 1991). Their experience is presented as a true journey of discovery for these New Caledonian students who manifest a respectful hunger for knowledge of Melanesian customary practices. At one point they are put to the task of making a *bougna* “under the attentive gaze of the women who lent a hand with the yams to help the apprentice Melanesian cooks” (*ibid.*). The suggestion is that, after three days, the accommodation between these students of European heritage and Melanesians had become so intimate that the students could be accorded honorary Melanesian status. This folkloric discourse of Melanesian culture offers no barriers with the modern world. Indeed, it exists to enhance a view of modernity as eminently adaptable to the colorful and quaint vagaries of the cultural forms with which modernity has had to contend.

However, this discourse of accommodation is offset by another of juxtaposition and discord. Indeed, this juxtaposition became something of a theme of the paper’s reporting on pro-independence politics in the early 1990s, exemplified in *Les Nouvelles*’ comment that the “difficult problem of balance between custom and democracy” had become, by 1991, the “news topic of the day” (9 July 1991).

Much of this prominence hinged on a dispute between the customary authorities of Lifou, one of New Caledonia’s Loyalty Islands, and its FLNKS mayor, Cono Hamu. The dispute concerned a conflict over land ownership of an area planned for a port. In the face of ongoing disagreement between two clans on ownership rights, Hamu made a decision on ownership that differed from that of the chief of his own traditional district, with the result that he was designated *persona non grata* in this district. At one point Hamu was assaulted and his house subject to an arson attack (*Pacific Report*, 30 May 1991). This was reported as a situation where tradition and modernity, presented through a discourse on democracy and development, were clearly juxtaposed. A central tenet of the Matignon Accords was a commitment to expedite development in the regional areas of New Caledonia, including the Loyalty Islands, in the face of the economic stranglehold of greater Noumea over the territory’s economy. Infrastructural developments such as the port project were important components of this development strategy for the Loyalty Islands that, the reporting suggested, was being jeopardized by traditional disputes. Prominent anti-independence politician Jacques Laffleur was reported in *Les Nouvelles* at this time as saying that he supported the right of Melanesians to maintain their culture but considered that there were greater rights that needed to be adhered to for a society to advance. One of these was democracy. For Melanesians, according to Laffleur, “when it comes

to managing, they have to ask the question whether they trust or don't trust their electorate. If they don't trust universal suffrage and democracy, they'd find themselves back in the situation of clan warfare. . . . For years, the habit was taken of not bending to the rules. But, if you want a modern society that advances, you have to bend to these rules" (*Les Nouvelles*, 9 July 1991).

For Laffeur such advancement was integrally linked to "insertion into economic life" without which "a person isn't complete" (*Les Nouvelles*, 14 Apr. 1990). Within this discourse tradition is not only politically crippling, it is also dehumanizing, a theme that found resonance in other commentary. In an editorial the redoubtable Henri Perron commended Laffeur's comments, observing that the deputy "didn't miss the opportunity to stigmatize the faults of their society," and concluded, "It's a society that desires emancipation but refuses the emancipation of its people, particularly its women" (*Les Nouvelles*, 5 May 1991).

As "good Melanesians," women are represented as bearing the brunt of these dehumanizing practices. The discourse on the poverty of Melanesian culture finds additional fodder in the correctional pages of the newspaper, where court cases concerning acts of violence by Melanesian men against Melanesian women received prominent coverage. In 1991 the paper reported on the "Boula trial" in which a young Melanesian, Henri Boula, was accused of having doused his girlfriend, Gaimelle Ngazo, with petrol and set her alight while in a drunken rage. The defense lawyer considered that the trial could have been that of alcoholism in the territory, which, he argued, was also present in the European society but which was "more important in Melanesian society, which doesn't have the means of prevention and control. The territory doesn't have the means either to solve the problem" (*Les Nouvelles*, 2 May 1991). The defense saw fit to provide an overview of the history of the introduction of alcohol into Melanesian communities pointing to instances where prominent Melanesians themselves opposed its availability in Melanesian communities. The decision in 1970 to allow its sale constituted, he argued, "a new liberty . . . and as with every new liberty [he suggests not only in Melanesian communities], it was abused because the safeguards hadn't been put there" (*ibid.*). Boula's girlfriend, who remained conscious until she died a day after the incident, had, according to the defense, become a martyr because she tried to protect him by claiming she had doused herself with petrol. It was "[p]roof of an extraordinary love to forget her suffering and only think to protect him. She has forgiven him. The tribe has forgiven him. He thinks only of making up for what he did. He is faced with his remorse" (*Les Nouvelles*, 2 May 1991).

Boula's forgiveness by Ngazo appears incomprehensible in the face of the manner in which he is represented in the newspaper report. As suggested,

it can only be understood by reference to the divine. The capacity of the tribe to forgive, on the other hand, is not explained, but the inference is that it arises as much from a type of disengagement as from some superhuman capacity; indeed, the suggestion is that the fault ultimately rests with the community for Boula's dysfunctionality. As *Les Nouvelles* reported of the defense argument:

This society will have to progress when it comes to women and the young. We saw in the witness box women from whom it was difficult to extract a simple "yes" or a simple "no," not because they have nothing to say but because they don't have the right to express themselves in their social group. Boula was criticized for not participating in custom. As a matter of fact, he, like all the young, also had nothing to say in the customary hierarchy. (2 May 1991)

Melanesian custom is therefore responsible for Ngazo's fate, not the structural inequalities inherent in colonial relations of power that continue to disenfranchise Melanesians from productive engagement in the workforce and the Western economy more generally and lead to the overuse of drugs, including alcohol. Youth are presented in this discourse as trapped by a customary world that, because of its rigid fixity and intransigence, offers no functional way forward for young Melanesians to progress in modern life.

The "awful law of silence that up until then bore like a lead weight in the tribal world" was still a topic of journalistic commentary much later in the decade, except now the focus was on the increasing number of Melanesian women who were prepared to speak up and testify before the courts, even in the face of "rejection by their tribe and their clan" (*Les Nouvelles*, 4 Dec. 1998). For proof of rejection *Les Nouvelles* claimed that, every day, "one finds victims strangely alone, abandoned by everyone. Worse, we even saw a whole clan travel from Lifou in order to support, not the victim, but the rapist." The paper discussed the large number of rape cases that had been heard by the court during the session and took exception to the presiding judge's optimism, expressed in his concluding remarks, that he saw in the proceedings "the image of a society that isn't heading the wrong way." For *Les Nouvelles*, the abandonment of the victims by their families and communities demonstrated that such optimism was mistaken. As the paper quipped: "Nice, optimistic words are just that. The reality is as it has always been. That's to say, not very pretty." For the journalist, it was only French justice that gave these women "some dignity" that was denied them in their own society (*ibid.*). The unusual claim that the courts afforded rape victims

a dignity that was otherwise denied them was the ultimate condemnation of the moral vacuity of Melanesian society.

Within *Les Nouvelles* the correctional system, and particularly cases involving sexual violence in Melanesian communities, become synecdoches of the "true" nature of these communities. Rape is presented as a lens through which the deviancy and dysfunctionality of this society in its totality becomes visible. This forging of an association between sex and society has, of course, a long history in colonial discourse; a history that, as Ann Stoler argues (1995:34), even predates Foucault's identification of this relationship in Europe in the nineteenth century. The prominence of its mobilization in *Les Nouvelles* attests to the relatively unreconstructed nature of much of its colonialist imaginings and the continuing functioning of discourses on sexuality as agents in the subjugation of colonized peoples.

The reporting of comments by accused men that there is no word for rape in their language further underscored the implicit claim that rape was an endemic feature of Melanesian society.<sup>2</sup> In 1992 *Les Nouvelles* reported on the trial of six young men for the rape of a Melanesian woman under the heading "Abused by Six Men ... and It Isn't Rape," evoking the argument in the trial that the act may have had a cultural significance that was not understood by the courts. The journalist summarized the thoughts of the prosecutor thus: "In substance, the prosecutor called attention to the fact that, in Melanesian mentality, victims of rape are not acknowledged, and that, according to their culture, the perpetrators don't consider having done anything wrong, considering their act as something they were naturally entitled to" (20 Mar. 1992).<sup>3</sup> This report precipitated a terse letter to the editor from one Kanak politician who considered its line of reasoning racist in assuming that the activities of a group of young Kanak rapists were somehow reflective of Melanesian culture (31 Mar. 1992). The letter pinpointed a key rhetorical prop to *Les Nouvelles*' racism—what Memmi called the "mark of the plural" under which "any negative behaviour by a member of the oppressed community is instantly generalised as typical, as pointing to a perpetual backsliding toward some presumed negative essence. Representations thus become allegorical; within hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogeneous community" (Shohat and Stam 1994:183).

Clearly, a culture imbued with such negative essences cannot constitute a foundation for progress, no matter how vociferous Melanesian demands for development. While the precise deficiencies of Melanesian culture were seldom overtly specified, they were often alluded to. In the reporting on the trial of a Lifou man who had raped a young French teacher, much is made

of the young man's upbringing as a mitigating factor in his criminality (*Les Nouvelles*, 31 Mar. 1995). According to the report the accused, Paul Noa, had been adopted by an uncle when he was five, in keeping with customary practice. The report suggested that his father had been obliged to give him away because he had many sons, to which the reporter added: "What the child thinks about it, absolutely no one cares." Subsequently, Noa "changed not only his name but the tribe. Since then he has been at Canala where he doesn't speak the language. No maternal presence, his uncle being a bachelor" (*ibid.*). In this instance it is the customary practice of adoption that is the culprit. Rape is never allowed to stand alone as an individualized act of deviancy. Rather, it always functions to encode a repertoire of racist stereotypes and prejudices that are given life by the prominence afforded reporting on sexual violence in Melanesian communities.

The deficiencies of Melanesian culture are also commented on in the newspaper's reporting on issues of development. For example, one prominent European commentator argued that development in the traditional milieu

seems to require several factors: men and women who are motivated, dynamic, hard-working, informed, capable of projecting themselves into the future and of permanently managing the gap between these projections and the realities. I agree . . . on the fact that, for this to happen, men and women have to have a dignified and positive self-image and be happily inserted into their cultural identity, within the context of a culture that has accepted to evolve. (*Les Nouvelles*, 18 Mar. 1991)

The similarity is striking between these "desirable" characteristics and those considered requisite for traditional societies on the path of development in much of the modernization literature of the 1950s and 1960s. Even the acknowledgment that traditional culture may retain a residual role (if it chooses to "evolve") evokes Schramm's writing of the period, which was more culturally sympathetic but nonetheless advocated the need by traditional people to develop a new "modern consciousness" (1964). Like this modernization literature, the discourse on Melanesian development in *Les Nouvelles* is premised on a perception of the cultural inferiority of traditional peoples who lack motivation, dynamism, the work ethic, and empathy. Women, who as we have seen are presented as the true victims of traditional society, offer the greatest hope for cultural evolution. As one report on the introduction of the first beauty shop in Lifou observed: "The young girls who Westernize without hesitation are the most sensitive to new models of



femininity. Much more receptive and dynamic than men, women from the islands are freeing themselves on every front. It's for them to choose by finding a personal style that also frees them from the Western model" (11 May 1991).

For women, the Western model is, as this passage suggests, the model of personal emancipation even if the end product of its adoption is not a replication of this Western style but, rather, the development of a unique one. The reason why the Western style can't be fully replicated is suggested in a report on a Melanesian woman who had lived in France for twenty-two years after marrying a young French military doctor. No amount of acculturation to metropolitan life had managed to hide her "Kanak origins":

To see and hear her, there is no doubt as to her ethnic belonging. Medium height, stout, frizzy hair, her strong features reveal her Kanak origins. The seeming severity of her face hides her true personality: in life, Monique is a *bonne vivante*, she lives joking with those around her. The 22 years spent far from her country of birth haven't erased the little signs that betray her Kanak nature: her mimicry, her accent, her gestures, her humor. But after this long separation, Monique is conscious of her uprooting. (*Les Nouvelles*, 25 July 1995)

What is striking about this description of "Kanak nature" is its resort to the bestiary (Shohat and Stam 1994:137), connoted particularly in the references to mimicry and gesture. Thus, even representations of the "good Melanesian" woman—the modernizing hope of Melanesian culture—point to the deeply racist presumption of a nature that will ultimately resist all opportunity for change. In 1996 Lafleur commented on continuing Kanak demands for independence, saying that it would need another generation "to teach Melanesians to manage for themselves" (*Les Nouvelles*, 24 Feb. 1996). At that time they were, he argued, "capable of political management but not economic" (10 Feb. 1996). It is noteworthy that this generous presumption of some capacity to learn—at the level of territorial politics at least—was not accorded Melanesian culture in much reporting in *Les Nouvelles*.

### **The Continuing Nonexistence of Kanaks in the 1990s**

Are the discourses of the 1990s more deleterious towards the prospect of a postcolonial identity and future than those of the 1980s? Certainly they attest to the profound racism that prevails in significant and influential sections of the non-Kanak community in New Caledonia—a racism directed at the very

cultural constitution of the indigenous peoples of this country. Such racist views did, of course, underpin much of the denigration of pro-independence Kanaks during the 1980s and earlier. Their call for a Kanak and socialist independence had always been a call for an independence founded on aspects of Kanak cultural practice, even if there was always considerable disagreement within the pro-independence movement of what this would mean in practice. Implicit, therefore, in *Les Nouvelles*' strident anti-independence of the 1980s had been antipathy towards Kanak culture in all but its ritualistic, folkloric form. The overt surfacing of this antipathy in the 1990s, particularly in the pages of *Les Nouvelles*, showed that the Matignon Accords had done little to resurrect the Kanak people in the eyes of this deeply racist constituency.

Can the mere fact that these views are held by such a significant constituency, and obviously by many journalists working at *Les Nouvelles*, justify their wanton articulation in the paper? The danger is that, once expressed—particularly in a monopoly daily newspaper such as *Les Nouvelles*—they not only reflect the views of this constituency but also lend credence to them, contributing towards the emergence of new generations of New Caledonians who hear in prominent public discourse little to dissuade them from such racist imaginings of the indigenous people of their country.<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

1. In 1963, the French government enacted a new statute for New Caledonia that reduced considerably the powers of local governance granted in the *loi cadre* of 1956 (Henningham 1992:55–56).

2. See also *Les Nouvelles*, 29 Mar. 1995. The article, titled “Ten Years for the Raping of Minors,” contains the comment: “On the word ‘rape,’ [the accused] explained that it doesn’t exist in Melanesian society.”

3. For another example in this vein, see *Les Nouvelles*, 16 Apr. 1994: “Where does custom finish and a racket begin?”

4. Advocates of postcolonial identity are becoming more vocal and have coalesced in recent years in a couple of small political groups dominated by younger-generation New Caledonians. These groups have had some success in recent local elections and have received a small amount of coverage in *Les Nouvelles*. However, their message of hope is more than drowned out by the paper’s litany of disparagement of indigenous Caledonians. The sharp shift in the paper’s discourses on pro-independence Kanaks immediately following the signing of the Matignon Accords demonstrates that *Les Nouvelles* is able to curb its tongue, even at the expense of causing considerable distress to its workers. It should do so in its reporting of Kanak culture if its constituency is to outgrow its colonial dependency and if New Caledonia is to have any decent chance at a postcolonial future.

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