

down the south coast, at Uvol, similarly exalted males linked inland mountain villages with coastal villages in a series of inherited trade partnerships.

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*Approches autour de culture et nature dans le Pacifique Sud*, edited by Hamid Mokaddem. Actes du XIIIe colloque CORAIL. Nouméa: Expressions; CORAIL in partnership with the Northern Province, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, and the University of New Caledonia, 2003. ISBN 2-9519371-0-5; 406 pages, tables, figures, map, abbreviations, notes, written in French, bibliographies, index. 3500 CFP francs.

The book is a compilation of papers presented at the thirteenth meeting of CORAIL (Coordination pour l'Océanie des Recherches sur les Arts, les Idées et les Littératures), which was held in 2001 in Nouméa at the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and in two sites in northern New Caledonia: the Provincial headquarters and the Goama Bwarhat cultural center established by Jean-Marie Tjibaou in Hienghène. As stated by Hamid Mokaddem in his preface, the organizers of the meeting (which Mokaddem qualifies as "an exceptional intellectual adventure" [13]) deliberately sought to practice decentralization and rebalancing by holding sessions outside of Nouméa. Their objective was to open channels of communication so as to break down the legacy of the Western

"binary models of the world based on the nature-culture dichotomy" which, according to Mokaddem, have in New Caledonia led to a vision and discourse of "us versus them" and "South versus North" (15). In addition, the organizers deliberately invited a wide range of academic and nonacademic participants with specialized knowledge ranging from traditional medicine, epidemiology, anthropology, geology, history, dance, archeology, law, literature, and cultural geography, including members of various nongovernmental organizations and cultural centers.

While the broad range of participants would have been invaluable for the actual meeting, the attempt to put together such a large number of papers into a single volume has proven difficult. Although the book is divided into five distinct parts—(1) anthropological approaches; (2) scientific and technical approaches; (3) legal approaches; (4) literary approaches; and (5) field approaches—the volume lacks coherence and continuity. The chapters are unequal in nature, quality, and depth of analysis, and the range of topics covered is extensive.

This drawback is compounded by the fact that while most chapters focus on New Caledonia, the book also contains a few chapters dealing with other parts of the Pacific (Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Australia, and Oceania in general). These chapters don't really seem to fit, and the book may have benefited by focusing solely on providing an up-to-date snapshot of how the nature and culture dichotomy is viewed by various actors and thinkers grounded in contemporary

New Caledonia. As it is, the book spreads itself somewhat thin.

Another difficulty is in the posing of the question of nature and culture. The nature/culture question is a central concern of anthropology, as Paul de Deckker illustrates in his opening discussion on the etymology and gradual transformation of these terms in Western thought. As such it is a binary or “antagonistic” paradigm, precisely the kind that Mokaddem views as divisive in the New Caledonia context. One then could ask why this was chosen as the theme of the conference. Would it not have been more useful to frame a new problematic, or find innovative ways to discuss place, space, environment, being, aesthetics, art, and other topics that are not necessarily in opposition but rather encompass both land and people (ie, nature and culture)? As Leah Horowitz states in her chapter, there is no exact translation of the word “nature” in Melanesian languages, and “nature, as an object of contemplation, is a fundamentally Occidental concept” (139). Why then require discussion of the nature/culture question in contemporary New Caledonia and the Pacific? In a world that has changed considerably since Claude Lévi-Strauss’s seminal work, it may be time to go beyond inherited paradigms.

Out of the twenty-seven chapters of the book (too many to discuss in one review), three are particularly interesting: Alban Bensa’s on what purpose is served by the notion of culture; Leah Horowitz’s examination of nature and contemporary Kanak cultural identity; and the chapter by Christophe Sand, Jacques Bolé, and

André Ouetcho on prehistory in Oceania and New Caledonia. These chapters present different facets of New Caledonia in well-written, lively, and relevant accounts. (Two other chapters of note are Jean Guiart’s, which looks at how nature or place is fully inhabited and organized by people, taking the example of a valley in northern New Caledonia; and Christine Salomon’s on “Maternity and Social Transformation.”)

In a provocative examination of the notion of culture (based on a paper given in New Caledonia in 2001, not at the CORAIL conference itself), Bensa rails against the current usage of the word, which, he says, has come to describe anything and everything, and in the process has come to resemble the older notion of race: “In its most current usage, the notion of culture, as that of race in the past, implies a barrier, a cage, a niche in which each individual would be locked from birth and from which it would be impossible to exit” (45). Bensa relates his own experience working over a long period in Kanak New Caledonia as one where his initial relativist views based on ignorance eventually were transformed into a “universalistic and non-exotic conception of social worlds” (45). He offers Lévi-Strauss’s work as a demonstration that it is possible “to step from an ethnographic particularism into an anthropological universalism” (47), a step that Bensa clearly advocates. Indeed Bensa argues that myths and oral narratives or accounts related by Kanaks (ie, the myths he has spent many years collecting and analyzing) can clearly be interpreted as political histories and have univer-

sal qualities: “[Oral] account[s] are neither religious discourse nor literary fantasy but a tool for political communication” (51). He adds that myths or accounts are therefore “decodable only within the local historical context where it is actively inscribed [but] all references to ‘kanak culture’ are of no use” (51). Bensa ends his chapter by reiterating that the “concept of culture which aspires to scientific status can lead to all forms of political fundamentalism” and that “shutting people into their mythico-symbolic worlds . . . thereby depriving them of all comprehension of the history in which they were caught” is a “castrating process which nourishes a worrying essentialism” (56).

While it is difficult to disagree with Bensa on the dangers of essentialism and its connection to fundamentalism, culturalist understandings do not have to be essentialist and exclusivist. In addition, political discourse (whether oral accounts, so-called myths, or parliamentary speeches) occurs in various contexts that must be understood not only in historical terms, as Bensa states, but also in cultural terms—the two do not have to be opposed. Societies emphasize certain values, norms, and practices over others. Some ethical standards may be universal, others are not; this can in part be explained historically and certainly changes with time, but cultural approaches are also necessary. Bensa may well be throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Horowitz, in her chapter (diametrically opposed to Bensa’s), examines how space, land, and place(s) (eg, areas not inhabited by people but only by ancestors and animals, as well

as towns and villages) are viewed in contemporary terms, as suggested by her Kanak interlocutors. She notably examines why present discourse on land emphasizes attachment to place even though precolonial history indicates that Kanak families were quite mobile (140). One possible answer is given by Louis Mapou, director of ADRAF (the New Caledonian land agency), who states the concept of land as identity grew after the 1970s. This apparent change is obviously linked to the Kanak political struggle. But Horowitz suggests it was also influenced by the ecology movement of the 1970s and has since been reinforced not only among Kanaks but also among New Caledonians of European extraction (Caldoche) such as Jose-Louis Barbançon, the author of books on identity, society, and politics in New Caledonia.

Horowitz also looks at land in terms of spirituality and Christianity and quotes Fote Trolue (from Lifou), a skilled orator and a judge: “One of the greatest traumas that religion inflicted on us was making us walk on our heads. Because when they arrived, we had our sky in our earth, and they told us the sky was in the air. So we began to walk upside down” (148). In spite of the process of Christianization, Trolue argues, Kanaks were able to hold onto their spirits and thus with the land and the founding ancestors. “And that,” he adds, “is important . . . because it allowed for the preservation of cultural values” (148).

It may be difficult to determine how Kanak attitudes toward land have changed and how much they have been influenced by global forces, but Horowitz concludes that today

Kanaks feel obliged to reaffirm attachment to land and place as much out of economic as cultural necessity (150). One could also add political necessity.

The chapter by Sand, Bolé, and Ouetcho is in two parts. The first looks at early human settlement and its impact throughout Oceania; the second focuses on New Caledonia. This short but well-documented chapter is a balanced account that tries to neither incriminate nor glorify the relationship Austronesian settlers had with the environment (or nature), but rather to understand and accurately retrace that relationship. The authors examine the different phases of occupation of New Caledonia and the associated living patterns and horticultural techniques, with the aim of showing how the settlers contributed to changing the landscape over the millennia prior to European contact. They also put forward (using archeological data) that the population of New Caledonia was much larger than suggested by ethnographic accounts, and that a demographic decline due to disease began by the end of the seventeenth century, leading to considerable depopulation and displacement during the half century preceding French annexation in 1853.

The main message of the authors is that the peoples of Oceania were “central actors in the humanization of their environment, and not passive spectators” (248). At times the settlers destroyed much of their environment, at other times they rehabilitated it and used it in ecologically sound ways. The authors ask whether the ecological choices made today will be any better than those of the past and

conclude with these words: “It is obvious that all [our] modern techniques and knowledge have not been able to make as judicious use of the islands as did the ancient Oceanians after millennia of taking small steps. These old farmers of the past still have much to teach us” (248).

To conclude, the book, in spite of its weaknesses, contains some interesting and informative chapters that any student of New Caledonia would be well advised to read.

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*L'oeil du Père Rouel: Autour d'une série de photographies d'Alphonse Rouel en Nouvelle-Calédonie (1913-1969)*, by Hamid Mokaddem. Nouméa: Editions Expressions, 2004. ISBN 2-9519377-1-3; 96 pages, photographs, appendixes, notes, written in French, bibliography. A\$55.00.

This publication is the first of a series. The work is in large part the outcome of the initiative taken by the Northern Province of New Caledonia to save the island's cultural heritage. This first publication aims at saving the material heritage through photographs, while the second in the series, when published, will focus on the nonmaterial heritage through the words and actions of Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou. Besides revealing the historic-cultural inheritance of the north of New Caledonia this series is also motivated by the lack of access to scientific research on the territory, as