

CROSSROADS

An interdisciplinary journal for the study
of history, philosophy, religion and classics

VOLUME III ISSUE I 2008

ISSN: 1833-878X

Pages 75-79

Short Essay Competition

Undergraduate Section – 2nd Place

Daryl Morini

The Great Revolt: Franco-Kanak Conflict In Historical Retrospect

ABSTRACT

This essay takes a macroscopic look at the history of conflict between the Kanaks (used interchangeably with ‘Melanesians’—the natives of New Caledonia) and French settlers. It focuses upon two chief confrontations—the Great Revolt of 1878 and the political ‘events’ of the 1980s. Historical analysis and comparison is applied to these; the interplay between diverging interpretations of history and political polarisation is likewise explored. All translations from French sources to English are the author’s own.

BIOGRAPHY

Daryl Morini is a second-year student undertaking a Bachelor of Art at the University of Queensland, majoring in International Relations and History.

THE GREAT REVOLT: FRANCO-KANAK CONFLICT IN HISTORICAL RETROSPECT

Would you look at history, still bleeding from ancient revolts and past injustices. [...] It is an island of wounds and of anger; a big, sliced finger floating on the ocean, pointed towards stubborn memories.¹

The Great Revolt was the bloodiest and—in terms of historical implications—the most far-reaching confrontation between French settlers and native Melanesians in New Caledonia. As we shall later discuss, the symbolism of this uprising was not lost on the modern Kanak independence movement. The purpose of this essay is to analyse this violent conflict within its proper historical context, and briefly contrast it to more recent developments in New Caledonian history. The roots of social discontent on this tiny Pacific island are traceable back to the earliest inter-cultural encounters. Two starkly different worlds met at Balade (where the formal take-over by France, or *prise de possession*, took place) on the 24th of September 1853—the European world view comprising philosophical Enlightenment, and its modern notions of liberty and private property, and the world of Melanesia, founded on traditions of tribalism, mystical beliefs, and humankind’s sacred tie to the land. Strictly speaking, however, the Kanaks had been coming into contact with Europeans since at least 1774, when James Cook first sighted New Caledonia and consequently named it for its resemblance to the Scottish highlands. An Australian historian, Martyn Lyons, noted that ‘suspicion and hostility marked Franco-Kanak relations from the outset.’ⁱⁱ This paradoxical relationship—characterised by the title of the author’s book, *The Totem and the Tricolour*—endured for a long time, and fuelled enmities in uncertain times.

INTERTWINING FATES: COLONIAL EXPANSION AND KANAK FRUSTRATION

Christian missionaries arrived in New Caledonia in the early 1840s. Catholic and Protestant missionaries soon competed to convert native tribes—a widespread trend throughout the Pacific Ocean—and thereby gain influence in various regions; the Protestants initially settled in the Loyalty Islands, and particularly the Isle of Pines, whereas the Catholics began their work on the mainland (in and around Balade). Despite the benign, religious aims of both missionary groups, geopolitical considerations played a significant part—i.e., French interests were associated with the spread of Catholicism, whereas Evangelists were deemed to be representing the English crown.ⁱⁱⁱ This preliminary Christian “invasion” also acted as a vanguard for the French *mission civilisatrice* (‘civilising mission’).^{iv} Whilst it is certain that the missionaries significantly undermined traditional Melanesian culture—through the introduction of foreign concepts such as baptism, strict monogamy and European clothing—as colonisation went on, it should not be overlooked that ‘in assuming the protection of tribes, [and] in trying to isolate them from diseases, from alcohol ... the Catholic and Protestant missions enable[d] the Kanak people to survive.’^v

When inquiring into the nature of New Caledonian civil conflict it is imperative to bear in mind that this country—in one of its many similarities with Australia—started out as a penal colony. The first French convicts (named *bagnards*) arrived on the 7th of May 1864. Upon their arrival in Port-de-France—the former name of Noumea—they were warned of the hopelessness of even attempting to escape; this threat was along the lines of ‘here there are sharks in the sea and anthropophagi [cannibals] on land.’^{vi} For these wretched souls, New Caledonia, especially the penitentiary on Nou Island, would avail to be nothing but a vast prison camp. In 1870, a failed socialist revolution in Paris resulted in its defenders—dubbed *Communards*—to be trialled and exiled to the remote colony of New Caledonia. To the ranks of these prisoners were added Algerian rebels, indentured labourers “recruited” from other colonies, including—but not restricted to—French Indochina, Pondicherry (a French territory in India), Reunion island and the New Hebrides (today Vanuatu); extremely low-wage workers were also obtained from various parts of Indonesia, Japan and China. An important point to note is that the penal colony caused great population flows to New Caledonia, which quickly became a “melting-pot” of different ethnic groups and cultures. In later conflicts, as we will see, tensions always peaked in areas where there was the most contact between Kanak and European communities. Perhaps in their gravest mistake, French officials distributed lands—almost haphazardly—to so-called “free colonists” and freed convicts, against the will of tribal hierarchies to whom the lands were viscerally linked.

During a meeting held at Teremba by the French Governor Olry, a Kanak chieftain, Atai—one of the foremost leaders of the insurrection to come—argued against the redistribution of lands for colonial purposes. According to this famous anecdote, the proud and daring Kanak approached the Governor carrying two bags—one filled with soil and the other with rocks. As he emptied the contents of each bag, in that order, Atai said: ‘This is what we had, and this is what you are leaving us.’^{vii} The French administration could not understand the plight of the Kanaks; after all, it seemed that they had plenty of land for a population which probably ranged from 50,000 to 70,000. In Kanak culture, the arable land available on this mountainous island was used for fields of yams and

taros—the staple diet of Melanesians. Governmental consent, though, was given for expansion into these seemingly “vacant” lands. The second greatest cause of Kanak resentment was the European practice of cattle-breeding. Before colonisation, no quadrupeds inhabited the island of New Caledonia. Soon enough, the bush was teeming with wild pigs, dogs, deer—a favourite target of game hunting until the present day—along with horses and cows. European colonists allowed the animals to graze freely, which destroyed Melanesian crops and—in the views of many tribesmen—put their very survival at risk. Furthermore, with the increasingly apparent domination of the French state, Kanak social structure was significantly undermined.

THE GREAT REVOLT

The idea of French colonisation in New Caledonia being a smooth ride, a sort of “quiet before the storm of 1878,” is misleading. Kanaks had killed French settlers before (often consuming the remains of their fallen enemies, a tradition of Kanak tribal warfare) and the military repression that followed was often ruthless. In fact, the areas outside of the capital city, Noumea, and away from isolated European mining and farming villages were effectively treated as “no man’s land.” Nevertheless, for the average European colonist minding his or her own business, the Great Revolt of 1878 exploded ‘like thunder in a serene sky.’^{viii} The simple fact which differentiated it from past Kanak revolts was its higher level of organisation; this time, it was clear for all to see that rebelling was the means to an unconditional goal—reclaiming *all* ancestral lands. Another novel aspect of the conflict was the so-called “Kanak army”: the first wave was charged with attacking and killing; the second with looting; and the third with burning down any remaining traces of European settlement.^{ix} However, the rebels were by no means ever united against the French; tribal rivalries poisoned any such hopes.

Upon arriving near La Foa on the 25th of June—where the death of four *gendarmes* at the hand of insurgents first signalled the events to come—the commander Rivière described the horrid scene: ‘Most *colons* have fainted, the others are twitching or are delirious. The wounds, almost all to the head or neck, are deep cuts from an axe or a beak-shaped *casse-tête* [literally, head-breaker].’^x The initial shock by the victims of this bloody uprising is telling of the era’s prevailing mindset. No one could believe that the attackers, Kanaks whom they had previously employed or befriended, had literally stabbed them in the back. Some typical assumptions included the belief that Kanaks were a harmless, lazy people—the image of children is often conjured up in accounts.^{xi} Indeed, much evidence suggests that this paternalistic attitude lingered on for years to come. The worst chapter of this war was without a doubt the destruction of the defenceless European village of Bouloupari. Atai’s warriors had been prepared psychologically for this blood orgy by the *pilou-pilou*, a pre-battle Kanak dance which effectively ‘plunged [them] into a state of violent agitation.’^{xii} The repression of the French army, including the equally notorious burning of Melanesian villages and crops, accelerated.

At the time of the crisis, the French colony responded with remarkable speed. However the most noteworthy acts did not so much come from the military, as from spontaneous resistance. For example, at the penitentiary of Fonwhary, convicted *bagnards* repelled Kanak fighters with makeshift weapons including machetes, sickles and pickaxes. As news spread to Noumea that a full-scale revolt was being staged in the bush—accompanied by rumours that the insurgents were heading towards the town—defensive measures were implemented. Militias began patrolling day and night—and a unit of voluntary stockmen was sent to reinforce the isolated Europeans in hotspots. This decisive organisation among the *Caldoches* (an elastic term for European settlers) would be an important factor in future conflicts. A turning point came when a naval lieutenant—in a dangerous gamble—rallied the Canala tribes to the French cause; these hardened Kanaks would later bring back the heads of Atai, his son, sorcerer and several soldiers. With the leader’s death, ‘the insurrection is decapitated, literally as well as figuratively.’^{xiii} Even though Kanak insurgents fought on sporadically until April 1879, the European colony had won.

The ‘civilising’ (or Westernising?) effects of colonisation in New Caledonia—as witnessed in colonial enterprises worldwide—were achieved at a high price. Some 200 white settlers were killed in the conflict of 1878, including many innocent women and children; on the other side it is estimated that some 1,200 Kanak soldiers died, and a further 800 were exiled to remote islands and Tahiti.^{xiv} Apart from the seemingly futile loss of human life, it is clear that the mentalities of *colonialité* (colonial-ness) and *rébellité* (rebelliousness) remained long after the events—i.e., that of colonist and colonised respectively.^{xv} Roselène Dousset-Leenhardt, in her important book on the Great Revolt of 1878, speaks of ‘this dual phenomenon of progressive invasion by the colonisers and the more and more intense awakening by the Melanesians provoking an increasing incomprehension and isolation [between the communities] ...’^{xvi} Indeed, the ambiguities and hatred long endured in popular memory. Few would refute that Kanaks were to remain a dominated culture for years to come; their frustration surfaced occasionally—i.e., in the failed rebellion of 1917. An immediate, and lasting, consequence of the Great Revolt, pointed out by Jacqueline Sènès, is that ‘fear [was] born, which would forever

incite the *colon* to keep a gun at home in case of an attack.’ The author also notices the same bitterness and surprised reactions of Europeans caught up in attacks during the 1980s.^{xvii}

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS AND “LES ÉVÉNEMENTS”

There is a dual purpose to this final section. Firstly, to discuss how the post-revolt mentalities of Kanaks and *Caldoches* resonate in historical understandings. The second question, a logical extension of the first, is: What part did the Great Revolt, and its debated legacy, play in the political conflict of the 1980s, dubbed “les événements” (the events)? It is clear that ideological polarisation, as we will see, begins with radically divergent interpretations of history. One can appreciate the conclusion of the authors of the *Mémorial Calédonien* (the official history book of the country). This rejected both the—‘unfortunately, for the most part French’—school of thought claiming ‘that the massacred Europeans [of 1878] only got what they deserved’, and the other extreme of those ‘draping themselves in the standard of civilisation to condemn, unduly, the “savages”’; the latter view being expressed by some *colons* at the time to justify a racial genocide of the Kanaks. The authors added the following even-handed words:

In fact, like in all things, there is a *juste milieu* [happy medium]. Atai’s revolt had this excusable [factor], that it was the indignant reaction of people, as respectable as anyone else, against a long series of vexing, if not bullying measures. However it would be iniquitous to make generalisations. Besides certain unscrupulous *colons* ... there were, among the Europeans of the bush, many kind-hearted, honest, hard-working and generous people.^{xviii}

The masterful work of Dousset-Leenhardt also reveals an interesting, albeit more controversial perspective. In the events of 1878–79 she saw a highly-organised ‘revolutionary war’; even more shocking to many readers, the author spoke of national liberation as the ultimate goal of Kanak fighters. Admittedly, in events that followed, such understandings of the past—probably exaggerated ‘historical myths’—would be of vital interest to the nationalist Kanak movement of the late twentieth century. In another case, a famous report by French General de Trentinian on the causes of the insurrection irritated the French government for its piercing conclusions. He believed that ‘we could have avoided what happened. The administration should have forced the Whites to be more careful ...’^{xix}

A Kanak political ‘awakening’ took place in the early 1970s, inciting agitation for change. With Kanak students returning from France—armed with the ideals of revolutionary socialism, and the experience of May 1968—small political parties such as Nidoïsh Naisseline’s *Foulards rouges* (red scarves) and *Groupe 1878* (an obvious reference to Atai’s revolt) sprang up.^{xx} The Great Revolt was a cultural bearing for the Kanak militants, something to be proud of; it was seen as the historical precursor to their demands for independence. In a speech on the 1st of November 1984, the influential *indépendantiste* (independence-seeking) leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou announced the creation of a provisional sovereign, socialist state of Kanaky. This was to replace the existing French order—denounced as colonial and racist—which had forced Kanaks along ‘the road of humiliation.’^{xxi} On the opposing side, descendants of French *colons* argued against what they viewed as a warped Marxist understanding of history. The pro-French majority (as of each electoral result)^{xxii} of New Caledonia was strongly opposed to the exclusive ‘Kanak and socialist’ scheme of independence. The role of the French government was described by observers as ‘that of a parent forced to keep fighting offspring apart.’^{xxiii} One notorious French High Commissioner named Edgard Pisani—eventually loathed by both sides—asserted that ‘the *indépendantiste* revendication has its foundations in history.’^{xxiv} It would be hard to argue against this claim; but then shouldn’t the *Caldoche* community—itself a ‘victim of history,’ with its convicts and exiled revolutionaries, not to mention the indentured labourers from Asia—likewise be justified in its demands to remain French? New Caledonia was polarised between two extremes, both claiming historical legitimacy.

From an almost poetic standpoint, one author noted the distinctly dual character of New Caledonia: ‘Here are two worlds, side by side. So radically opposed, we may really think them irreconcilable.’^{xxv} The violence to come, between the years 1984–1988, seemed to vindicate this viewpoint. *Caldoches* claimed they were resisting Kanaks, and *vice versa*. However, there is a significant nuance to bear in mind. The ethnic distinction between Melanesian and European *may* have been a decisive factor, influencing for whom one fought during the Great Revolt. However, in modern times this was no longer the case—the ‘events’ were chiefly political. The two competing sides were the pro-French RPCR (Rally for Caledonia in the Republic) and the pro-Kanak FLNKS (Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front). The fact is that many different ethnic groups were represented under the umbrella of both parties. I would like to suggest that, in recent times, the terms “Kanak” and “French” (also “*Caldoche*”) have become much more than ethnic distinctions. They are two different, albeit not necessarily incompatible, identities—each representing a different mindset; a different understanding of the past. Significantly, ‘both colonists and independentists manipulate history for their own ends.’^{xxvi}

CONCLUSION

Some parallels certainly did exist between the Great Revolt and “the events.” In cruel historical irony, for example, Éloi Machoro—one of the foremost leaders of the Kanak nationalist movement—was killed by a special unit of *gendarmes* (G.I.G.N.) in the same spot where Ataï had died 106 years before.^{xxvii} Machoro had attacked and occupied a European farm, attempting to reclaim ancestral land by force; his ancestors—knowledge he undoubtedly loathed—were the Canala people whose precious help, during the Great Revolt, had turned the tide against Ataï. Although the political conflict is effectively over, New Caledonia’s status remains in the balance—it is to be decided by a referendum sometime after 2014. From the vantage point of the 21st century, it is clear that Franco-Kanak conflict has effectively undergone the transformation from colonial war—epitomised by the Great Revolt—to a contemporary struggle over New Caledonia’s identity. Today, closer political co-operation and dialogue has characterised developments on this island country. The way forward is reflected in the name of a recently formed multi-cultural political party *l’Avenir ensemble*—“the future together.”

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- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 26.
- ^{iv} This expression is also known in English, quite pejoratively, as the “white man’s burden.”
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- ^{xi} F. Devilliers, *La Vie du colon en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, ed. Augustin Challamel (Paris: Comité Dupleix, 1898), 30.
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- ^{xv} Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale, terre d’exil*, 95.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid*.
- ^{xvii} Sénès, *La Vie quotidienne en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 114.
- ^{xviii} Godard and Chevalier, *Le Mémorial Calédonien*, 228–229.
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- ^{xx} Frédéric Angleviel, *Brève histoire politique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie contemporaine (1945-2005)* (Noumea : Groupe de Recherche en histoire Océanienne Contemporaine, 2006), 85–86.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid*, 208.
- ^{xxii} This was, and still is, the cause of endless polemical battles. Hence, this citation is used with the sole intent of demonstrating the pro-French side of the argument; Kanaks rejected the democratic results as unjust, in that they (allegedly) did not represent the majority will of *their* people. Général (cr) Michel Franceschi, *La Démocratie massacrée: Nouvelle-Calédonie. Témoignage* (Paris: Pygmalion/Gérard Watelet, 1998), 9, 16.
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