

**Education, colonisation and Kanak aspirations
in New Caledonia:
Historical contexts and contemporary challenges****David Small¹**

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Abstract

This is an analysis of the role that education has played in the development of colonial relations in New Caledonia. It examines the historical impact of French colonialism and particularly colonial education, and details some of the ways that Kanak educational resistance became a focus of the radicalisation of the Kanak independence movement during the 1970s and 80s. It includes a discussion of the rise and eventual demise of the independent school initiative, *les Ecoles Populaires Kanak* (EPK), and explains how intimately connected the EPK was to the FLNKS policy of rupture with French colonialism. In its discussion of the post-conflict era which began with the 1988 signing of the Matignon Accords and looking towards the 2018 referendum on self-determination, this article considers the state of Kanak languages and the extent to which the challenge of Kanak educational underachievement is being met.

Keywords: Kanak, colonialism, education, Pacific, French**Introduction**

New Caledonia is an anomaly. Surrounded by independent nations in the South-West Pacific, it remains a non-self governing territory of France. Some of the residents are recognised, even by France, as “citizens” of the “country” of New Caledonia. Proportionately, the indigenous Kanak people have not been reduced in number to the minority status of the indigenous peoples of the neighbouring settler states of Australia (3.3 percent) and New Zealand (14.9 percent). But at 39 percent of the islands’ population in the latest census, the lowest proportion since records began, and facing an overwhelmingly anti-independence settler population, Kanak people approach next year’s self-determination vote with understandable anxiety about their future.

It is now almost thirty years since New Caledonia’s increasingly violent independence struggle was brought back from the brink with the signing of the Matignon Accords. The peace agreement between the newly-elected French Prime Minister, Michel Rocard, and the leaders of the main pro- and anti-independence groupings set out a ten-year process of development and social and economic “rebalancing”, culminating in a vote on independence, a process extended by the Nouméa Accord in 1998.

This paper discusses the role of education in the Kanak independence struggle. It analyses how education became central to the struggle for Kanak socialist independence. It also examines ways in which differing ideas and strategies regarding educational challenges reflect different perspectives on Kanak social, cultural and political aspirations. It argues that these perspectives go to the heart of the future society Kanak people are seeking to construct in New Caledonia.

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Historical context

French colonisation of New Caledonia formally began on 24 September 1853. Besides exploitation of its extraordinary mineral wealth and its strategic value in the largely anglophone region, the primary purpose of colonisation was for the islands to serve as a penal colony. At the end of the 19th century, with 21,600 convicts having been shipped to the islands, France ended the deportation policy and sought to encourage the migration of free settlers. Kanak people were viewed as an obstacle to colonisation and were treated as such, with France adopting one of the region's most brutal approaches to colonisation.

On the main island, *la Grande Terre*, Kanak communities were driven from their lands and confined on small infertile reservations in isolated inaccessible valleys. In 1878, Kanak resistance grew into a co-ordinated revolt against a colonial regime that, according to an official report prepared by French General Trentinian, “had not the slightest concern for the natives and had given absolutely no thought to governing them with justice” (Dousset, 1970: 135).

From 1887, French authority over Kanak people was maintained through a collection of repressive measures known as the *Code de l'Indigénat* (Native Law) which, among other things, prohibited Kanak people from leaving their reserves, imposed a forced labour regime, and established severe sanctions against transgressors. The Kanak People's Charter written by the Customary Senate declares that French colonial policies “... struck the entirety of the chiefdoms in the Kanak country. In practically every region of *la Grande Terre*, the violence of colonization resulted in the disappearance of clans and chiefdoms, and the displacement of all or part of the populations of tribes and entire regions. The trauma of this violence has permanently marked the customary structures and the people who inhabit them” (*Charte du Peuple Kanak*, 2014: 4). Kanak people rebelled against colonial rule throughout the latter half of the 19th century and again in 1917. However, these uprisings were suppressed and, for several decades, Kanak people lost the capacity to resist.

Following the Second World War, France liberalised its relationships with all its overseas possessions. In New Caledonia, this approach led to the repeal of the Native Law and the relaxing of formal restrictions that prevented the social integration of Kanak people. By the 1950s, all Kanak adults were allowed to vote. In 1953, primary schooling was made free and compulsory and in 1956 Kanak students were permitted for the first time to attend a public secondary school. These policy reforms took place in a context where it was believed that the pacification of the Kanak people had been achieved. In 1953, during events marking a century of French colonization of New Caledonia, it was remarked that apart from St Pierre and Miquelon, New Caledonia was the only French colony with no risk of nationalist revolt (*Le Calédonien*, 21 July 1953).

For the majority of Kanak children, primary schooling during this period took place in their tribal areas in schools that were sub-standard. They were under-resourced and teaching was undertaken by young, untrained Kanak *moniteurs* (teaching assistants) transmitting a curriculum that was imported unchanged from France using an alien language of instruction. Hninö Wéa described his arrival in one such school in the tribe of Wawé in the 1960s to run a sole-charge school as a teenager with only a primary school leaving certificate and no teacher training:

When I arrived, even the parents didn't know that I was coming... I went to see the parents to tell them that I had come to teach at the school. I didn't even know who I was supposed to see in the tribe. I just landed there. I knew no-one. I didn't even know the area. I was a total

stranger there. I am Kanak, but I was only 18 and I knew nothing at all about that region. I just had to do the best I could.

The school's 15 pupils were aged between five and twelve years old. The younger ones spoke no French at all and their language, (Neku) and Hninö's (Iaai), were mutually incomprehensible. The school consisted of one classroom made of straw and earth with a wasp nest in the wall and holes in the roof. Wéa had no supervision or even any contact with the educational authorities; only the occasional visit from the nearest gendarme to make sure he had not abandoned his post, as was common at the time for many isolated and disillusioned *moniteurs*.

Increased access to this kind of schooling by Kanak pupils did not translate into academic success. Kanak pupils under-achieved in education and it was not until 1962 that the first Kanak passed the baccalaureat, the qualification needed to enter university. Only a handful of Kanaks made it to university in France during these early years. One of these, Nidoish Naisseline, wrote a scathing attack on colonial education in New Caledonia in the first issue of *le Canaque. Homme Libre*:

The white community denigrates the man of colour wherever it meets him. It ridicules his parents in the eyes of the young indigène, making them guilty for not having made of him a descendant of Asterix. At school the ideal mother is always represented by a white. As youngsters, my friends and I avoided being seen by the teacher in the company of our parents. Thanks to the French school, our parents had ended up representing for us something to be shunned and forgotten in order to become a real person (Naisseline, 1969: 5-6).

Education and the rise of Kanak radicalism

Later in 1969, Naisseline returned to New Caledonia and founded the first pro-independence group, the Red Scarves, that sparked the first challenge to French colonial authority since the rebellions fifty years earlier. It was these radical Kanak youths who reclaimed the name “Kanak”, which had hitherto been used only as an insult against New Caledonia’s indigenous Melanesian people. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, Kanak people railed against French education, which they saw not as a vehicle for individual or social development but as an instrument of colonial domination and control. As *Groupe 1878*, one of the early radical groups, noted:

We received domination education, that is education whose aim was not to take account of the local people's way of thinking and acting, but oriented in such a way that the traditional past be not given any emphasis (*Andi Ma Dho*, July 1976)

In the late 1970s, two major campaigns in particular brought educational issues to the forefront of the anti-colonial struggle: the 1976-78 occupation of a hostel for New Caledonian students in Paris by Kanak students and military conscripts; and a prolonged series of mobilisations and confrontations in response to the dismissal of Kanak or pro-Kanak teachers, which challenged the educational establishment in New Caledonia from 1979 until 1981. These actions, as well as the broader political movement that they grew out of, fuelled, and were in turn fuelled by, a heightened level of Kanak political awareness. It is widely recognized by scholars of this period (see Dornoy (1984) and Ward (1982)) that next to land, education was the most important focus of Kanak resistance.

In 1984 most of the pro-independence parties and groups favouring “Kanak socialist independence” came together to create the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS). The FLNKS adopted a policy of removing itself from and actively disrupting colonial structures

and institutions; a strategy of rupture that began with the active boycott of the November 1984 territorial elections and the occupation of disputed lands.

In February 1985 the FLNKS extended the boycott to education. Not only would they call on supporters to boycott French colonial schools, they announced the creation of an alternative system of Kanak Popular Schools (EPK) which would operate in ways consistent with the political, economic and cultural aims of the FLNKS. The EPK launched 46 schools, engaging 246 voluntary *animateurs*, working with around 1,500 pupils, approximately six per cent of the 25,000 Kanak pupils who were enrolled in the territory's schools.

Some EPK represented the majority of pupils in their area, with others being in quite marginal situations. The facilities of each EPK were locally organised. Construction of desks, chairs and buildings was a community activity. In some cases, school buildings such as classrooms and cooking areas were also locally built, although a number of EPK occupied buildings that had previously been used by the colonial school system.

The EPK viewed the colonial schools as channelling Kanak people into the lowest social stations – “the slums, the reserves, the unemployed”. At the same time, they saw Kanak people steadily losing their remaining independent means for social advancement and being made dependent on colonial society. The colonial school, it was argued:

...favours the educational failure of Kanak children ... it completely ignores the real needs of the country to the point of alienating minds to make a beneficiary of the Kanak people and to make the country a devotee of the cultural hegemony of French imperialism (EPK, 1985).

The EPK strongly rejected the colonial school system's encouraging of pupils to identify with and admire the achievements of the French nation. The French-defined notions of citizenship that were being generated and reinforced among Kanak people in colonial schools were seen to be undermining both the desire to struggle for independence and the kinds of values and attitudes that would be needed for the construction of a new independent Kanak state. As Simon Naaoutchoué, a leading EPK and FLNKS figure, remarked: “We know the French aim is to imprison our children's minds; to make them think in a straight line to France and nowhere else”.

The EPK sought to redefine schooling in the interests of Kanak people. In doing so, it was making an explicit attempt to develop an education system that would serve two purposes: to assist in the struggle to achieve Kanak socialist independence by rejecting colonial education; and to equip people to take their place in a future independent Kanak state.

There was, however, a recognition within EPK that educational initiatives cannot, of themselves, generate the fundamental change that was sought:

The EPK, like any school, cannot change the entire society by itself. Society changes through change in all of its components. But in the liberation struggle of the Kanak people, the EPK has a function which goes beyond the simple functions of the colonial school (*Bwenando*, 5 September 1985: 9).

For the EPK, the starting point and primary point of reference for the entire educational process must be traditional Kanak education. The EPK defined for itself an active role in the reproduction of the cultural base of Kanak society; equipping the emerging generations with the values and attitudes that Kanak society would need to flourish, while preparing individuals to be able to feel at ease and function effectively within that society.

The EPK was confronted by many different kinds of challenges. The territory's education authority, the Vice-Rectorat, exerted pressure over its employees or former employees who had defected to the EPK. In some instances, it offered sizeable financial incentives to encourage EPK *animateurs* to come back to the mainstream system. Kanak parents were threatened by their employers with dismissal unless they withdrew their children from the EPK (Néchéro-Jorédié, 1988). Parents were also denied child allowance and state-subsidised medical care on the grounds that child-related social services were conditional upon attendance at school. Since the EPK was not recognised as a legitimate school, the children attending it were officially classed as truants.

The imposition of intense financial hardship on already poor parents was compounded by the lack of resourcing of the EPK themselves. This prevented the EPK from purchasing necessary teaching materials or stationery and was also highlighted by critics of the schools seeking to dissuade people from sending their children to the EPK. As Naaoutchoué has pointed out, the comparative lack of resources made it difficult for the EPK to present itself as a credible alternative to parents.

There was the whole conventional school system that continued to function with all their money and materials as against the EPK which was just a few groups of animateurs.

Attempts by the EPK to obtain development funding from regional NGOs were undermined by banks in Nouméa refusing to clear funds for the schools and by governments withholding subsidies for NGO grants destined for the schools. A document obtained from New Zealand's Ministry of External Relations and Trade (MERT) read "the French Government has made known its strong opposition to the work of the EPK which is heavily political and as such goes beyond the field of education".

No less challenging for the EPK was opposition from within the FLNKS. The rationale for the FLNKS deciding to end its active boycott campaign in 1985 was to channel resources into alternative structures for resistance and development such as the EPK. However, the EPK found it almost impossible to extract funding from the FLNKS-controlled regional governments. According to Déwé Gorodey, although the Ponerihouen EPK she had helped to create had been promised money from their regional administration in 1985, the funding was not made available until 1988, their EPK having been forced to close just weeks earlier.

Internal FLNKS divisions over the EPK proved particularly difficult. One of the main causes of tension from an early stage was that many prominent figures within the FLNKS, including some who argued in favour of the EPK, did not send their own children to the EPK, or even participate in the boycott of the colonial school system in any way. This was a source of intense frustration because it made more difficult the EPK's task of reassuring parents that it offered a serious educational option for their children. In Poindimié, some FLNKS activists so resented the non-participation of leaders in the EPK that they burnt down their own EPK. Commenting on the action, Kanak activist Susanna Ouneï-Small remarked:

They did not want to see the children from the tribes being brought into the EPK to learn the name of this or that tree, while some of the leaders of the FLNKS continued to send their children to the colonial schools to learn how to give them orders in the future.

One of the clearest declarations of opposition to the EPK from within the independence movement can be found in an internal document prepared by the leaders of the Loyalty Islands region of the *Union Calédonienne* (UC), the largest member party of the FLNKS. The document describes the FLNKS strategy of 1984-85 in which "it was out of the question to cut the umbilical cord with France (which would be suicidal), but to cry louder in order that she (France)

would be more attentive and considerate”. It refers to the campaign “getting out of hand” and making “unfortunate mistakes which proved difficult to halt. The EPK, which is more a political slogan than a genuine institution, is one of these mistakes”. Produced towards the end of 1985, at a time when the EPK was at its peak, the document represents a rejection of the EPK and, in many respects, an endorsement of colonial education:

These EPK struggle schools have not succeeded in weakening the colonial school through lack of maturity and equally of strategy and tactics... Why would any man of reason give a moment's thought to 'sacrificing' his child in order to satisfy a political slogan, a blind fanaticism, a utopian ideology... The advocates of the 'colonial' school... believe in the virtue of reform. Furthermore, international or global competition demands that we be defended by serious and, above all, **competent** representatives (emphasis in original). Competent means qualified and French qualifications are sure guarantees in these international levels. Learning French, other than its virtues in opening new horizons to us and giving us access to a superior knowledge of a certain notion of freedom and of learning about the world, is also a significant if not the principal trump for successfully securing a good independence (Union Calédonienne Région Isles, 1985).

The document reveals a deep faith in the superiority of French society and the education system upon which it is based and thereby reveals that, at the heart of a radical independence movement lay some deeply conservative perspectives. Internal opposition to the EPK was by no means confined to the UC, however, and neither was it all a reflection of a conservative ideology. Amongst the most strident critics of the EPK were Elie Poigoune and Paul Neaoutyine, leading figures within PALIKA, one of the more radical parties within the FLNKS. It was Neaoutyine's dismissal from his teaching post and Poigoune's resignation in support of him that sparked the prolonged and militant protests and school boycotts of 1979.

Poigoune argued that insufficient thought was given to the creation of the EPK for it to be a school system for the entire population, and that it was irresponsible to call people to take part in an essentially experimental exercise without adequate preparation. He also insisted that the existing school system was a useful starting point for a post-independence education system and that it was a mistake to consciously reject everything in it and try to establish a new system from scratch. Despite its pro-colonial dimensions, Poigoune argued, there were important elements within the French education system that Kanak people can take and use to their own advantage. He valued sending Kanak students to France for tertiary education, arguing that although the school “diffuses the bourgeois colonialist ideology... it can also be, if we really want it to be, a formidable weapon which we can use against colonialism and to gain our liberation” (*Kanak*, 1988).

The question remains, however, as to what such a strategy promised for the majority of Kanak youth who were eliminated from the education system well before tertiary level. Furthermore, Poigoune's acceptance of France's position as the source of knowledge and analytic skills makes even more difficult the already challenging task of breaking from the kind of mentality, as expressed in the UC document cited above, that had been conditioned by the colonial experience and continued to sustain colonial power relations.

Poigoune also criticised the EPK's preoccupation with Kanak custom and culture. He argued that culture and traditions are properly part of the family and traditional milieu. Although in favour of preserving and promoting the things which are of value from traditional society, Poigoune insisted that they are not school subjects. This concern was shared by other activists who were wary of allowing state control of or at least influence over crucial aspects of Kanak culture and identity. One group of Kanak people who were working to promote Kanak languages harboured concerns about the central role that schools, as opposed to parents, were

assuming in the rehabilitation of Kanak languages. They identified a number of "inherent problems" in the post-Matignon moves to incorporate Kanak languages into the curriculum. These included:

1. reticence on the part of elders with regard to the written which fossilises the Word: the Word is life;
2. feelings of the usurpation of the prerogatives and the role of the elders, the holders of traditional knowledge; and
3. fear of the devaluing of this knowledge through its integration into the school and responsibility for it being assumed by teachers, who carry Western knowledge but have not mastered all that is to be known in their own culture (Waheo et al., 1989: p.50).

Poigoune maintained, as he had done since the radical challenge to the education system had gained momentum in the 1970s, that the real task of organising educational resistance had to be undertaken within the existing institutions. The colonial system, he argued, much preferred to see activists establish parallel structures like the EPK than to have them engaged in a strong and well-organised union.

As a dissenting voice, Poigoune was in a minority and was regularly taken to task over the issue, especially given his own position as a graduate and qualified secondary school teacher. Although some former EPK people were able to resume teaching careers, the sacrifices made by many others for their EPK involvement proved irredeemable. Furthermore, bitterness lingered among some activists who, as secondary school students in 1979, abandoned their studies out of a political commitment to the schools' boycott campaign, of which Poigoune was a leading figure.

These conflicting viewpoints over the EPK and education more broadly reveal deep ideological, analytical and strategic disagreement within the independence movement, differences that the Matignon Accords brought to the fore. By agreeing to abandon the strategy of rupture, the FLNKS finally signalled an end to the EPK as a popular movement. The Accords removed the political framework within which the EPK had been able to operate after the decision to participate in the regional system set up in 1985. The EPK was conceived of and could only properly function as one element of a popular mobilization and that mobilization was over.

The post-conflict Era

When FLNKS President Jean-Marie Tjibaou entered into the agreement he knew he was going out on a limb. The Accords were signed on 26 June 1988, only fifty-two days after what has become known as the "Ouvéa massacre". In the days leading up to the second round of the French presidential election, Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, who was standing against the incumbent, President Francois Mitterand, eschewed a peaceful resolution to a politically embarrassing hostage stand-off on Ouvéa, and launched a military attack that claimed the lives of 19 Kanak activists. Some had died in the custody of the French military after they had been taken prisoner and there were allegations of civilian villagers being tortured.

On the first anniversary of the Ouvéa massacre, Tjibaou and his deputy Yeiwéné Yeiwéné, were assassinated at point blank range by Djubelly Wéa, a leading activist from Ouvéa who steadfastly opposed the Accords and was embittered at the failure to hold anyone to account for the killing of the 19. Wéa was then himself gunned down. In minutes, the rifts in the independence movement had claimed the lives of three experienced, talented and committed leaders. Ironically, Wéa's desperate attempt to derail the Accords had the opposite effect. Those who shared his opposition to the Accords were marginalised and silenced. Equally, the standing of the Accords

was massively enhanced by the recognition amongst those supporting independence that the charismatic Jean-Marie Tjibaou had given his life for them.

The Accords were endorsed by their various signatories for divergent reasons. Prime Minister Rocard believed the Accords provided a framework for what he called "a veritable economic and cultural decolonisation without any change in (French) sovereignty" (Reuters, 28 August 1988). Rocard believed that at the end of ten years, Kanak people who had wanted independence would have come to an appreciation of the benefits of remaining a French territory. "My dearest hope," he declared, "is that in 1998 the people of New Caledonia will choose to remain a part of France" (Reuters, 29 August 1988).

New Caledonia's settler population is a multi-ethnic mix of Caldoches (European or mixed race settlers of many generations) and immigrants from France and other parts of the French empire including the French Pacific territories of French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna. They are overwhelmingly opposed to independence. The main pro-independence party, whose President, Jacques Lafleur, signed the Matignon Accords, was the RPCR. It took them just three-and-a-half hours to unanimously endorse the Accords. Lafleur welcomed Tjibaou's acceptance of the Accords, describing him as "one of the Melanesians who has an economic conception... which works towards advancing things and forgetting the conflicts". The RPCR hoped the Accords would return stability to the islands whose economy they dominated.

By contrast, the FLNKS was deeply divided. It took Tjibaou two weekend congresses of heated debate and a promise to try to extract more concessions in the final round of negotiations at Oudinot the following month, to convince the FLNKS to agree to the Accords. Tjibaou believed that the Accords were the best deal possible given the balance of power at the time, stating "this plan does not correspond to our objectives, but we must see to what degree we can make it work for us. All our activists support Kanak Socialist Independence; however, before gaining it, we have to live" (Agence France Presse, 25 July 1988). Tjibaou had experienced direct personal loss during the struggle; less than four years earlier, two of his brothers were among ten Kanaks killed in an ambush by settlers who were acquitted of the killings on grounds of self-defence.

The Matignon Accords were a sea change for the independence movement. Its activist base have been largely demobilised, the strategy committed the movement long-term to co-operating with the French government and investing in social, cultural and economic development. The decision in the Accords to put off the promised referendum on independence for ten years was criticized by many Kanak activists for postponing independence too far out into the future. However, by 1998 none of the parties to the Accords wanted to put matters to the vote. The FLNKS knew it did not have the numbers to win and the anti-independence side did not want to risk a return to the disruption of the 1980s if the vote went against independence.

Instead, the parties signed the Nouméa Accord. The preamble acknowledges that colonisation "harmed the dignity of the Kanak people and deprived it of its identity", and that "these difficult times need to be remembered, the mistakes recognised and the Kanak people's confiscated identity restored, which equates in its mind with the recognition of its sovereignty, prior to the forging of a new sovereignty, shared in a common destiny". It also states that decolonisation is the way to rebuild social bonds "by enabling Kanak people to establish new relations with France" (Accord sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1998). It was the Nouméa Accord that first referred to New Caledonia as a "country" (not just a "territory"). It differentiates "the Kanak people" from "the French people" and it created a new status of citizenship which forms the basis of differential voting rights between long-term residents and more recent immigrants. This principle is consistent with UN guidelines on such votes but is hotly contested among anti-independence

groupings in New Caledonia and France and has provoked legal challenges in the *Conseil Constitutionnel* in Paris, France's highest constitutional court (see Maclellan (2010)). The vote itself was pushed back a further twenty years and is scheduled to be held before the end of 2018. New measures in the Nouméa Accord include recognising customary land rights, creating a Customary Senate comprised of Kanak Chiefs, and supporting Kanak languages in the education system and in wider society. In 2007, a Kanak Language Academy was established to promote the development of all Kanak languages and dialects in a variety of contexts beyond the education system (Wacalie, 2010). The Nouméa Accord also extended the provisions of "Operation 400 Cadres", set up under the Matignon Accords, to become "Future Cadres".

An essential aspect of the Matignon Accords and the Nouméa Accord was a commitment on the part of France to address Kanak educational grievances and make improvements to the education and training of Kanak people in New Caledonia. Prime Minister Rocard described the educational aim of Matignon "as making up for the 'retard' and correcting the imbalances which give rise to such a weak presence of Melanesians in the different sectors of the territory's activity, and particularly in the public service" (Reproduced in *La Dépêche Kanak*, 27 June, 1988).

Further, he said:

Education and training are the keys to development. Whatever destiny New Caledonia may choose in ten years, this territory and its different communities need economic, social, cultural and administrative leaders who are ambitious for themselves and for their country (Speech by Michel Rocard in Lifou, 24 August, 1988).

Tjibaou made similar declarations, appealing to Kanak people "to become better trained and educated in order to cope with greater responsibilities". Accompanying the French Prime Minister on a tour of the territory to promote the Matignon Accords, he declared:

People have to be better trained in management skills: management of the cooperatives, the shops, and to become more involved in the economy so that when the time comes ... to take up the sovereignty of our country, we have the necessary tools in our hands (Speech by Jean-Marie Tjibaou in Poindimié, 26 August, 1988).

Behind these similar statements were different aspirations and expectations. Rocard hoped that educational reform would strengthen French influence in the territory by more effectively integrating Kanak people into the political, economic and socio-cultural structures of the territory. Tjibaou's aim was to use the support of France to bring Kanak people to a form of independence that was realistic and sustainable.

Kanak languages

Central to the educational and cultural objectives of the Accords process was the stated commitment to the recognition and promotion of Kanak languages. The place of Kanak languages in society and in the education system had long been a point of contention. There are 28 distinct Kanak languages and eleven dialects as well as a creole. Kanak people from different language groups use only French for communication.

It was some time after the formal restrictions of the colonial era were lifted that there were any moves to allow Kanak languages in New Caledonia schools. The first attempts were made in the 1970s by church educational bodies. In 1972 the Protestant educational authority, *l'Alliance Scolaire de l'Eglise Evangelique*, tried to introduce Ajië into Nédivin Collège in Haouilou. According to Gasser (1979), this effort failed because of a lack of trained teachers and interested pupils.

Four years later its Catholic counterpart, *la Direction de l'Enseignement Catholique*, introduced Ajië into a Nouméa collège. In 1977, as political pressure was mounting, the Vice-Rectorat established a *Commission des Langues Vernaculaires* (Rivierre, 1985). State involvement increased further in 1979 under the Dijoud Plan with training being provided in France by the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* (INALCO) and the creation in New Caledonia of the *Centre Territorial de Recherche et de Documentation Pédagogique* (CTRDP).

It was not until 1984 that the prohibition on the teaching of Kanak languages in schools was formally lifted in New Caledonia, through the application of a June 1982 memo from the French Education Minister, Alain Savary (Waheo et al., 1989). In 1981, the Vice-Rector had estimated that it would take four years to introduce Kanak languages into state lycées where they would be taught as baccalauréat subjects (Bruel, 1981). However, it was 1992 when the Vice-Rectorat eventually followed the lead of some private secondary schools and introduced four Kanak languages (Drehu, Nengone, Ajië and Paicî) into state lycées, approved as "living second language" subjects at the baccalauréat level.

The Nouméa Accord made special mention of the role of Kanak languages, stating that "the Kanak languages are, with French, the languages of teaching and culture in New Caledonia. Their place in education and the media must therefore be increased and be the object of deep reflection". In line with this, and in accordance with France's signing of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Kanak languages have since 1999 been recognised as languages of instruction at all levels of schooling.

Despite this, Kanak languages remain marginalized and under threat, with thirteen of them officially recognised as endangered (Moseley, 2010). A study of school pupils entering high school revealed that while around 70 percent of pupils reported French to be their first language, only about a third of them had a parent whose mother tongue was French (cited in Vernaudon, 2013). With increasing urbanization and exposure to an overwhelmingly French language media, Kanak youth are using their Kanak languages less and so their fluency is falling. As Veyret and Gobber (2000) remarked:

One can notice a progression of the French language to the detriment of the other languages, particularly in the family context, because the mastery of French is clearly perceived as being associated with academic and therefore social success, and in the communication style of the new, mainly urban generation.

Fillol and Verdaudon (2004) have observed that, while previous generations of Kanak youngsters negotiated two separate linguistic spaces – the home for the other tongue, and the school for French – that distinction is disappearing for the current generation. The importance placed on French as the only language for academic and social advancement is leading many Kanak parents to focus on teaching their children French at the expense of their mother tongue. They argue that this threat to the Kanak languages, especially in urban contexts, is compounded by the impact of an almost exclusively francophone television and a practice of starting children at school at increasingly younger ages.

France has been slower than other countries to recognize the importance of incorporating the use of mother tongues in education. A PISA report singled it out on these grounds:

All countries except France recognise mother-tongue support as an important element for integration and education. Most countries provide a combination of support in the mother tongue language and the language of instruction. France, on the other hand, stresses the

acquisition of French as the key prerequisite for educational success (Schleicher & Shewbridge, 2004: 49).

French authorities were late to allow Kanak participation in education, late to adapt New Caledonian education systems to meet the needs of Kanak people, late to recognize that Kanak underachievement was a serious problem, and late to address that problem. The latest strategic plan for education in New Caledonia makes reference to the promotion of Kanak languages and culture in a school project that aspires to be “adapted to the realities of the country”, acting as “the crucible of common destiny” and offering to everyone “equal opportunities to succeed” (*l'École Calédonienne est en Marche*, 2016).

Closing the gaps?

Although there is now specific reference to Kanak language and culture, there is and has never been official recognition of the extent of the educational crisis facing Kanak people. In 1971, the principal of Nouméa's only *lycée* declared that “the faulty use of French language” was the main obstacle to Kanak educational success but insisted that this and other problems were “being ironed out” (Senes, 1971: 22). In 1981, the Vice-Rectorat claimed that it had achieved “spectacular results” in this area. It said that the achievement gaps between various ethnic groups showed a “slight disparity” and expressed confidence that a continuation of the existing strategy would close this gap (Bruel, 1981). In the immediate post-Matignon era, the Vice-Rectorat claimed that “... secondary education has already improved its results in a significant way. It is a matter therefore of accentuating and generalising this progress, notably in the areas where it has been the least pronounced...” (Vice-Rectorat, 1989: 29).

One of the Vice-Rectorat's main educational initiatives to address Kanak educational underachievement in the wake of the Matignon Accords was the *Programme d'Enrichissement Instrumental* (PEI), which it introduced into every college in New Caledonia and then extended into the *lycées*. Like so many specialised learning programmes, the PEI subscribes to cultural deprivation theory as the explanation of educational underachievement, its first stated aim being “to correct deficient intellectual functions”. The Vice-Rectorat explicitly and uncritically accepted this view, claiming:

Many pupils, considered deficient or slow in light of what they produce, are actually unable to perform the tasks they are set because of a lack of 'cognitive modifiability', which is itself the result of a phenomenon of cultural deprivation. This situation is reversible and cognitive modifiability can be developed through mediated learning which is the aim of the PEI (Vice-Rectorat, 1992a: 21).

After twenty years of Kanak campaigning for significant educational change, the main agency charged with educating New Caledonia and giving effect to the commitments in the Accords to address Kanak educational underachievement was clinging to the same deficit theory that was articulated by Senes twenty years earlier. Without any evidence of consultation with Kanak educational stakeholders, the Vice-Rectorat was proposing a technicist solution to a problem that had deep and complex historical, social, cultural and political dimensions. It is not surprising, therefore, that there was and remains no evidence of any significant reduction in the educational underachievement of Kanak people.

From 1981 to 1992, there was a slight closing of the gap between Kanak and European pass rates in the baccalauréat. However, with multiple exclusion points along the way, far fewer Kanak students progressed to the point of even sitting the baccalauréat. Despite Kanak people being the largest ethnic group, the number of Kanak students to obtain a baccalauréat from 1988 to 1992

was 495. More than four times as many European students (2,107) obtained the baccalauréat during this period. When it came to the prestigious baccalauréat générale, the gap became even more stark, with six times more European than Kanak students. The Vice-Rectorat declared itself satisfied with these outcomes, stating: The current figures confirm the existence of a sufficient number of lauréats in all ethnic groups – and notably Melanesian lauréats – to advance effectively to all the forms of higher education... (Vice-Rectorat, 1992b: 18)

Since 1993, in line with policies in mainland France, New Caledonian educational statistics include no ethnic breakdown. Precise measures of the extent of persisting Kanak underachievement are, therefore, difficult to obtain. Proxies that are used include breakdowns by province, with the Northern and Islands Provinces predominantly Kanak and the Southern Province predominantly non-Kanak. This is weak, however, as the South includes many urban Kanak people with their particular challenges noted above, as well as almost all of the country's sizeable Polynesian population (from French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna) who are also confronting problems of educational underachievement. Nevertheless, statistics cited in a 2012 review of the educational dimensions of twenty years of rebalancing revealed that the educational gap had not closed since the 1990s (Hadj et al., 2012). The most notable area where it identified only slight ethnic differences was in the technical and vocational baccalauréats. This appeared to be the result of Kanak students being steered towards these streams as they left college. While such streaming may arguably be deemed appropriate for the needs of some individual students and for some needs of Kanak society, it also restricts higher education possibilities. It has also resulted in Kanak people remaining under-represented or sometimes almost absent in certain sectors. It was only in 2016, for example, that the first Kanak lawyer was admitted to the bar (CDTM, 2016). This is in a context where at least 90 percent of New Caledonia's prison population is Kanak (Anaya, 2011)

Conclusion:

The repressive and divisive nature of French colonial policy in New Caledonia created the ingredients for the uprisings of the 1980s. Because Kanaks were excluded from positions of control or even real influence in society, Kanak challenges to colonial and settler political power structures and economic interests were conducted through strategies of disruption. Without radical change, Kanak people had no stake in the smooth running of a system that continued to ignore and obstruct their social, political, cultural and economic aspirations. The militant actions of the 1970s and 80s forced those who held power in New Caledonia to take Kanak claims seriously.

Concessions won by the Kanak people in the Matignon Accords and the Nouméa Accord were real and significant. How they would translate into sustainable and positive social change in a society like New Caledonia was, however, an open question. Tjibaou was able to convince the majority of a divided independence movement that committing to the Accords was a risk worth taking.

The educational dimensions were central to the Accords. They arose out of serious Kanak critique of colonial education. However, many of those within the independence movement who had been active in the educational sector were suspicious or outright opposed to the Accords and did not engage in this process. This was particularly the case with many who had been involved in the EPK. This left the institutions with the responsibility for New Caledonia's education run by people whose understanding of the educational problems confronting Kanak people and the strategies for addressing these problems was thoroughly different from the sorts of perspectives found within the independence movement.

New Caledonian society remains divided. The issue of independence remains real and volatile and is likely to become more politically charged as the date for the vote on self-determination approaches. However that issue is addressed at that time, the ongoing challenge of building an education system that meets the needs and aspirations of Kanak people and, by extension, the entire population of New Caledonia, will remain.

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