

WHEN BLACK IS TRANSPARENT: FRENCH COLONIALISM IN NEW CALEDONIA,1878-1914

Chantal Ferraro

"The cultural identity of everyone gains in the diversity of the French-speaking world. The (French) government policies have not rested until the cultural identity of every overseas territory was respected, for a greater richness of the French nation, in deep respect for the roots of everybody. ...We believe that all cultures can contribute to the enhancement of the French culture, and beyond to universal civilization."

G. Lemoine
State Secretary in charge of
Overseas Territories
—Paris, November 5, 1985

"To deserve the name of 'human being' in this new world, we had to renounce ourselves to the deepest root. Today, the glory of the faith and the honor of "civilizations," would be to invite the Kanaks to the banquet of civilizations, not as acultured beggars, but as free men."

J.M. Tjibaou
President of the Provisional
Government of FLNKS (Kanak Socialist
National Liberation Front)
—Noumea, 1975

On June 18, 1878, in the upper valley of Quamenie, New Caledonia, Jean Chene, a one-time convict then established as a rancher, was murdered along with his Melanesian wife and their son. Their executioners were of her own kin group, the Dogny tribe. A local French gendarme, Schenk, arrested the leader of the Dogny tribe, and then proceeded to indiscriminately jail the leaders of every other Kanak² group in the valley. Some of these groups were traditionally opposed to the French administration, others supportive of it.³ This event was to trigger the first large scale Kanak rebellion, known as the Kanak Revolt of 1878,⁴ in New Caledonia's history.

It was the attack on the police station of La Foa and the massacre of its gendarmes by Kanak tribesmen, in an attempt to free their leaders, that started the revolt on the night of June 24. By dawn this explosion of rage had spread to the village of La Foa and neighboring colonial outposts. Some forty persons — French civilians and gendarmes as well as a few Melanesians and foreign laborers — were dead by the day's end. Colonial administrators, not realizing the extent and gravity of these uprisings, were slow to react and dispatch aid. When aid did come, it was minimal. The rebel Kanak's first attack was on a French military outpost at Boulouparis, a short distance from La Foa. Although this attempted takeover was unsuccessful, the French officer in charge of the military operation, Colonel Gally-Pasboc, was killed three days later in a Kanak ambush, causing the French government to realize, for the first time, the seriousness of the situation.

From then on New Caledonia was under a state of siege. Military operations were taken over by Captain Henri Riviere, and the entire New Caledonian population became mobilized in a year-long war. Kanak insurgents adopted guerilla strategies (raids on civilian villages and military and

missionary outposts, retreat and hiding out in the mountains, etc.) to undermine the French presence. The French sector, mostly residing in Noumea, engaged in a war of attrition against the rebel forces, organized offensive and punitive expeditions with support received from France as well as from renegade Kanak groups who had aligned with the French. Peace was not restored until June 1879, when the state of siege was lifted and scores of prisoners were sent to the Isle of Pines and to Belep.⁵

It had been the widespread belief among the colonizing population that peaceful and friendly relations existed between the Kanaks and the Europeans. The colonizers consequently felt betrayed by the Kanaks as a result of the rebellion. Riviere, in his memoirs, deplored that the white settlers had been stabbed in the back by Kanaks they knew personally.⁶ The daughter of John Paddon, one of New Caledonia's early white settlers, recalled how, as a child, she miraculously escaped death at the onset of the rebellion. That the "natives had been able to organize a spontaneous uprising of tribes throughout the colony was something totally unexpected."⁷ Similarly, Clovis Savoie, resident historian of New Caledonia, described how the "trust was so great in those primitive beings, those big children" that the insurrection came as a total surprise to the settlers.⁸

Surprisingly, this vision is still a dominant one today. In 1978, Louis Jose Barbancon, writing about this episode in New Caledonia's history, claimed that:

contacts between the two ethnic groups were numerous and amicable: they were not relations between oppressors and oppressed. If the atmosphere had been tense, there would have been suspicion on the part of the colonizers, the police; in fact, it is precisely because trust existed that the surprise was total.⁹

What was wrong, then, was precisely that nothing seemed to be wrong in New Caledonia in 1878. Or so the European population thought.

Some forty years after the 1878 Revolt, the Kanak people again took up arms against colonialism. As recruits were leaving the northern village of Kone, on their way to Noumea and then to France in 1917, Kanaks in Kone and Hienghene rebelled.¹⁰ They held out for a couple of months raiding coastal towns from their mountain outposts, but this insurrection, as the one of 1878, was also quelled by the colonizing authorities. A manhunt started. Reward notices were posted: fifty francs for a dead Kanak, twenty-five for a live prisoner.¹¹ Again, it came as a surprise to the French colonizers that the Kanaks would revolt, since the island had been peaceful and quiet for the past forty years, and also because the northern area of Kone and Hienghene had not participated in the 1878 Revolt.¹²

This paper proposes to investigate the period between the 1878 Revolt and the 1917 insurrection. By 1884, the year of its last military governor, New Caledonia had become a full-fledged colony. Its European inhabitants demanded participatory political institutions. Very different people had very different notions on what the colony should be about. They suggested scores of ideas as well on how to best realize these goals. Some hoped to maintain the then-current stream and turn New Caledonia into a giant open penitentiary, hoping to prove that murderers and thieves could be transformed into gentle, caring human beings and productive farmers. Others thought a prosperous future lay in mining. Even early explorers had been struck by the richness of New Caledonian mineral resources. Still others wanted to transform the colony into an agricultural state. Each faction proposed a concrete agenda for economic, social and political measures, and each achieved supremacy at one time or another during this forty year period.

These decades are crucial in understanding the shape and problems of contemporary New Caledonia and its colonial society, since it was then that

European colonizers were confronted with the issue of indigenous assimilation. Recent events in the islands show that this question is still far from being resolved. The task of this paper is to study the developmental dynamics of New Caledonia in the late nineteenth century, and what has been said about it. It is primarily concerned with the impact of those various schemes of colonization on the indigenous population of the territory. What did these plans mean to Kanaks in terms of their access to land and the possibility to live a decent life? Was the indigenous population even considered by the French state and the colonizers? And if so, how? In other words, did the French learn anything from the 1878 Revolt? Did they advise an answer other than: "How dare a savage give an ultimatum to a government?"¹³

Historians and ethno-historians of New Caledonia have paid a great deal of attention to times of crisis. R. Dousset-Leenhardt, L. Latham and J. Guiart wrote major works on the 1878 revolt with special emphasis on its causes. Perhaps because of its smaller scale and more confusing nature, the 1917 insurrection is less studied. Nevertheless, Leenhardt provided an eyewitness account, and later J. Guiart briefly analyzed its causes and unfoldings. The 1878-1917 period is certainly mentioned in general histories of New Caledonia, such as that of Brou, but those accounts tend to remain factual. Of great importance in understanding a major problem of late-19th Century New Caledonia is A. Saussol's definitive book on the history of land tenure in the islands. More recently, M. Dornoy offered a good summary of the issue. It is hoped that the present paper will contribute to a better understanding of the in-between crisis period, not only in terms of concrete events but also of the colonizers' ideological development. Because this paper takes for granted that colonialism and racism are crucial factors of New Caledonia society, it claims some affiliations to Guiart's work.

The decades following the Kanak Revolt saw a proliferation of declarations, published writings, and commentaries by colonizers and church and state officials. Numerous newspapers were started as well. Some folded overnight, others had a longer life.¹⁴ Often created by just one person or two, always heavily involved in local politics. Besides local news, advertisements, and international items when they were available, the *raison d'etre* for a newspaper was to allow its founders and their followers an opportunity to inject political opinions into the arena of public debates and decision-making. They proposed policies, attacked political opponents and responded to other newspaper columnists. Both style and content were personally and politically loaded. To get at the European perception of the colonial order, this period of New Caledonian history will be investigated through the study of those primary sources, with a major concern being the indigenous population and how its existence was envisioned. Unfortunately, it is not possible to match the European views to the Kanak perceptions of the time. Colonial conditions did not allow much expression for the Kanak population. Before launching into the later part of the 19th Century it seems important to identify the major themes in European discourse and the main trend of concrete developments, since those often served as springboards for later events.

A close reading of contemporary accounts of the events preceding the 1878 Rebellion does, at least between the lines, presage the insurrection and reveal its causes. Although the island had been opened to earlier foreign influences by sandalwood traders and whalers, the arrival of white settlers progressively and dramatically altered the relations of indigenous people to their land. France took official possession of New Caledonia in 1853, and the

Declaration de Bouzet in January 1855 claimed that "all land belongs to the French government." An 1859 decree, subsequently modified, instituted native reservations "for the needs of the Kanaks."¹⁵ The Decret de Delimitation, enacted in March 1876, represented the legal apotheosis of the process of encroachment on Kanak lands that had started decades earlier. From then on, the "needs" of indigenous populations were to be determined according to European priorities. Kanaks were allowed to remain on their land only as long as no settler petitioned for it. The Decret de Delimitation was applied in early 1878 in La Foa, cradle of the 1878 revolt.¹⁶ Close to two thousand hectares of land were taken away from local tribes, and another large plot was transferred to the penitentiary at Fonwary, near La Foa.¹⁷ In 1877 colonizers were temporarily given the right, in the aftermath of a severe drought, to let their cattle graze on the penitentiary grounds traditionally used by indigenous people to grow their crops. Kanaks, affected equally by the drought, were forced to watch their crops destroyed by herds belonging to Europeans.¹⁸

Addressing the issue of the nature of colonial social order, Gascher, a New Caledonian historian, echoed the general sentiment at the time that white people were not suited for work in a non-temperate climate. Moreover, he argued, since the indigenous population could not be used as part of the work force in an effective fashion, New Caledonia should turn elsewhere to recruit the labor necessary for the development of the colony.¹⁹ The French settlers assumed from the beginning that no use could be made of the Kanak population. This is especially intriguing since the Kanak population was numerous and French colonial history reveals a pattern of heavy reliance on local labor in developing conquered land. In 1887, out of a total population of 62,500,

there were 42,500 Melanesians and 9,100 free Europeans. By 1901, however, the indigenous count had dropped by 29,100.²⁰ Local employment in New Caledonia was minimal and was confined to Noumea, the main urban center. Early in July 1878, after the news of the Kanak uprising had reached Noumea, the hundred and fifty workers servicing settlers in the city were immediately rounded up and exiled to the island of Nou.²¹

It is here argued that from the very beginning it was a deliberate official French policy, as well as the actual practice of local French settlers, to instill and maintain segregation in the New Caledonian society. Though it is beyond the goal of this paper to deal with post-World War I time lapse, it can be argued that the deep and crippling problem between the Kanak and white populations of New Caledonia today have deep roots in their common past history. The feeling of good relations that the French had on the eve of the 1878 insurrection was nothing more than a blind illusion. An entire population could not be mistreated, ousted from the land and confined to the least productive areas of the island without altering its traditional way of life and their relations with those responsible. Had the French looked closely into the history of the multiple rebellions that took place in the decades preceding the 1878 revolt,²² had they been able to analyze their contempt and self-righteousness, perhaps the insurrection would have appeared inevitable rather than surprising. In 1878 Riviere stated, "I had been in New Caledonia for two years, and there was so little said of the Kanaks that I could believe that they did not exist or had disappeared."²³

To the Europeans in New Caledonia, Kanaks were, first of all, black savages. "They are black, we are white" was often offered as a primary explanation of the revolt of 1878.²⁴ But black was more than a biological

characteristic. Their skin color and their "savage" behavior set Kanaks in a category halfway between the human and animal species in the eyes of the white New Caledonians. "He (Kanak man) can jump like a tiger and crawl like a snake," recalled Riviere,²⁵ and accordingly he often would "stalk (his) prey", nineteenth century French scholar, De Salinis observed.²⁶ Moreover, "when they smell blood, the ferocious beast sleeping in them awakens."²⁷ At time, Kanaks were able to display signs of intelligence, but they rarely utilized that potential to acquire civilization. That they were by nature lazy, suspicious, ferocious liars and thieves was the quasi-unanimous opinion expressed by colonizers.²⁸ Their god was "the devil"²⁹ and they scared Europeans with a dance called pilou-pilou. At night "they intoxicate themselves with music and noise...from time to time groups leave the dance to satisfy their cannibal appetite."³⁰ Cannibalism was the most definite proof of savagery.

Colonizers in Noumea, from very early on, took legal steps to protect themselves from the Melanesian population. An 1875 decree declared that since free access to the town by non-white persons created dissension and an obstacle to its proper functioning, Noumea from then on would be off limits to "natives",³¹ thus making the Kanaks foreigners on their own soil.

Bearers of European civilization had a clear idea of the nature of the "Kanak problem." As Riviere summarized:

antagonism always exists between conquerers and conquered. The latter must be absorbed by the former, or else disappear. But those black races do not absorb. They differ too much from the white race by their instincts which have never progressed, by their invincible repugnance to work, by their complete indifference to a civilization they do not appreciate because they have no need for it.³²

Since Kanaks could not be "absorbed" then, logically they would have to disappear. French Commander Testard, in 1879, proposed a radical solution to the "Kanak question":

one must begin by destroying this population if one is to remain securely in the country. The only convenient way to come to an end, would be to organize hunting parties, like we do for wolves in France, with several groups of thirty men, to destroy plantations, villages and renew such operations several times a day at the beginning of the rainy season.³³

In 1866, at the Sydney International Exhibit, the emblem set forth by New Caledonia displayed a Kanak man with broken arms, and a convict stepping on his chains: Surrender for those who had every right to own their island, freedom for those who had none. The motto announced: "Civiliser, Rehabiliter, Produire"³⁴ or Civilize, Rehabilitate, Produce.

Very few whites voiced their concerns or expressed compassion toward the Kanaks. Jules Patouillet, who had come to New Caledonia as a doctor in 1867, was one of these rare few. Violence, he wrote, was systematically used to compel the Kanak population to grow food for the nascent colonial state, even if it meant the neglect of their own crops. The unwritten code of civilization, according to him, could be summarized as: "You shall not steal, but I can take your land; you shall not kill, but I will kill you if you do not cede the land inherited from your ancestors."³⁵

Overwhelmed as they were by the violence of colonization, the Kanaks did not, however, remain passive. They rebelled repeatedly and violently. What is truly astonishing, looking back at the pre-1878 decades, is not that the great revolt took place, but rather that it could have come as such a "surprise" to the colonizers. French ethno-historian, Dousset-Leenhardt, for example, reports nineteen acts of hostility involving violent indigenous uprisings against some form of European penetration (missionary, military,

civilian). In return, French authorities typically retaliated, destroying villages, killing chiefs, burning crops.³⁶ European settlers, by the mid-1850's, were living in fear and insecurity. Revenge was a point of honor.³⁷

The most important episode of pre-1878 Kanak resistance was the massacre at Pouebo. It differed from the preceding rebellions because it was less spontaneous and more planned, and involved an alliance between tribal groups against a common enemy. Another reason for the significance of this uprising was that it triggered a long-lasting dispute between Marist priests and the French government, who accused the former of inciting Kanaks to revolt, and resisting the take over of their land by the colonizers. Among the victims of this slaughter of 1868 were local gendarmes and families of colonizers who had settled in the Pouebo area.³⁸ Retaliation was often brutal. Several insurgents died in jail (officially from "natural causes"), ten Kanaks were sentenced to death, and a dozen more to forced labor.³⁹

Relations between the French government and the populations of Pouebo reveal the general attitude of the French in New Caledonia. Legally, any piece of land on the island could be granted by French authorities to any colonizer, assuming that this land was not to be used by indigenous groups,⁴⁰ that is to say uninhabited and uncultivated. In a letter to a French commanding officer, a Marist priest from Pouebo claimed that the disputed zone was certainly inhabited and under cultivation. Indeed, it was the location of seven villages, all living off agricultural cash crops. Before the land had been confiscated by the French government for the French settlers, Bailly, one of the latter had visited the Marist mission and had asserted that he was about to receive his parcel of land and therefore the natives were, in fact,

working for his benefit.⁴¹ Bailly was killed during the insurrection. Ouerebat, a Kanak resident of Pouebo, objected to the seizure of his ancestral land. Using a Marist as an intermediary, he wrote to the Governor: "In no way do I want to give up my land. I refuse to be alienated from the heritage of my ancestors." The Governor's response arrived promptly: "How dare a savage give an ultimatum to a government?"⁴²

It was indeed the challenge of the Melanesian, "savage", black-skinned population, to the French, "civilized", white-skinned people and government that came as a surprise to European colonizers in the aftermath of the 1878 Revolt. Despite an official report, the question of the roots of the insurrection were never seriously addressed. French General de Trentinian formed a committee of investigation. Gendarme representatives, especially Schenk, and members of the Comite de Delimitation were included. The report, issued on February 4, 1879, stressed the invasion of Kanak land by European settlers and cattle, the irresponsibility of the colonizers vis-a-vis Kanak crop destruction, the use of forced labor, and the absence of European awareness of the indigenous people. Though it did not question the fundamental principles of colonialism in New Caledonia, the report recommended that more attention be devoted to Kanak customs and habits in order to speed up the "civilizing" process. It also praised the work done by the gendarmes, and shifted the blame on to the penitentiary administration.⁴³ Unfortunately, the Rapport Trentinian was quickly forgotten. Again, European colonizers felt that the defeat of the rebels meant final victory: Kanak surrender and the acceptance of white supremacy. This was also what they felt after the Pouebo massacre in 1868, especially in light of the relative tranquility of the following decade.⁴⁴ The 1878 revolt, however, proved them wrong.

Turning to the post-1878 period and following French historian Brou, the 1878-1910 period will be divided into three phases: 1) 1880-1884, the reign of the penitentiary, 2) 1884-1894, the search for development, 3) 1896-World War I, the agricultural colony.⁴⁵

Following the 1878 Revolt, peace was restored in June 1889. Until 1884 New Caledonia, primarily a penitentiary colony, remained under the rule of military governors. On September 3, 1863, New Caledonia was declared a zone de transportation. According to this law, enacted by the French government, convicts were to be sent from France to the island, and set to work on the development of the colonial infrastructure. The Actes Organiques de 1874, which originated in Paris, further reinforced the penitentiary system and its military command, and provided the Governor with unlimited powers. He was given complete authority in indigenous affairs and could arrest, jail, or deport any Kanak without judicial process.⁴⁶ Until 1882, the penitentiary administration was subject to the Governor's approval. Subsequently, it became a more independent institution, often referred to as "a state within a state."⁴⁷

After inmates served their time in jail and contributed a given amount of labor, they could, under specific circumstances, be released and given the opportunity to settle on a piece of land. The French government even organized, under religious auspices, the shipment of female convicts from France, who could marry newly released convicts in exchange for their freedom.⁴⁸ By 1882, more than three thousand prisoners had been released and had pushed inland to set up farming settlements. This original social experiment, however, turned out to be more problematic than the French administration had expected. What had been conceptualized as a path to human

regeneration resulted instead in the creation of a frontier area heavily populated by Kanaks in the interior of the island. Violence was rampant. The newly freed resented their exile tremendously and resented their assignment as New Caledonian farmers even more. To Leon Moncelon, who spent over a decade in the penitentiary, voluntary colonizers were the "last of the last."⁴⁹ Liberated convicts, as a result of the conditions for the settlement, came into frequent contact with the indigenous people. According to Leenhardt, a French missionary and anthropologist, Kanak tribes were eager to welcome these French settlers and to assist them in their installation. It was, however, not unusual that the former convicts would attempt to manipulate Kanaks, induce them to drink alcohol, and take out their anger and frustration on them.⁵⁰

In the mid to late 1870's, the penitentiary's primary clients were political prisoners who had been arrested in Paris during the days of the French Commune, charged with conspiracy against the French government. A law of March 23, 1872 institutionalized their deportation for political exile. It was abolished in 1880. Some four thousand convicted political activist reached New Caledonia after a four to five month sea voyage from France as part of this program of deportation. Among those four thousand, a couple of hundred came from North Africa, where they were leaders of a major rebellion against the French colonial system in Morocco.⁵² These prisoners all shared the same ideology, and had violently refused French state domination. When the 1878 Kanak Revolt broke out, most of these prisoners turned against the Kanaks. For example, Ahmed-Ben-Mezrag, a Moroccan leader, volunteered his men to fight against the Kanak rebels in exchange for their pardon.⁵³ It was not until 1895, however, that they were sent back home.⁵⁴

Very few recognized or acknowledged the political significance of the Kanka Revolt. Louise Michel, renown French anarchist, was one. She had been sentenced in 1871 and recalled how the political activists had felt and expressed as much contempt towards Melanesians as the colonial administrators had. At the onset of the rebellion, she pleaded for the Kanaks. She believed that they were "fighting for their independence, for their life and their freedom." She sided with them as she had "with the people of Paris, revolted, crushed and defeated."⁵⁵ Louise Michel remained in New Caledonia until the early 1880's, where she created a school for Kanak children. Upon her return to Paris, she started a defense committee on behalf of the Kanak people.

French legislators had hoped that the transportation system would contribute to the development of the economic potential of the colony. By 1880, however, only 7.2% of the penitentiary population was actively working on public projects.⁵⁶ By then, the mining sector was booming, and New Caledonia was exporting three-quarters of the world's nickel.⁵⁷ Recruited workers from New Hebrides provided labor for the mines. In 1884, a New Hebrides laborer was paid less than two francs for a day's work. No Kanak would work for under three francs per day.⁵⁸ Indigenous people were able to rely on their social networks and social organization in order to maintain a life outside of the European sphere.

By 1880, in an attempt to increase its monetary resources, the colonial government of New Caledonia engaged in the massive sale of huge parcels of land, which were often purchased as an investment by wealthy Europeans. Kanaks, once again, were the victims of such a policy. On August 16, 1884, over one thousand hectares of the best land on the island was allocated to the penitentiary.⁶¹

In summary, the period of 1879-1884 was characterized by greater encroachment on Kanaka domain. European settlement did not confine itself to Noumea, but increasingly expanded inland. Nickel and cobalt mining brought about the development of a transportation network, which contributed to the opening of the island to colonial influence, and especially to more settlement and the loss of land to indigenous people. Meanwhile, the intensive use of convicts as workers, as well as the efficient recruiting system of labor from the New Hebrides, allowed the colony to function and develop while excluding the Kanak population as an important source of labor. The confinement of indigenous populations on tribal reservations and the recognition of the tribe as the basic social unit of a native organization provided the colony with a legal framework that allowed colonial expansion without dealing with the question of indigenous rights and/or grievances. The European perception of the Kanaks as lazy, sullen, and unappreciative of a great civilization (French), fitted perfectly with the ideology of segregation.

The period between 1884 and 1894 saw the trend toward agricultural development grow stronger. The grant of over one hundred thousand hectares of land to the penitentiary in 1884 had outraged the colonial faction, which was striving for a colonisation libre, that is, the settlement of individual families from Europe as cultivators recreating a European, and especially French, way of life and social order. A decree passed in December of 1885 attempted to stimulate the immigration of French citizens through the allocation of three hectares of land per family unit. It was, however, an insufficient step, and though it did not launch the expected wave of immigrants, it did represent an important turning point in the fate of New Caledonia. If penitentiary and mining had been prominent in earlier decades,

it was now the movement for colonisation libre that was gaining ground. In 1894, with the nomination of Feillet for Governor, it achieved supremacy.

Politically, the climate was unstable. The colonizers began to question the strength of colonial ties to France. The issue was not one of independence, but one, rather, of concern for the amount of control exercised from Paris. Some argued that it was too strong and that it impeded the development of the colony. This was the position advanced by L'Independent de la Nouvelle Calédonie⁶³ and L'Avenir de la Nouvelle Calédonie.⁶⁴ E. Mouro, former communard, who came as a political prisoner to New Caledonia and later immersed himself in local politics, argued the opposite. In 1886, he launched Le Progres de la Nouvelle Calédonie, which, from July 1884 on, became known as Le Progres de Noumea. He claimed that:

the French colony...contributes to the expansion of the French territory, to its power, to the welfare of the entire nation. To colonize is to people the colonies, to enhance France, its resources and its population. ...As long as the colony expands its agricultural potential, it also assimilates its native element.⁶⁵

Mouro believed that French authorities in Paris ought to send young soldiers to New Caledonia for a period of three to five years in order to promote colonisation libre. After an initial year of military training, they would be sent inland to start their own farms. The soldiers' enthusiasm could turn New Caledonia into a dynamic island.⁶⁶ To Mouro and his followers, the expansion of France overseas was not just "a national triumph"; it was also "the conquest of civilization over barbarism."⁶⁷ Mouro thought that forced labor should serve primarily the interests of the public sector. Providing free labor was one way to be assimilated. Moreover, he claimed, foreign labor was essential to the life of the island.

The recruitment of workers from the New Hebrides had been halted in May of 1882 following a petition, signed by a couple of Noumean residents and sent to the President of the French Republic, which denounced abuses and mistreatment of the recruits. In November of 1883, under strong pressure from an organized Noumean society, the trait was re-established between the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. Although Mourots demanded more control over the recruiters, he nevertheless firmly believed that the future of the colony would be dependent on the availability of contracted foreign labor. To be viable for the colony, he argued, the price of the "merchandise" had to be strictly regulated and controlled by the Governor; otherwise it would be sold for five or six francs per "piece" and even more for a female "piece."⁶⁹ If public opinion in Noumea was divided over the issue of indentured labor, it was not so over the "Kanak problem."

Kanaks were rarely mentioned in Mourots's columns. He deplored, however, the natives spending their time drinking alcohol and getting arrested for it instead of working on the roads of the Vallee des Colons or Colonizers' Valley. Le progres de la Nouvelle Caledonie passionately campaigned for the restriction of those "savages" and "cannibals" from areas populated by white European settlers. Government policies, it argued, should assure that "barefoot hoods" and "niggers" were not allowed to cross the "civilized" town of Noumea.⁷⁰

The assimilation that Mourots and his followers had in mind obviously excluded the majority of the population in New Caledonia. Europeans constituted the core of the society. Even New Hebridans were to some extent allowed to gravitate around the French center and settle in Noumea, "attracted by (our) civilization, by an existence less monotonous and more fulfilling,"

wrote Mourot in Le Progres de Noumea in 1884.⁷¹ After all "for France, to colonize it not to dominate or exploit; it is to assimilate and civilize."⁷²

In the 1880's, assimilation was defined differently by other political factions. L'Avenir de la Nouvelle Calédonie, created by M. Reichenbach, a Noumean resident, was an equally strong advocate of colonisation libre and favored political decentralization. Assimilation was also a stated objective and a central concern of this publication. Contrary to Mourot's views, Reichenbach did include the Kanaks in his definition of assimilation. Reichenbach believed that: "The progressive assimilation of the natives ought to be realized by the institution of a civil status on them, the creation of mandatory schools, and the setting up of private property."⁷³ This represented, at least in theory, the first step toward turning Kanaks into French citizens. A closer look at Reichenbach's explanations, however, reveals that he was not proposing the achievement of peaceful political and economic equality between indigenous and French populations. On the one hand, L'Avenir de la Nouvelle Calédonie purported that Kanaks were "sweet" people, but would endure our domination only to the extent that "(they were) not ill-treated in their tradition and customs." But on the other hand: "The Kanaks must know that we will always be the strongest,"⁷⁴ it was the mission of the whites to "uproot them from the state of savagery they still live in...", and to "teach them to grow our crops."⁷⁵ Only later would it be feasible to undermine the prestige of Kanak leaders, as well as institute private ownership of land. It is obvious, however, that all of the above measures were indeed insensitive to Kanak traditions and customs. Reichenbach's inconsistency did highlight the fact that there was, and still is, a contradiction in terms of assimilation and French colonialism. The

issue of Kanak integration quickly dropped out from L'Avenir de la Nouvelle Calédonie. By 1891, the only allusion to Kanak existence was linked to issues of delinquency.

In 1892, La Calédonie: Journal Republican proposed still another view of "native assimilation" in New Caledonia. It recognized that "the natives are perhaps still further from assimilation today than they were in 1867."⁷⁶ The reason for this was that, since the very beginning, the French government had always recognized and promoted tribal, that is communal, property over private ownership. As a result, argued La Calédonie, one could see indigenous people strolling all day long on communal grounds, instead of spending their energy working on a piece of land they would be responsible for as individuals."⁷⁷ By this ethnocentric reasoning, private property and civilization became two components in a package for freedom. In fact, Kanak freedom might very well have been linked to the fact that the Kanak way had equipped them with the capability of refusing to become the servants of European colonizers. As Brenier, ex-communard and former convict, who started in 1885 L'Indépendant de la Nouvelle Calédonie, explained to his readers: "the best role that Kanaks could play would be to become servants, maids and butlers for European colonizers."⁷⁸ Similarly, La Calédonie also regretted the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the native population to assume domestic roles.⁷⁹

The issue of shifting from communal to private land ownership had become an important theme in New Caledonian politics in the 1880's. There were immediate, concrete advantages in doing so. Some argued that the granting of private ownership rights would be recognized as positive by the Kanak population. In exchange, the French administration could impose a head tax on every Kanak. Besides private property and head taxation, the solution to the

"Kanak problem" included the suppression of the hereditary chief system, as well as European education to boost the "native" moral. Perhaps all this would enable future generations to choose their leaders, and be "useful to the Republic."⁸⁰

In the period between 1884 and 1894, the mining sector, so strong in earlier days, encountered difficulties. After the boom of 1881-82 and the subsequent recession of 1883, nickel mining in New Caledonia regained some ground until 1891, when Canadian nickel invaded the world market. Thio, on the southeastern coast of the island, had traditionally been the center of the mining industry, as well as the headquarters of La Societe Le Nickel (or SLN). In 1884, SLN had recruited six hundred Chinese workers for its mines.⁸¹ The question of Chinese immigration started a heated debate among Europeans. In an article entitled, "That's it, we've got the Chinese," Mourot lamented that the import of Chinese workers was equivalent to a death sentence for the European population. "The sacrifice of France will not serve its children;" he argued, "it will benefit the Chinese."⁸² But while Chinese immigration was upsetting to the European colonizers, what was even more unpalatable to the French population was that SLN had been created and was owned by M. Higginson, "an English Jew, who was the first to reveal the mining potential of New Caledonia to European markets."⁸³ Consequently, La Bataille: Journal des Interets Coloniaux was started in 1893 because "some foreigners in the country have declared war on the population."⁸⁴

Higginson and his society had indeed benefited from very favorable access to labor, first by employing scores of New Hebrides workers, then by turning to a Chinese labor force. By the late 1880's, however, the recruitment of New Hebridean laborers again became a source of concern. Abuses by recruiters and

employers, which had led to the temporary suspension of la trait in 1882, did not stop after the re-establishment of work migration to New Caledonia in 1883. On the contrary, the situation was so alarming, that it became the object of a long exchange between the U.S. consul on the island and the Assistant Secretary of State in Washington, D.C. Numerous recruiters were conducting their business from ships flying the U.S. flag. From Noumea, the U.S. consul sought guidance from Washington, since he was convinced that "this native traffic will lead to diplomatic correspondence." He was personally aware of several cases of New Hebrides workers who came with a contract to work in stores or private homes and found themselves forcibly taken to nickel mines, in conditions "approaching slavery."⁸⁵ Of a group of 34 workers, 12 had died in the mines."⁸⁶ The importation of New Hebrides laborers stopped in 1889.

New Caledonia faced a major labor shortage in the mid-1880's. The SLN, however, seemed to stay immune from such concerns. Higginson had been the first to import Chinese laborers, and equally important, he had been able to gain access to the labor resources of the penitentiary. By 1878, three hundred convicts were active in the Diahot mines, and by 1888, close to two thousand on the plateau de Thio.⁸⁷ Small scale miners, who did not enjoy Higginson's privilege, had to pay a "free" worker five or six francs per work day. At the same time, the penitentiary provided the SLN with inmates who were paid twenty-two centimes a day.⁸⁸ These ideal conditions were not to last long. By 1894, the transportation was over, and no more convicts reached New Caledonia. Moreover, by then, two thousand two-hundred eighty six parcels of land had been allocated to released penitentiary inmates. Immigration from the New Hebrides was suspended, but already by the 1880's migrant workers

reportedly preferred Australia over New Caledonia. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, in such a context, the French population of New Caledonia organized against Higginson's big business. By 1894, the issue of labor access, especially cheap labor, was a major source of concern. The viability and survival of the colony and the colonial order were at stake. The French community resented the fact that Higginson and his banker-partner, Rothschild, had dominated the economic life of the island for so long, and had induced the bankruptcy of small mining interests while delaying the pace of colonisation libre. That the two English-speakers intended to infiltrate the political institutions of the island as well, was certain.⁹⁰ By 1897, scores of small mines were forced to close down. Agricultural New Caledonia was gaining ground.

By 1893, it was widely believed that coffee growing ought to be promoted by official authorities on the island. After the failure of cotton and sugar, of cattle raising, and more recently of mining, coffee was thought of as the next savior. It was the task of Governor Feillet, one of the most controversial figures in the history of New Caledonia, who arrived on the island in 1894, to materialize that hope. He became a passionate advocate of colonization libre.

Colonization libre meant French settlement. The decision to exclude the indigenous population from that process was simply based, according to La Bataille, on scientific findings regarding the black race. "A fugitive in the bush is less dangerous than a black clerk. ...You deal with the former with a bullet; but if you try to do it with the latter, you will find imbeciles ready to pass judgement on you."⁹¹ Accordingly, it would be a great mistake to allow these "niggers" in any administrative position, or to grant them

rights. This was the obvious political conclusion to draw from the biological findings of Dr. Gerard, of the medical school of Paris, who contended that "intelligent races" were characterized by a cranial angle more open than that of black races. But since it had taken centuries for the former to acquire such cranial shape, only colonialism could lead the latter in the same direction. It would be unfair to impede "the progression of receding foreheads."⁹² Consequently, the notion of political equality was scientifically absurd. If New Caledonia was to become a dynamic colony, it would have to import European population, that is, the pinnacle of the human race.

Turning New Caledonia into a giant agricultural venture was, for Governor Feillet, not only a goal, but a mission. As a political personage, he was either loved or hated, and his extreme rigidity had polarized the New Caledonian society by the end of his mandate. He declared war on the proponents of mining, advocates of a penitentiary colony, and the clergy and considered the defenders of colonisation libre to be the only good citizens.⁹³ He quickly became renowned for his merciless repression of political opposition.

Feillet's grand scheme did, however, please many Europeans. His primary objective was to attract French families to New Caledonia, and to provide them with the opportunity to develop coffee plantations. In his eyes, access to land was not a problem. The Manuel du Colon en Nouvelle Calédonie, or colonizer's handbook, which was distributed in France to promote colonization, suggested that coffee would greatly prosper in taro patches left behind by Kanaks after the confiscation of their land.⁹⁴ Potential immigrants were carefully screened: they had to be French citizens from agricultural

backgrounds, and possess little capital. Upon arrival, potential colonizers were allocated an initial grant of twenty five hectares.⁹⁵

In 1894, Governor Feillet halted "le robinet d'eau sale," or the flow of dirty water, that is, the coming of convicts from France. A couple of months after he assumed office, Feillet created L'Union Agricole Caledonienne, or Caledonian Agricultural Union, whose task was to promote immigration and institutionalize settlement. As a result, 525 new French families were introduced to New Caledonia.⁹⁷ In addition, the island developed the infrastructure to facilitate coffee export.

Not surprisingly, Feillet's bold policies collided with the interests of the Kanak population. The content of his handbook clearly indicated that, in his eyes, Kanak land was no-man's land. The Governor's dearest project in 1895 was the creation of an experimental agricultural center at Voh. It was an area heavily populated by indigenous groups. But this did not prevent Feillet from confiscating one hundred fifty hectares of the best land. In a memo, he claimed:

the tribe has been confined on another part of the national territory, after it was given what we considered was a decent payment, in the name of the spirit of this administration and of equity ... my intention is, thanks to this new acquisition of good productive land so far unused, to promote the development of the center.⁹⁸

Feillet's policies of expansion turned into a heavy burden on the colony's finances. In 1895, he enacted a law requiring that a head tax of ten francs be paid by every Kanak. Europeans as well as foreigners were exempted from this tax. The average worker's daily pay at this time was just one franc.⁹⁹ Because of their sporadic employment, this head tax placed an enormous burden on the Kanaks. The combination of massive land alienation and heavy taxation

took place at a time when the colony was moving toward a single-crop economy. Coffee cultivation requires intensive labor during the harvest season, and almost no work in between. The imposition of a head tax and the confiscation of productive land drastically threatened the independence of the Kanaks. It also made it necessary to look out, in the sphere of the colonizers, for alternative means of survival. Accordingly, many expected the problems of labor in New Caledonia to be solved if the indigenous population would fulfill the role of a reserve of labor force.

Interestingly, Kanak head taxation was not approved of by the French government in Paris. It was, however, maintained by Governor Feillet until 1899. In France, the Comite de Defense des Indignes, formed by Louise Michel upon her return to France, lobbied for its repeal. In New Caledonia, the strongest criticism came from the Marists, who were violently attacked by Feillet and his followers for having provided documentation and testimony to the Comite. Meanwhile, the Governor declared that head taxation was no problem for the Kanaks, because it was no burden to them. Simultaneously, however, Kanak groups began agitating on the east coast, especially at Wapag and Ti-ouaka.¹⁰⁰ As in the Pouebo massacre, Marists were held responsible for fomenting insurrection. Feillet demanded their expulsion from New Caledonia,¹⁰¹ and was responsible for introducing Protestant ministers on a large scale.¹⁰² Head taxation on the Kanaks was declared illegal by the Paris government in 1899.

The mistreatment of the Kanak population was blatant. By the late 1880s, most newspapers and political groups did not question the basic orientation and tenets of Governor Feillet's policies. Open dissent, rarely expressed, was heavily repressed. Newspapers daily reported notices of Kanak arrests for

"drunkenness," "theft," "exhibitionism," "armed robbery," "assault on Europeans," and simply crossing the town of Noumea.¹⁰³ In 1899, the Parisian newspaper, L'Eclair, denounced the effects of Feillet's policy on Kanak life. It charged that Feillet had deported the chiefs of Hienghene to Tahiti, had officially announced that, since the colony needed ten million francs, he would propose to raise this through the means of a "light" collection from Kanaks, and that he planned to build roads at a "very advantageous" cost by using indigenous labor. In fact, an 1898 decree legally placed the Kanak population in the category of foreign residents. They could be sentenced and even jailed without trial.¹⁰⁴

Not surprisingly, the Governor and his Republican Committee responded with outrage at what they felt were unfounded accusations. La Caledonie: Journal Republicain denied that Kanaks were forbidden to reside in the town of Noumea, despite the fact that its columns had repeatedly reported Kanak arrests — arrests on the basis of Kanaks being present within city limits. Furthermore, the paper accused Paris of not being realistic enough to see that the Kanak presence in itself represented a serious threat to the life and very existence of the white European population in New Caledonia. Moreover, it argued that Kanaks "understood so well the advantages they receive from colonization that they are the first ones to demand land limitation for their tribes." Indeed, it was only because Feillet lacked land surveyors that he could not possibly keep up with such a demand.¹⁰⁵ La Caledonie held Louise Michel responsible for the article published in L'Eclair on the ground that she had always sided with "those Melanesian cats."¹⁰⁶

It was no easy task to voice opposition to powerful Governor Feillet. But some did, and paid dearly for it. Marc de Goupils was one of them. As a

teacher in a prestigious Parisian lycee, he had been attracted by Feillet's publicity, and had arrived with his two brothers in New Caledonia in 1898. Upon their arrival, the immigration office allocated to them a coffee plantation in the northern part of the island. Their staff included twelve New Hebrideans, ten Annamites, who had been deported from France for political reasons, and a few Kanaks.¹⁰⁷ Governor Feillet had allowed rebel groups and families of the 1878 insurrection to come back from exile at l'ile de Nou in exchange for providing five years of labor to French plantation owners. Some had been assigned to the Goupils. They formed a small village and regrouped around the eldest member, Samuel, dreaming of the day when they would be free again and reunited with their missing tribesmen, who were scattered all over New Caledonia, thanks to colonial rules.¹⁰⁸ By 1898, even the most remote area of the colony was under French rule. The French colonial state was omnipresent. "To be loved by the gendarmes was to be loved by God," Le Goupils remembered.¹⁰⁹ His vision of colonialism, from the very beginning, conflicted with Feillet's notion of colonial order. The Goupil brothers gave back to the Kanaks the right to perform rituals and carry on pilou-pilou, the native dance which their predecessors on the plantations had forbidden. The brothers also acted as a buffer between colonial authorities - especially the gendarmes - and their Kanak workers. But most important were the personal attacks which Marc launched against Feillet's despotism and his management of the colony. The three brothers were especially concerned with the significance and impact of French rule on native populations. Marc, after a troubled political career as councilman, was expelled from New Caledonia¹¹⁰ by the colonial administration.

None of the Goupil brothers had professed a revolutionary view of the

social order. They accepted the rules of colonialism, settled down on a plantation, and used Kanak, as well as indentured labor, intensively. But they were sensitive to issues of injustice, fairness, and blatant inequality. To them, the treatment Kanaks received from planters, gendarmes, and colonial offices was not fair. In the same way, in 1868 at Pouebo, Marist brothers did not think that it was fair to take away from small agricultural villages enormous amounts of land. They, too, believed in imposing their own ideology on indigenous population. Yet they sided with the underdogs, as the Goupil brothers had. They were all expelled from the colony of New Caledonia. There was no room for dissent in the French colonial order of New Caledonia.

In order to recognize that there was a problem before the 1878 revolt or the 1917 uprisings, French colonizers would have had to acknowledge that the people who first inhabited the islands were true human beings capable of thoughtful action, of having a project. But the French never thought of the Kanaks as equal. Although this is not surprising in a colonial situation, it becomes overly dramatic in settlement colonies, like New Caledonia, where there is a pretense of bi-racial society.

Ready access to convict and foreign labor allowed the colonizers to confine the Kanaks, through laws and force, out of the sight of Europeans. When the shortage of labor became acute, the colonial administration devised ways to force the indigenous population to become workers. In late 19th Century New Caledonia, the role assigned to the Kanaks in the colonial framework was precisely to have them adapt to colonizers' needs and the necessity of the colony. The ideology promoted by Europeans was not a cause of colonialism, as is often suggested, but rather its justification. Although again, this is not surprising in a colonial context, it has had unfortunately a very dramatic impact on the 20th Century Kanak fight for dignity.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on material available in the Pacific Collection of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu. I am especially indebted to Ms. Renee Heyum, Curator of the Pacific Collection, for her priceless assistance, and to Professor Brij Lal for his constant encouragement.

Whenever possible I have used the names of French personnel involved, which I regret to say was not possible in the indigenous population involved, due to the non-availability of the latter in the material consulted.

2. The term "Kanak" refers to the indigenous population of New Caledonia.
3. The issue of alliance between French and Kanak groups against Kanak rebels is of considerable importance in the unfolding of the 1870 Rebellion. See Lathan, L.: "Revolt Re-Examined: the 1878 Insurrection in New Caledonia," in The Journal of Pacific History (JPH), X(1975):48-63, for a historical analysis of the pre-1878 patterns of such alliances in New Caledonia, see Bronwen, D.: "Conflict and Alliance in a Colonial Context," JPH, XXV(1980):21-51; Dousset, Leenhardt, R., Colonialisme et Contradictions. Nouvelle Caledonia 1878-1978: Les Causes de l'Insurrection de 1878 (Editions l'Harmattan, Paris, 1978).
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13. Written answer of French Governor to a Kanak farmer in Marist Fathers: Papers on Pouebo Massacre, 1867-68.
14. For a partial listing of such newspapers, see Brou, Histoire de la Nouvelle Calédonie, p. 227.
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16. Ibid, pp. 158-161.
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18. Brou, p. 161.
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24. La Nouvelle Calédonie, 23 October, 1879.
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44. Dousset-Leenhardt, R., p. 124.
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72. Le Progrès de Noumea, 22 November, 1884.
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