

Dialogue

Melanesianist Anthropology in the Era of Globalization

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Pacific-Based Virtual Communities: Rotuma on the World Wide Web

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Local studies commenced in the 1960s and continue to be practised, *differently*. For those researchers who undertake them, it is an extended immersion (at least one year, in order to cover the cycle of the seasons) in another society, a first confrontation between ideas and the reality of “fieldwork,” and often a kind of initiation. We all return from it changed, troubled, respectful of those whom we have met.

JOËL BONNEMAISON, “GENS DE PIROGUE,” 1993

Joël and I first met in Canberra in July 1968. I was in the throes of writing a PhD thesis on the agricultural system of the Enga, in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. I had just spent fifteen months among a noble, proud, and extraordinarily welcoming people living on the extreme limits of Western civilization. Joël had come from Paris and was on his way to Melanesia. He was carrying, in his bags, his doctoral thesis (3rd cycle) on the rice-growers of the village of Tsarahonenana in the mountainous interior of Madagascar, a people among whom he had lived for some twenty months in 1965–1966. By this time, both of us had already undertaken, as young adults, an extended period of local study, conducted in an extremely rigorous manner, in full respect of the academic “rules” of the time and the counsel of our intellectual guides. Our personal meeting was also the meeting of two major academic projects, one French and the other Australian. Gilles Sautter and his students were working on an atlas of African agricultural landscapes, whereas, for Harold Brookfield and his doctoral students, the aim was to study the wealth of subsistence agricultural systems in Melanesia prior to their being subject to major social and economic transformations.

We had done our work well, *successfully writing theses from which we, ourselves, were totally absent*. Yet we had both lived remarkable expe-

riences, negotiating a temporary passage from one civilization to another, from one that was assuming global dimensions at an incredible speed to another that still flourished on its margins. And we had both benefitted from exceptional supervisors. On the one hand, a Gilles Sautter who would subsequently make a plea for different “ways” of seeing and of writing and who would evoke the necessary “complicity” with the landscape, “in order to open on to the totally unconstrained space of freedom” (Sautter 1979, 42, 67). And on the other, a Harold Brookfield who constantly affirmed his faith in “the ultimate intelligence of people who derive their daily sustenance from productive activities, in this case rural peasants” (Waddell 1998, 2).

The year 1968 was a turning point in many respects. Postgraduate students in Canberra were reading Camus and Marcuse and reflecting at length on the human condition, the future of the world, values, and the real meaning of things. For us, somewhat “isolated” in the Antipodes, Joël came as a messenger, with fresh news of France and of that incredible “insurrection of the Spirit against the materialism of a society condemned to the production of goods and accused of sacrificing Being in favour of Possessing” (Maurice Clavel).

This context of a profound crisis in Western civilization, linked with a *séjour paisible* (peaceful stay) elsewhere on the part of a few geographer-travelers, left permanent marks, opening the way, in the case of Joël, to a new kind of geography and, indeed, to a new form of moral and intellectual commitment.

Scarcely was our first meeting over, than Joël plunged into “his” islands (Vanuatu), to surface again at the beginning of the 1980s. For my part, I returned to Québec in order to progressively develop an applied and committed cultural geography: on Québécois identity, the presence and the destiny of the French-speakers of America—the relationship to land, territorial consciousness, dreams and aspirations, symbolic figures. I delved into the memory, partially buried, of my students, and I wrote essentially for them. This *patrie*, whose fate was to live in a state of perpetual reprieve, was mine. It was, in part, the source of all I knew, and I was profoundly indebted to it.

Joël and I stayed in contact over the years, by letter, the exchange of publications, and occasional meetings in the course of our travels. I witnessed a fertile mix of values and ideas, geographical practice and experience slowly emerge in his many reflections. It was without a doubt in part

by virtue of his *parole* (word, in the truly Melanesian sense of the term) that I made the decision, at the end of the 1980s, to return to the islands and to the people of the Pacific. Because I had matured, spiritually and intellectually as much as physically, here in the South Seas, I felt close to the Islanders. It was a world where I was at ease and where I had, above all, learned and understood—perhaps I should say grasped—much about my own civilization. Oceania was, in other words, in some small way home. Hadn't Joël said, on returning to Tsarahonenana in 1993 after an absence of twenty-seven years, "I had the sense of coming back, to my people" (Bonnemaison 1993a, 94). For this very specific reason, the return to the place of his first field experience was, for him and for his companions, "a joyful trip" (Rakoto Ramiarantsoa 1993, 92).

I still recall several of our letters in which we discussed the challenges small societies had to face, brutally confronted as they are by the process of modernization and, more specifically, by the international promoters of individualism. We meditated on the ongoing quest for ramparts against the steamroller of universal progress and of the nation-state that denies all differences, on the necessary dialectic between tradition and modernity, on the urgency of having common bonds, on the importance of territory, and on the realization that all concern for cultural survival—since that was above all what we discussed—had to be based on "some kind of spirituality" (Bonnemaison nd). If not, all fundamental differences would be quickly reduced to mere folklore.

We inevitably drew closer to each other over the past few years, in order to take joint initiatives, to create institutional ties, to share the supervision of students, to write jointly, and to affirm our oftentimes intuitive solidarity. Hence I was stunned, for weeks, by the news of his being torn from this world. I tried as best I could to counter the loss by returning to some twenty years of Joël's writings, all the while thinking of the content of the many conversations we had had together.

One particular article focuses on the major change of direction that Joël experienced in his intellectual life, where he revealed for the first time a fundamentally new kind of geography. "Voyage autour du territoire,"¹ published in 1981, toward the end of a long residence in Vanuatu, was undoubtedly the fruit of a long reflection, far from the walls of the university. It is the product of a clearly articulated set of ideas and reveals both his great sensitivity and his deep convictions. I have shared it with many generations of students. In this text, Joël recounts his itinerary, an

itinerary that led him to question the ideas and methods learned and practiced with so much care and trouble in the university environment. Thanks to the taste he shared for kava and, over and above it, his fascination with strong cultures, with cultures that resist, Joël wove powerful ties of friendship with the people of Tanna. Instead of imposing his vision and staying apart, he participated in “the collective flight to the ‘clouds’” (Bonnemaison 1981, 260), he chose to listen, gradually letting a rootedness in the earth and a vision of the world be revealed to him. In so doing, he became “the craftsman of a work that, in the final analysis, [the people of Tanna] masterminded” (Bonnemaison 1981, 260).

And so it happens. Joël passes from one civilization to another, not in order to judge but above all to share, driven as he was by a deep urge to understand rather than to simply learn. Suddenly everything makes sense, it comes alive. Joël proposes a new vocabulary in order to reveal the Islanders’ world. That totally Western obsession with method and theory fades away, to be replaced by complicity and communion. A new vocabulary, a new sonority emerges from the mouths of the people and from the natural world: magical gardens, enchanted territories, cultural plenitude, mysterious island, philosophical island, the wisdom of the islands, the desire for tradition, the now-fragile echo of an age-old world, a friendly view of nature, sentiment, dreaming, happiness. . . . Proverbs and metaphors take their place in the text: “I will never forget the village,” “Do not abandon the canoe that brought you here” (Blanc-Pamard, Bonnemaison, and Rakoto Ramiarantsoa 1997, 53, 55). And the community in Madagascar, which he had studied in great detail and where “the mode of production . . . held no more secrets for [him],” despite the fact that, on his departure, he had “the feeling [he] had only touched the surface of things” (Bonnemaison 1981, 259), is transformed, after a long period of residence in Oceania, into a place “where the living is always good” (Blanc-Pamard, Bonnemaison, and Rakoto Ramiarantsoa 1997, 52).

Himself the product of a civilization and an intellectual culture that tends to turn its back on the past or to treat it with a certain impatience, he suddenly finds himself confronted by peoples whose very existence can only be justified in terms of “ancestral wisdom.” “I had the feeling that I was referring at one and the same time to the past and to the challenges of the present” (Bonnemaison 1996, 15). Joël’s worldview is radically transformed. He can no longer function in the same way. He can no longer make the distinction between the civilization he comes from and the one

that welcomes him. He is condemned to think about what the islands, and the tiny communities they shelter, have to offer for the future of us all here on earth.

To do this, he is henceforth condemned to investigate his own roots. They are, first of all, intellectual. So, Tsarahonenana becomes his “maternal study,” his “maternal fieldwork,” the place where he was initiated into the world of adults and where he underwent experiences whose real significance he was only to appreciate much later in life. It is why, no doubt, his life became for him an itinerary, a voyage, where one never loses sight either of the past or of the real point of departure. This intellectual point of departure is found in an article that was to take the form of a “maternal article” because it was an “enlightening text,” replete with “scientific intuitions” (Bonnemaïson 1993a, 94), the fruit of the pens of Gilles Sautter and Paul Pélissier, and entitled “Pour un atlas des terroirs africains: Structure-type d’une étude de terroir” (1964).

His career with ORSTOM had made Joël into a traveling man, but he had his own geographical roots, in the Gers, in Gascony (France). His experience in Vanuatu reminded him of his own small corner of the world, his own culture, and his own values: the ancestral earth, the extended family, peasant roots, faith in God, in other words the values of honest people. The Melanesians of Tanna no doubt brought forth in him the memory of a small laboring people, his own (or, at least, the still-living memory of them), and of a particular place, his house called Waterloo, “which is always open to you should you need it, it is somewhat isolated but the place—a little sacred—lends itself well to meditation” (Bonnemaïson nd). It was the place of his memory, his reference, his primordial identity. But that reality in no way prevented him from traveling far from his *stampa* . . . by profession, because of a desire to travel, because of a thirst to learn, and by virtue of the conviction that one is never alone in this world.

In those distant islands he learned that there was no contradiction between rootedness and travel, on the condition that one never abandons one’s roots, one doesn’t lose one’s particular way of looking at the world, one doesn’t become a *drifting man* devoid of all “magic.” Rootedness and travels are, on the contrary, complementary gestures, two facets of one and the same existence, the one vital for the survival and development of the individual and the other essential for the flourishing of the group. All his work, from the end of the 1970s, is inscribed in this double trajectory, which possessed, as all-powerful metaphors, the tree and the canoe:

Out of these splintered lands, beyond time and where space was scarce, they carved their collective destiny.

The identity of Melanesian islands plunges into the bowels of the earth. Soaring toward the infinity of the sky only because it is also rooted beneath the surface of the earth, the tree became the metaphor for man—whom another metaphor had already designated as stone. Thus, the man who lives within his place and who stands straight will take root along with the tree. . . .

Earth is a womb; her sons are men. By contrast, space is a sea, a “floating” value that has no depth and no duration. What a man considers valuable is the quality of his roots, in other words, his places of origin, like fixed points in the moving patterns of waves.

If a man is a place, what about society? The canoe, or *niko*, is the metaphor for the community. Much as an unconstrained, mobile value, society is a flexible spatial network evolving from and building itself by means of roads. A place provides a man with his roots; a canoe traveling on a road grants him the allies necessary for his survival and reproduction. The canoe’s destiny is to circulate, to go beyond the tree, to move from place to place and island to island, wherever its road leads it. (Bonnemaison 1994, 321–322)

In traveling, strong ties and alliances are woven, but on the singular condition that the traveler is firmly rooted, that he bears in him the memory of his place, that he is a *man-places*. The people of Tanna know only too well, and they made it clear to Joël that, deprived of anchors, the *drifting men* whom modernity breeds in increasing numbers have “neither roots nor true homes, they are ‘modern people’ committed to the physical and spiritual wandering of the peoples from beyond the seas” (Bonnemaison 1997, 13). Consequently it was hardly surprising that Joël sought, from his particular corner of the earth, in the Gers, to weave a vast and friendly cultural network made of strong cultures, of people who resist and who affirm themselves. Tanna, Québec, and “deep” Australia became his references, his “world,” not in any exclusive sense but simply because they were the places inscribed in his particular geographical trajectory. Out of these minority “islands” he constructed a set of coherent ideas and expectations, a “whole” that embraced both modern and traditional worlds.

Certainly there is the danger of nostalgia in Joël’s message, of this wandering scholar who speaks of a lost paradise to the starving souls of a West that is in danger of succumbing to cynicism and despair. Such is what a first reading of the title *La dernière île*² evokes. But he was conscious of the risk. If Joël was fascinated by *kastom*, it is because *he*

doubted. Indeed, I believe *he was convinced*. He did not believe in development, conceived in terms of the single-minded accumulation of material wealth (Bonnemaison 1993b). He was a member of that small band of the world's travelers who share "the discontent of the civilized with civilization" (Bruce Chatwin). On Tanna, and on his return to Tsarahonenana, he encountered peoples who explained to him the doubt that lingered in his heart. In Vanuatu, he experienced the privilege of living consciously and fully within a "fraternal community which binds together the inhabitants of a single territory." On the island of Tanna he was witness to the encounter of two truths, one with and the other without real roots. More important, he observed through their confrontation, "a conflict of ideas that was of global significance" (Bonnemaison 1997, 521), and he came to the unavoidable conclusion that *it is more important to survive culturally than it is to survive materially*. Otherwise, our very existence is without meaning. Finally, in order to realize this dream, which had unexpectedly become universal, he had the sentiment that it was necessary to "refer at one and the same time to the past and to the challenges of the present," both to ensure that all peoples can live decently and honor their ancestors, and to "recreate the unity of the world" (Bonnemaison 1997, 514).

No, it wasn't a question of nostalgia for Joël, but rather what he called "that immense effort of collective memory" that offers hope for a new world where "the West is no longer . . . the giver of lessons" (Bonnemaison 1993b, 55) and "the *man-ples* are not necessarily destined to be the losers in their rivalry with the *drifting men*" (Bonnemaison 1997, 524).

On Tanna he found the metaphors necessary both for an understanding of the contemporary world and to indicate the pathways to the future. If the *man-ples*, who live at the periphery, live in a state of cultural wealth, the *drifting men*, who are at the center, know or at least experience the promise of material plenty. Which of the two are the richest, the friendliest, the warmest, the most meaningful? Which are those who bear the most hope? For Joël, who had arrived at the end of his Melanesian travels, there was no longer any doubt. His man's heart and his researcher's soul had chosen the side of the traditionalists in order to affirm, with them, that the routes of modernity "lead to impasses and to yawning abysses" (Bonnemaison 1997, 516).

It is perhaps ironic that postmodernist intellectuals find themselves confronted by the same impasse. However, they seek to construct their

pathway to the future from the *drifting men*, and specifically those individuals who drift on the surface of the great cities, without any reference to the past. Their call is that of Nietzsche, and of the black British sociologist Paul Gilroy, who affirmed unequivocally “It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at!” that counts. Perhaps even more important, such scholars rely above all on theory in order to develop their ideas, thereby largely ignoring the sum of collective human experience.

Joël, through his acts and his writings, posed a formal challenge to such a discourse. Rather he preferred to listen to the counsel of the traditionalists in order to face up to the challenges of the future. In so doing, he lent his ear to a new generation of young adults who, they too, doubt and question the values of a world reduced to a single economic order and one, unbounded, space. Whether they are at the Sorbonne or the Université française du Pacifique, whether they are French or Melanesian, the students listen with passion and humility to the words that Joël found in the *kastom* of this *last island*, a tradition that “may just one day paradoxically reveal itself to be the prefiguration of a model that is suddenly ‘new’, in other words post-modern” (Bonnemaison 1997, 522).

In my hut I watch the fire flicker and I listen to my grandfather. He weeps about the fertile valleys, he weeps about tradition which he sees slowly disappearing in favor of a modern world. He saw the stranger come to take, to overwhelm, to disperse, to destroy. He saw the stranger kill the chiefs and the people. Our fathers and our grandfathers had believed the white people to be their own ancestors. But it was a tragic misunderstanding. I feel I am powerless and I try to understand what is happening to my people but I am not yet able to. And I hear once more the murmuring of my grandfather who reminds me that what we do today will determine what we will become tomorrow. (Chrystelle Salvatore 1995³)

And myself? “*Man-ples* from Québec and elsewhere,” “Cultural man and companion in the Oceanian canoe,”⁴ friend and geographical colleague, I listen to the word that came from afar and that you, Joël, so skillfully caught in its flight.

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by Dominique Guillaud, Maorie Seysset, and Annie Walter, 55–60 (Paris: ORSTOM-PRODIG, 1998). All translations from Joël Bonnemaïson's writings are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

Notes

1 Translated as "A Journey around the Territory" by Josée Pénot for use in the Department of Geography at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

2 Title of the original French edition of *The Tree and the Canoe*.

3 Chrystelle Salvatore, a nineteen-year-old Kanak student of history and geography at the Université française du Pacifique in Noumea, wrote these words on reading *La dernière île* in 1995.

4 Inscriptions in publications given to me by Joël.

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