Material benefits

High Chief Whanéroï: [...] I looked into the profits, I want 25% of the exploitation revenues. As for the project’s political development, I give the government carte blanche, but only if it commits to respecting my word. (Gope 2001: 65)

Because of the symbolic and material importance of the Koniambo Project to the Kanak (see Section 4.3.), nearly all the villagers of the Voh-Koné area with whom I spoke expressed support for its broader goals for the Kanak people. However, some people had concerns about various aspects of the project that would result in costs at the local level, such as the construction of the refinery or the dam on local lands or pollution from mining activity. Thus, villagers’ reactions to the possible advent of the mining project reflected a tendency toward fission and fusion (see Section 1.3.2.). As indicated in Chapter 5, the people who opposed the local construction of features of the mining project most often belonged to subgroups that expected to lose control over the land if the construction went ahead.

Local residents were anxious to maintain their basic livelihoods (see Section 7.1.). However, as suggested in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3.4.) and elaborated below, villagers did not hope or intend to amass great personal fortunes as this was not a path to renown. On the other hand, reception of mining royalties and/or special privileges (which, unbeknownst to many villagers, Falconbridge had no intention of providing) would constitute public proof of membership of a first-occupant clan, a social position which entailed control over the land and which was worthy of great respect. Thus, as indicated above (Section 1.4.3.), natural resource exploitation projects may spark intracommunity conflicts over their benefits, yet this rivalry is substantially informed by historico-cultural relationships to money.
6.1. Social fission and fusion sparked by the Koniambo Project’s economic implications

As described above (Section 1.3.2.), a sense of solidarity or nationhood, based on shared cultural characteristics and/or goals, may unite a relatively large number of disparate groups of people. On the other hand, when distinct social subgroups or ‘segments’ have equal needs for limited resources, intense rivalry often results at the local level. In New Caledonia, both situations are present. Because SMSP, and therefore its Koniambo Project, are seen as promoting a politico-economic readjustment in favour of the Kanak, local residents’ solidarity as Kanak obliged them to support the project’s broader goals. Meanwhile, individuals often spoke of the importance of acting in the best interest of their village. However, villagers had different socio-economic positions which influenced their expectations of and concerns about the mining activity’s potential consequences for their daily lives.

6.1.1. Support for broad politico-economic goals

Nearly everyone in the Voh-Koné region with whom I spoke insisted that he or she supported the Koniambo Project itself. Most local residents based their approval of the project on its importance for the Kanak, and some explicitly linked their support for the project to their sympathy with the independence movement. For instance, some supporters insisted that this project was indispensable because the pro-independence leaders needed to demonstrate that they were capable of managing their resources. Bernard Tchaounyane, the leader of the pro-refinery group at Pinjen, lamented the fact that until the present time, the Kanak had been unable to benefit from the territory’s economic activities. However, the Matignon and Nouméa Accords had promised access to economic resources and thus the Koniambo Project represented a step towards a future independence.

The Kanak have been deprived of everything that is done in mining. Since then, there have been the accords, which means that now the Kanak have access to
mining resources. [...] We still demand independence, so that’s why the mine is a plus for the country. (July 2001, Pinjen)

Another pro-refinery villager expressed the need to prove to the opposition that the Kanak were capable of initiating and managing economic development projects. ‘Today our message has to carry something. It’s no use crying “independence”, “Kanaky”¹ and all that if behind all that it’s an empty sound box’ (Alfred Baca Tein, October 2001, Oundjo). Similarly, the president of Ouélisse’s Council of Elders, in favour of the construction of the dam at Wapan, explained that the Kanak were proud of SMSP, ‘the fruit of their struggle’ and hoped that the project would ‘break the Southern Province’s monopoly’ (Émile Boanou Tein-Boanou, November 2001, Ouélisse).

As I have argued above (Section 5.1.), those who most stood to gain social status from Falconbridge’s recognition of them, such as the customary landowner clans at Pinjen, were also the most whole-heartedly supportive of the Koniambo Project. In contrast, some people – usually those who feared that the project would cause their subgroup to lose control over the land – felt that extra precautions should be taken or that the refinery or dam should be built elsewhere, even if this entailed greater costs for the mining company. While eager for the benefits they expected for the Kanak people, they did not wish the costs to be incurred locally. For instance, the president of GEO6 claimed that the members of the GIE were Palika independence activists, just like the president of the Northern Province and the mayor of Voh, but that nonetheless they had economic interests to defend (Abel Vua Wabealo, July 2001, Oundjo). Indeed, the president of Oundjo’s Council of Elders based his support for the GIE on the fact that it was run by advocates of independence (Henri Cip Kahmene, September 2001, Oundjo). Similarly, at Ouélisse, the spokesperson for those opposed to the construction of the refinery at Wapan, himself an active member of the Palika party, was concerned that others were accusing him and the people he represented of trying to undermine the Koniambo Project. He regretted that the clans concerned had to refuse the dam on their land, but felt that this was imperative for several reasons (see Section 4.4.4.). However, he wished to make it clear that the local customary landowner clans supported SMSP and that they were ready to cooperate with them and with their partner, Falconbridge (August 2001, Ouélisse). After my first extensive interview with him (after an initial,

¹ ‘Kanaky’ is the name proposed by pro-independence groups for a future, independent state, and is sometimes used – with significant political overtones – to refer to present-day New Caledonia.
and protracted, reluctance to speak on the subject), he requested that I write up my notes as a statement that he could release to the local newspaper in order to counter the accusations levelled against him.²

Those in favour of the construction of the refinery or dam on local lands did not overtly question their opponents’ loyalties, but attributed their opposition to misguided evaluations or decisions. The mayor of Koné did not deny that those who expressed unease about the Koniambo Project, or other industrial development projects, were in favour of independence; in fact, he believed that their opposition to such instances of outside intervention reflected their excessive impatience for attaining autonomy (Joseph Goromido, June 2001, Koné). Meanwhile, Dipiba Fouange, a member of the pro-refinery group at Oundjo, criticized the GIE’s choice of lawyer in their suit against Falconbridge. He claimed that this lawyer, Denis Millard (who was a member of the loyalist RPCR party and had earlier been the head of an ADRAF that had questionable intentions; see Section 3.4.2.), was only too happy to sabotage an FLNKS project (November 2001, Nouméa). Dipiba accused the GIE members not of RPCR sympathies but rather of mere foolishness. Others, who trusted Falconbridge and supported all of the mining company’s decisions, expressed the opinion that their opponents simply did not understand the wider politico-economic implications of the project. The mayor of Voh was confident that all opposition to various aspects of the mining project was based on ignorance and could be easily alleviated through explanation.

Now the thing that remains to be done is to make people understand what economic development is, […] what the consequences are that can benefit first them, the people concerned, and the whole population of the municipality. (Guigui Dounehote, June 2001, Voh)

6.1.2. Concerns about the project's local economic impacts

Despite their support for the Koniambo Project itself because of the benefits they expected it to provide for the Kanak people as a whole, some villagers had concerns about various aspects of the project that would result in costs at the local level, such as the construction of the refinery or the dam on local lands or pollution from

² I did so, to his satisfaction, but subsequently had no evidence that he had actually released the text.
mining activity. As explained above, these people most often belonged to subgroups, such as the GIE at Pinjen or the customary landowners at Wapan, that expected to lose control over the land if the construction went ahead. They would thus lose a crucial economic asset and did not expect that employment opportunities associated with the mining project would sufficiently mitigate this loss. Moreover, as will be explored further below (Section 6.2.), money could never compensate for a loss of social status, which was determined by relationships to land.

6.1.2.1. A lack of benefits

Some opponents of the refinery’s construction at Pinjen claimed that although a few would find employment with the project, the majority of local people would not in fact benefit from the mining project. For instance, Noël Wabealo, who was opposed to the refinery’s construction at Pinjen, estimated that the mining project and its concomitant employment opportunities would last only 30 years; this was in sharp contrast to supporter Maguy Leack’s estimation of 200 years. In any case, many opponents of the refinery’s local construction insisted that the positions available with the mining project would require a much higher level of education than that possessed by any of the village youth.³ Therefore, it would be necessary to preserve their local marine resources as a source of food and income for those without salaried employment (see Section 7.1.). To ensure this, they preferred to see the construction occur somewhere else, far from the village. Some pointed out that the only way to finance their children’s education was through the sale of marine resources, a source of income that they worried would be destroyed by pollution from the mine and the refinery, and from competition with migrant workers who would fish in their spare time. Thus, they feared that the very project that would provide their children with employment opportunities would simultaneously remove their ability to prepare their children to take advantage of those opportunities.

³ According to a census conducted in 1996, no residents had pursued studies beyond the high school level, and only four residents (three men and one woman) possessed a high school diploma. The vast majority of the residents over the age of 14 (94 out of 116 men and 73 out of 87 women) had not completed primary school (ITSEE and INSEE 1997). Similarly, at the time of my arrival at Oundjo in July 2001, three brothers and one woman possessed high school diplomas; none of these people was employed. In September 2001, the woman in question died of renal failure at the age of 28.
Others spoke of the importance of having the option of choosing a line of work that they enjoyed. One senior fisherman asserted that the villagers would not be able to do other work than fishing because it was ‘in the culture’ (Pwa Millot Kahmene, July 2001, Oundjo). Similarly, the president of GEO6 (the cattle-raising cooperative, or GIE) declared that the village children needed to follow the course of study that best suited their talents and interests rather than being pushed towards a subject that would prepare them for work with the mining project (Abel Vua Wabealo, July 2001, Oundjo).

Other Oundjo residents did not believe Falconbridge’s promises of future jobs for the villagers. They cited the fact that only three young men from Oundjo were employed at the mine site as proof that Falconbridge/SMSP had not kept its word or, worse, had deliberately lied. Some people stated that those in favour of the construction on Pinjen were salaried employees who did not understand that their fellow village members were unemployed and thus depended on the sale of marine resources for their livelihood. However, several others pointed out that, ironically, the people occupying Pinjen spent their days fishing in the very mangroves that would be damaged by the refinery. As will be shown in Chapter 7 (Section 7.4.), those who trusted the mining company to provide economic benefits that would outweigh any ecological costs were also the people who most stood to gain social status from Falconbridge’s recognition of them as members of customary landowner clans. Meanwhile, André Diela, a member of the GIE, expressed frustration with the fact that the villagers would not receive any royalties from the mining operation (July 2001, Oundjo).

6.1.2.2. The corrupting power of money

Even those who did believe that the project would provide a significant source of revenue for Oundjo residents had doubts about how well their fellow villagers would cope with this new influx of cash. Many feared that the money would be squandered on alcohol and otherwise wasted, although it had the potential to provide important benefits. These worries also reflected people’s discursive opposition of ‘money’ to ‘custom’ and their fears of the potential of the market economy to promote individualism and to destroy community cohesion, as will be explained below (Section 6.2.1.). A common topic of conversation among villagers was the social upheaval that the arrival of the project had already initiated; they lamented what they perceived as an
obsession with money that had disturbed what was nostalgically portrayed as a previously unified community.\footnote{These concerns about local people’s abilities to obtain employment with the mining project, the effects of an increase in cash, and future conflicts and jealousies, as well as worries about the project’s environmental impacts and expectations of priority in employment, all closely resemble the anxieties and anticipations of the population around the Goro-Nickel project site as reported by Marguerite Holbein and Grégory Marakovic (1996).} For instance, Oundjo residents noted that the group occupying Pinjen no longer attended church services and only participated in customary ceremonies that directly concerned them. Alice Kahmene feared that the villagers’ pride would prevent them from distributing the wealth on an equitable basis; she believed that if the refinery were built on Pinjen, the Caunyan would prevent their erstwhile opponents from being employed there (July 2001, Oundjo). She also condemned what she perceived as the Canadian mining company’s intentions to destroy not only the local ecosystem but also what she described as the village’s previous social harmony which was now replaced by individual greed. She thus implemented a common discourse which opposed the market economy to cultural values and, like many of her fellow villagers, she viewed disputes among Kanak as worse than those between Kanak and Europeans. However, most of her neighbours merely blamed each other’s selfishness for the current intravillage tensions while she pointed her finger directly at Falconbridge.

It’s the White who comes to divide the Blacks. Because they come to destroy. Destroy up there [the mountain]. The clans, they don’t see that they come to make divisions among us. What they want is for Falconbridge, SMSP to give a certain sum of money: ‘Here’s some for Caunyan, here’s some for Tijit, here’s some for Gunebwajan.’ […] It’s true that the White is clever, he comes, he gives his spiel, ‘Here, if you sign, I’ll give you this, for your wife, like this like that like that.’ (July 2001, Oundjo).

Not only did people question Falconbridge’s intentions, they also had doubts about their own politicians. Although the vast majority of the residents of villages around the Koniambo Massif are at least nominal members of pro-independence political parties, many people expressed distrust in their elected officials, who (villagers believed) kept information for themselves and did not act in the best interests of their constituency. One 41-year-old man from Baco, a village at the southern end of the massif, had drafted a petition against the mine a few years earlier and had since joined a newly-formed political party, Koné avenir, that defended the social and ecological
rights of local people. He cynically opined, ‘The FLN[KS] has followed the same path as the colonizer. It’s all about money’ (Antoine Cano Poady, June 2001, Baco). At Ouélisse as well, some villagers suspected that the mayor of Voh, who had urged them to accept the dam on their river, would profit personally from the project. Oundjo residents similarly mistrusted their elected representatives. On 25 October 2001, a letter from the town hall, inviting the president of Oundjo’s Council of Elders to a meeting of the Mining Committee, arrived a few hours after the meeting was scheduled to commence. The letter had been sent on a Monday for a meeting on the following Thursday morning. However, mail arrived at the village only on Mondays and Thursdays; thus, it would have been impossible for the president to have received the invitation in time for him to attend. Noting this fact, the council president speculated that the mayor of Voh had purposely acted to undermine Oundjo’s representation on the mining committee because the village was known for voicing its concerns about pollution (Henri Cip Kahmene, October 2001, Oundjo).

Among Oundjo residents, the conflict over the construction of the refinery near the village led each side to accuse the other – sometimes explicitly, other times in a thinly veiled subtext – of thinking only of short-term, individual gain. Such selfish greed formed a sharp contrast to ‘custom’-based concern for the well-being of the larger community. Alice Kahmene asserted that the Kanak had customary methods of conserving certain species and spaces. However, she lamented the fact that, in her view, local people’s desires for financial benefits from the mining project had led them to forget their ancestors’ injunctions to protect their natural resources with a view towards long-term maintenance.

Our relatives who are dead, they said that we have to be careful, whether about cattle or about trees; we mustn’t destroy, we must keep it because that is for you, your great-grandchildren later on. We have to protect nature, we mustn’t destroy. Well now when I see now, that’s it. It seems that money has filled their brains. They have only that in their heads; they don’t think about nature. […] It’s since the Northern Refinery has arrived. (July 2001, Oundjo)

Her statements resonated with those of Antoine Poady, who believed that many local people, dazzled by promises of employment and material goods, had overlooked the environmental and cultural consequences of the mining project. ‘They saw that it

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5 This committee, composed of administrative officials, elected representatives, and local residents, met every three months to discuss concerns regarding the mining project.
brings money. But the environment side, the Kanak heritage side, the taboo side, they forgot all that’ (June 2001, Baco). For him, elements of the natural surroundings formed an important part of Kanak culture that should be respected but that had been temporarily neglected in favour of economic interests.

I think that there won’t be many things to do, concerning the mine, if we really take custom into account. Concerning the land, it’s bad to use it like that; we mustn’t cut a tree for no reason. […] Whereas we Kanak, it’s already the land, the taboo it’s the tree, it’s the mountain, it’s the river. When it’s the mine, we put all that aside. Then afterwards, when the mines are finished, we talk about culture, we Kanak it’s this, it’s that. But when we have to access the mines, we forget all that. It’s all about money. (June 2001, Baco)

Thus, people were accusing their opponents of preferring money (which, according to this discourse, was inherently corrupting) to custom, which in these particular examples was linked to an ancestral respect for ‘nature’.

6.2. The micropolitics of mining money

Because of the merit attributed to generosity, reciprocity and the maintenance of economic equilibrium (see Section 3.3.4.), allegations of individualism were quite severe criticisms. However, these accusations obscured the fact that recognition from the mining company entailed not only financial gain but also – and perhaps more importantly – social status.

6.2.1. Relationships to money

Customary relationships to material objects and to the market economy play a very important role in the micropolitics of local people’s engagements with the Koniambo Project. As explained above (Section 3.3.4.), villagers avoid ostentatious displays of wealth because of a prevailing discursive emphasis on economic equilibrium, manifested through frequent ceremonial or informal reciprocal exchanges, and also because they fear sorcery due to jealousy. This lack of conspicuous consumption in no way denies the evidence that the great majority of Kanak are interested in the benefits made possible by instances of economic development such as
the Koniambo Project. However, the acquisition of material goods is not translated into ostentatious rivalry, as it remains socially unacceptable to display or even to amass material possessions. Indeed, as explained in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3.4.), a ubiquitous discourse disparages the pursuit of money as being against contrary to the virtues of customary beliefs and practices. For instance, Pierre, the representative of the customary landowner clans at Wapan (see Section 4.4.4.), defined Kanak identity as a unique connection to the spiritual and natural worlds, which was far more important than any material gains from the dam project.

Kanak assets are not cars or houses. […] It’s the possibility of having relationships with the beyond, to have power over such-and-such an animal, over such-and-such a fish. (August 2001, Ouélisse)

Ouélisse villagers were indeed interested in the financial benefits of economic development, as was clear from the fact that in the late 1990s they created a cooperative (GIE) with the intention of initiating a cattle-raising enterprise and then requested assistance from an agronomic research institution (see Section 4.4.4.). On the other hand, as at Oundjo, these villagers wanted the development to occur in a way that they could choose and control, one that would not lead to intracommunity inequalities.

Meanwhile, exchanges of goods and services, whether informally between relatives or friends or formally through customary ceremonies (Figure 19), still serve as frequent reminders of the interdependence of members of communities or kin groups. Rather than accumulating material wealth, people prefer to translate economic capital into social capital (Faugère 1998: 339). On one hand there is tremendous pressure to maintain economic parity by giving or lending items to friends or family members who assume that this should and will occur. In response, people systematically hide their wealth and deny that they possess anything worth borrowing. Indeed, knowing that their possessions will be borrowed and/or requisitioned, people often forgo purchasing expensive items; ‘the avoidance of possessing certain goods appears to be a means of escaping the multiple pressures for redistribution’ (Faugère 1998: 146). On the other hand, most of the Kanak with whom I spoke appeared to derive genuine satisfaction from giving gifts or lending their possessions. In either case, there is no need for

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6 For instance, when she learned that her adult step-daughter had once used our household’s telephone when no-one was at home, my host mother insisted that when anyone left the house in future, we should hide the telephone under piles of clothes or mattresses in the adjacent bedroom.
competition to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ since all that is necessary in order to benefit from the Joneses’ possessions is to ask to borrow them, nor is there any socially recognized merit to be gained from owning more than one’s neighbours. On the flip side of the coin, accusations of stinginess are particularly serious.

Figure 1: A customary ceremony at Pinjen

Mining company representatives assumed that local communities would benefit from the financial inputs provided directly through employment with the company and indirectly through immigrant workers’ demands for local products. Speaking from within the framework of a modernist development discourse, they repeatedly asked my colleagues and me to try and determine whether local residents were ‘ready for development’. What they failed to take into consideration was the fact that socio-cultural pressures to maintain intracommunity economic equilibrium prevented people from openly pursuing disproportionate financial gain for themselves and led them to accuse their rivals of doing precisely that. Meanwhile, the project’s presence, and its potential to disrupt or reinforce control over land – which, unlike material goods, was a socially acceptable object of overt rivalry – created unexpected socio-political stakes that led to intense intracommunity tensions.
6.2.2. Modes of status acquisition

In contrast to the value placed on economic equilibrium, there is room for much differentiation in terms of prestige. This is not apparent at first glance; as in Fiji, social positions in New Caledonia are generally inherited or passed on through adoption. This distinguishes them from the ‘big-man’ systems of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and northern Vanuatu.\(^7\) The primary object of competition in the latter societies is the demonstration of the personal capacity to act in a manner worthy of a big-man (Strathern 1982a: 157), typically achieved through rivalry in personal largesse as demonstrated by the amassing, display, distribution, or competitive exchange of material items (Chowning 1979; A. Strathern 1982a: 138; M. Strathern 1991: 1). As explained above (Section 6.2.1.), such pre-existent cultural forms have strongly influenced the ways in which aspects of the market economy have interacted with local socio-economic structures. For instance, Margaret Mead describes the Manus of Papua New Guinea, among whom individuals could achieve status through the accumulation of trade goods and business acumen in their dealings with Europeans (Mead 1956). In the Solomon Islands, according to Edvard Hviding and Tim Bayliss-Smith (2000: 165), the possibility of making ostentatious purchases, throwing lavish parties and offering extravagant store-bought presents has turned money – and especially the unprecedented sums from logging royalties – into a new mode of competition for status. Similarly, Ton Otto explains that at his field site of Baluan, Papua New Guinea, ‘gavman (government and Western style development)’ forms a new ‘sphere of meaning’ within which people can compete for status (Otto 1992: 264).

In contrast, high social standing in Kanak societies is attained not through the accumulation or distribution of material wealth but through proof of the ability to claim relative seniority and, especially, membership of a clan that was among the first to arrive in the area of current settlement (see Section 3.2.1.). As Alban Bensa (1992: 123) succinctly puts it, ‘[c]ompetition depends not on goods, but on names’ (cf. Bensa and Antheaume 1982). Clearly, earning money can allow for a higher material standard of living (although this is limited by the fact, as explained above, that people must be careful not to display their wealth and must share it), but cannot bring about a rise in

\(^7\) As Marilyn Strathern indicates, however, any definition of ‘big-man’ systems is necessarily an oversimplified generalization as ‘a global comparison of societies is faced with the chaotic knowledge of internal differentiation within any one’ (1991: 3).
social status as defined by customary measures. Rank is – at least in theory –
determined purely by genealogy.

However, there is scope for gaining prestige within Kanak societies. As
Bronwen Douglas argues (1994: 169), differences between the two ‘systems’ described
above cannot be reduced to simplistic stereotypes of hierarchical ‘Polynesian’ structures
with hereditary rank vs. egalitarian ‘Melanesian’ structures based on status achieved
through competition, with New Caledonia and Fiji typically classified as ‘political
approximations of the Polynesian condition’ (Sahlins 1968: 159). Historically and
currently, the situation on the ground has been far more complex, as New Caledonian
chiefs’ powers have long ‘depended on the ability and character of the individual
incumbent’ in ‘a complex interaction between the principles of ascription and
achievement’ (Douglas 1979: 18; cf. Douglas 1978: 38). In other words, instead of
being born into a social position that they are unable to alter, Kanak actors navigate
through a system that contains scope for differential realization of assigned political
power as well as for upward (or downward) mobility. Historically, people constantly
attempted to raise their families higher within the social hierarchy by manipulating
myths and engineering marriages in order to associate themselves ever closer with the
first-occupant clans, a position which, if less explicitly sought today, is still just as
coveted. Amidst this turmoil, however, reigned the ideal of social harmony, resulting in
a tension between ‘desired equilibrium/actual disequilibrium’ (Roux 1974b: 40; cf.
Douglas 1982: 402; Bensa 1995: 239) which is still widespread in contemporary Kanak
communities. Thus, in a society that places tremendous emphasis on mutual respect and
the maintenance of social harmony, the position of first-occupant cannot be openly
claimed without incurring the serious stigma of ‘pride’ (orgueil) (Naepels 1998: 186).
Instead, members of these clans rely on others’ public acknowledgement of their status.

6.2.3. Royalties as proof of status

Official recognition by a mining company, through the reception of royalties or
priority in employment, constitutes one form of high-profile proof of one’s position as
customary landowner. My findings thus differ from those of Andrew Strathern and
Pamela Stewart (1998: 213) who note that a need for increased sums of cash provoked
internecine quarrels and accusations of jealousy among the Kawelka in Papua New
Guinea. In the case of the Koniambo Project, I argue that while financial benefits in their own right undoubtedly interested people, their desire to receive visible, tangible forms of recognition from the mining company in large measure represented a wish for confirmation of a high social standing, which could be enjoyed far more openly than the money itself. In light of this analysis, it is necessary to re-examine Oundjo villagers’ efforts to convince the mining company to demonstrate, publicly, that they were the ones who had the right to negotiate with it and to receive financial benefits from the natural resource exploitation activity.

Many members of customary landowner clans expected the reception of mining money, which would constitute proof of their position within the local social hierarchy. Raymond Diela, whose clan claimed customary landownership of both the massif and part of Pinjen, believed that members of the customary landowner groups should follow training programs and perform assigned tasks just like everyone else, rather than expecting that they would receive employment and salaries simply by virtue of their social position. His statement reveals that many members of customary landowner clans simply assumed that they would be granted special privileges and financial windfalls.

If we landowners, we claim our part of that, for example 20 or 30 million [FCFP], from SMSP or Falconbridge, those who are left out, how will they react? They must be served, even if they are later arrivals [i.e. clans that arrived after the first occupants]. That’s the problem. Everyone wants to push to have his part of all that. But if everyone comes to an agreement, we can try to have the benefits around that. [... I don’t want to feel inside my head that being a landowner, I twiddle my thumbs and I wait for the end of the month. I have to work like everyone else. [...] I know that I am protected because I am a landowner. That’s the problem. But in the law of the workplace, that’s not how it is. [...] We have hours to provide for the boss. (Raymond Hauli Diela, April 2000, Oundjo)

Some members of the clans occupying Pinjen also believed that if the refinery were built there, they would, or at least should, benefit more than the others. One 26-year-old member of the Caunyan clan reported that, as a result of the current dispute, supporters of the construction of the refinery on Pinjen were saying that they should have priority for employment, although he recognized that the final decision rested with SMSP (Frankie Cawa Tchaounyane, July 2001, Oundjo). Maguy Leack, who had a long-term

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8 The speaker is referring to employment directly or indirectly linked to the project.
commitment to a member of the Caunyan clan, believed that the customary landowners were in the process of negotiating with the mining company, thus avoiding a scenario in which ‘they [would] come destroy and then we [would] have nothing in exchange’ (August 2001, Oundjo). According to her, these ‘transactions’ were intended to ensure that in exchange for the land, Falconbridge would provide running water, electricity, roads, houses, and telephone lines, as well as 49% of their profits as royalties to the relevant clans.

6.2.4. Concern for the community

Meanwhile, members of customary landowner clans at Pinjen stated that they planned to use the money they received for the good of the entire community. For instance, Maguy insisted that the people occupying the peninsula were acting on behalf of the entire village and not only in their own personal interest. As proof, she claimed that the customary landowner clans could have established an official registry of customary land tenure on Pinjen but preferred not to take such a drastic measure. Opponents of the construction, she asserted, were the ones who were selfish and deluded.

People get it into their heads that the Northern Refinery, when it will go up, the benefits will be only for the Tchaounyane family, for example only for Bernard; [they think that] he’s the only one who will get rich on Pinjen. Their minds are closed. (August 2001, Oundjo)

Bernard Tchaounyane, the representative of the clans occupying Pinjen, also believed that his opponents, and especially the Vabealo, were concerned that their lack of customary land rights on Pinjen would prevent them from fully benefiting from the mining project (July 2001, Pinjen). However, he affirmed that the customary landowner clans wanted the project to benefit the entire village. In fact, in his view, his opponents were the selfish ones because the GIE could profit only a few individuals while the rent from the peninsula’s lands could permit the development of economic groups and activities that would benefit the entire community. Bernard pointed out that the Diela clan, most of whom opposed the construction of the refinery on Pinjen, claimed customary ownership of the Koniambo Massif while according to Bernard and his
supporters, the massif was a heritage at the national level. He was certain that this claim was a sign that the Diela wanted quick money, especially through royalties and priority for employment, rather than a long-term solution. In contrast, he and his supporters hoped to encourage the villagers to organize themselves into a group that could take advantage of the economic opportunities that the project would provide. He felt that the construction of the refinery on Pinjen would ensure that all Oundjo residents would benefit from opportunities to provide the workers with products such as fish. Thus, emphasizing the importance of economic egalitarianism, Bernard asserted that the customary landowners’ control of Pinjen would lead to economic benefits for all villagers.

Members of the GIE similarly portrayed themselves as altruistic and their enemies as selfish, but used different arguments. In contrast to Bernard, opponents of the construction at Pinjen pointed out that if the refinery were built elsewhere, GEO6 could continue to function and could sell meat to the workers. As Maguy had noticed, GIE members and supporters expressed the opinion that the customary landowners favoured the choice of Pinjen as a construction site because these clans believed that they, exclusively, would receive royalties and priority for employment. Some were certain that the customary landowner clans were mistaken, as the project was in fact intended to benefit the entire Northern Province. Others suspected that the representatives of Falconbridge/SMSP had made secret deals and promises.

Once the mining company had given up on Pinjen and began to focus its attention on Vwavuto, similar expectations ensued regarding those lands. In August 2001, Dipiba Fouange, a senior member of the Fowang clan who lived and worked in Nouméa, was (by his own account) contacted by SMSP’s CEO, André Dang, who requested Dipiba’s approval of the mining company’s plans to conduct prospecting work on Vwavuto. Certain that the customary landowner clans would receive royalties and preference for employment if the refinery were constructed there, Dipiba contacted the other clans with customary rights to that area. First, he obtained the agreement of the Cidopwan and Huleut clans, the first occupants of the peninsula, who had since moved further north. He also contacted a member of the Gwa-Cidopwan clan. According to him, this person represented the true Gwa-Cidopwan clan, with customary

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9 In contrast to these expectations, representatives of Falconbridge denied that any royalties would be paid, and asserted that they did not favour members of customary landowner clans when employing workers (see Section 5.1.).
rights to Vwavuto, although this assertion was challenged by other community members (see Section 5.2.2.). On a visit to Oundjo, Dipiba met with certain members of the Xahmen clan with whom he felt affinity (and not with others with whom he had long-standing quarrels) to determine a common strategy. Pwa Kahmene, the eldest member of this clan, later reported that in return for the use of their lands, they had decided to demand ‘1% per month’ from the mining company, although of what precisely the 1% would be he was not sure (October 2001, Oundjo). Although Pwa had previously expressed opposition to the Koniambo Project because of the threats that it posed to the village’s fisheries resources, he reassured me that construction at this particular site would allow the currents to take the pollution from the refinery further north, away from the village.
Ecological resources

Pa Saké: Look above your head, technology is taking our land every day in the bottom of these white boats, abroad... (Gope 2001: 71)

As demonstrated above (Section 1.4.4.), development projects may become embroiled in intracommunity conflicts over the natural resources and cultural significance contained in areas of land or sea, as community members’ diverse social positions give them differential access to and control over these places. While all villagers in the Voh-Koné area agreed on the importance of natural resources such as marine products and fresh water, and many also valued the cultural heritage and recent memories that the land embodied, they differed in their levels of concern about the ecological consequences of the mining project. A closer examination reveals that these anxieties depended on people’s expectations of economic benefits and/or costs from the project. This chapter contains two main arguments. First, local people’s highly pragmatic evaluation of the significance of their ecosystems is logical because the villagers perceived natural resources as equivalent to other forms of income; thus, direct or indirect employment from the Koniambo Project could compensate for the potential loss of marine species. In other words, most Oundjo residents analysed the mining project as involving a trade-off: On one hand the area’s natural and cultural resources would undergo a certain degree of damage, and on the other hand employment and royalties would be generated.

Secondly, whether or not the villagers deemed the trade-off worthwhile depended on, first, the benefits they expected from the project and, secondly, the degree to which they trusted Falconbridge/SMSP. These expectations and this trust depended in turn upon the relationship that local residents had with the mining company and
whether or not they believed that this relationship, and the project, would increase their subgroup’s control over the land, which represented their security, identity, and fundamental reference point. In other words, some villagers’ expectations of recognition from the mining company was behind their willingness to trust the company to avoid damaging the local ecosystem or to provide benefits that would outweigh any damage. Conversely, residents who did not expect to benefit from the project either financially or in terms of prestige chose not to trust the mining company’s promises.

7.1. Villagers’ concerns about the environmental impacts of the Koniambo Project

In the Voh-Koné area, most of the local residents with whom I spoke expressed some degree of anxiety about the Koniambo Project’s potential environmental impact. The reasons behind their concerns centred around the natural and cultural resources that the surrounding areas provided. All the villagers in the Voh-Koné area whom I interviewed agreed on the importance of natural products such as marine species and drinking water, and many also valued the cultural heritage and recent memories that the land embodied. However, the villagers perceived natural resources as equivalent to other forms of income; thus, direct or indirect employment from the Koniambo Project could compensate for the potential loss of marine species. In other words, most Oundjo residents analysed the mining project as involving a trade-off: On one hand the area’s natural and cultural resources would undergo a certain degree of damage, and on the other hand employment and royalties would be generated. Local people’s interest in spaces and species was thus, ultimately, a people-centred one rather than being based on notions of the ecosystems’ intrinsic value.

7.1.1. The significance of the environment

Conversations with people at Oundjo revealed that they thought of the ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ significance of their surroundings in pragmatic terms. One man, age 26, was similarly concerned that the construction of the refinery would destroy ‘nature’ which, to him, consisted of land for planting yams, fresh air, vegetation that provided
shade and oxygen, and a source of free customary medicinal plants (Frankie Cawa Tchaounyane, July 2001, Oundjo). He thus identified a large part of the importance of ‘nature’ as its ability to provide items of practical value. In a discussion about the importance of the lagoon, I asked fisherman Léopold Wabealo if marine species had a value other than that represented by their consumption and sale. He replied that they also played an important cultural role. Asked to elaborate, he explained that during weddings or funerals (which last several days), men would organize fishing expeditions in order to feed the participants in these customary ceremonies (September 2001, Oundjo). Hence, the ‘cultural’ value of faunal and floral species resided in their use in customary ceremonies, traditional exchanges, medicines, or, as will be discussed below, in defining one’s identity. The worth of species and spaces thus depended not on mystical sentiment but rather on the various forms of use-value of these resources.

Indeed, the director of ADRAF, a Kanak in his early 40s, rejected the Western notion that the Kanak has a special, supernatural connection with ‘nature’, insisting instead that spirituality was simply one of a myriad of human needs.

[LM:] In fact, there is a relationship of usefulness with nature. The spiritual is also a need that exists in Kanak society. […] Behind that theory that consists in saying ‘Nature and Kanak are merged’ I feel like saying very often, ‘No, watch out, these relationships…’

[LH:] And who says that?

[LM:] Ethnologists, even today, theses on the environment. No, it’s notions of needs that are put forward, and there is for example the need for the spiritual. (Louis Mapou, June 2000, Nouméa)

He also stated that his people’s apparent concern for the environment actually reflected a desire to preserve their identity as proven by landscape markers (June 2000, Nouméa). His analysis thus viewed elements of the natural surroundings fundamentally as resources that serve very practical purposes in fulfilling a variety of human needs.

As Louis Mapou pointed out, in contrast to outsiders’ biased expectations, Oundjo residents simply had their own definitions of the environment and its significance. Ultimately, what mattered was not a ‘deep ecology’ version of ‘caring for nature’ for its own sake but, rather, the use of natural resources, important both for their direct consumption and for their cultural/spiritual values. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that these aspects were factored into evaluations of the Koniambo Project as people weighed their expectations of its costs and benefits. Those who believed that
their subgroup would be able to benefit from the project were more prone to downplay its potential environmental impacts.

Thus, villagers’ discourses on the environment, and the actions they took to support or oppose environmentally destructive activities associated with the mining project, were directly linked to their expectations of the degree to which the project would increase or decrease their control over the land and the resources it contained, and/or provide them with an alternative source of income. In turn, these expectations depended on their customary authority over the land concerned and their relationships to the mining company. For instance, some of the supporters of the construction of the refinery on Pinjen (the first-occupant clans and their allies, who believed they had a particularly close relationship to Falconbridge/SMSP (see Section 5.1.) agreed that it would be painful to see the bulldozers destroy the landscape and its elements such as the resident animals and the marks left by their ancestors, such as yam terraces. However, they insisted that such sacrifices were counterbalanced by the economic gain that the project represented. Just like their opponents, who expressed concern about the natural resources that formed the basis for their own and their fellow villagers’ livelihoods, pro-refinery villagers explained their support for the local construction as reflecting an interest in the community’s future. As Maguy Leack stated,

We’re going to lose somehow a little bit of the heritage of our elders before, but it will be for our children later on. If we have to make sacrifices for our children, I think we have to go for it. (August 2001, Oundjo)

The secretary-general of the Voh Town Hall, a 30-year-old man from Ouèlisse, expressed a similar sentiment but qualified people’s attachments to certain places as stemming from ignorance: ‘I think that people haven’t quite grasped economic development’ (Joël Boatate, June 2001, Voh). What local residents failed to understand, in his view (as in that of the pro-refinery Oundjo residents as well as the mining company), was that the natural resources and cultural heritage that the land contained could never outweigh the economic benefits to be gained from the mining project. On the contrary, I argue that the villagers who opposed construction of the refinery or dam did not necessarily underestimate the extent of the material benefits to be gained. Instead, what they were particularly worried about was who exactly would receive these benefits and who would suffer the costs: whose identity markers and marine products would be traded for whose fattened pockets, and who would have the
privilege of deciding when and if this would occur. The following sections explore several ecological issues discussed by Voh-Koné area villagers and examine the ways in which their concerns were mediated by expectations of other benefits or costs from the Koniambo Project.

7.1.2. Pollution

Many people in the Voh-Koné area spoke of the pollution they had witnessed at other mining projects around the main island. Most villagers were not particularly concerned about air-borne pollution from the refinery, which they believed would be carried far away. Instead, they feared that the eroded soil from the areas to be exposed by the mining activity would contaminate their drinking water\textsuperscript{10} and their fishing zone. Many scoffed at the anti-pollution dams touted by Falconbridge representatives, claiming that during heavy rains the water would quickly overflow the barriers. They worried that there would be similar run-off from the ore that would be stocked by the refinery for later processing, and that the mining company would dump the slag into the ocean. The president of Oundjo’s Council of Elders was concerned that prospecting work had already begun polluting the rivers but that with the commencement of real mining activities, the area would be ‘ten to 100 times more polluted’ (Henri Cip Kahmene, September 2001, Oundjo).

These anxieties regarding the Koniambo Project’s potential environmental impacts depended on villagers’ expectations of the project’s material benefits. Those who were not confident that they would be able to access these benefits expressed the most concern. At Oundjo, several salaried employees expressed concern for the welfare of their fellow villagers. However, those who depended on fishing for their subsistence and livelihoods, often people with little formal education and few hopes of being employed by the mining company, were the most anxious about the maintenance of their marine resources. Many women, who collected shellfish from the mangroves near both potential sites for the refinery, expressed concern about the potential loss of these

\textsuperscript{10} Oundjo’s water supply comes from a catchment point on a spring that feeds the Pandanus river. I can attest from personal experience that during the hot and dry season, from October to March, water becomes limited and supplies are often shut off at night or for several hours around noon. After heavy rains, and on mornings after the supplies have been shut off for the night, the tap water is often yellow or reddish with mud. This has long been the case, but villagers feared that erosion from mining activities could further contaminate their water supplies.
resources. As they explained, this possibility constituted a reason to oppose local construction of the refinery – unless they could find employment with the mining project, a possibility that they strongly doubted. In a similar vein, several people stated that the project was good for those for whom it provided jobs, but bad for those who depended on fishing for their livelihood. Many affirmed that they would have been ready to accept the construction of the refinery on local lands if they could have been assured that the villagers would find employment there to replace the predicted loss of their fisheries resources.

Figure 2: Fishing boats at Oundjo

Thus, people’s desires to maintain their resources were largely based on economic concerns; many villagers referred to their natural surroundings as a ‘heritage’, defined pragmatically as a source of wealth that they and their children needed in order to survive. In other words, the use of natural resources was most often seen simply as a necessary alternative to salaried employment. At Voh, a 36-year-old man had helped to create an association for local unemployed people, called the Public Works and Regional Environment Group (Société des travaux publics et de l’environnement régional). When I asked about the inclusion of the word ‘environment’ in the group’s name, he explained that unemployed people depended on nature, which he defined as places in which to plant crops and to fish, because they did not have money to purchase food. Therefore, they had to protect their environment whereas salaried employees
‘don’t give a damn’ about their natural resources. However, when Matthieu Thaxou\textsuperscript{11}, his friend from Oundjo, mentioned the existence of Corail vivant, a non-governmental organization (NGO) that aimed to protect the coral reef (see Section 7.5.2.), he scoffed at the idea because it might prevent the refinery, which would create jobs, from being built (Jacob Janan Couthy, October 2001, Voh). This example neatly illustrates the trade-off in many people’s minds between natural resources and salaried employment. Both represent means of livelihood, although there are significant differences between them. Formal employment is more stable and a greater source of income, yet the use and sale of natural resources is more accessible and more reliable in the long term.

7.1.3. Overfishing in Oundjo’s fishing reserve

Many of those who opposed the construction of the refinery on Pinjen expressed fears that their marine resources would be threatened not only by pollution but also by an influx of workers who would fish in their spare time. This eventuality was painted as especially dangerous since these outsiders would not conserve the resources in the same way that the villagers did.

In the early 1960s, Oundjo’s Council of Elders declared the area of lagoon directly in front of the village to be a customary fishing reserve. Since maritime space up to the reef is considered, just like land, to be under the authority of the local customary landowners, the elders first needed to obtain the agreement of these clans. Such customary reserves exist throughout New Caledonia, both on land and at sea (Teulières-Preston 2000; Horowitz forthcoming b). In Bwatoo and Haveke, the dialects spoken at Oundjo, they are known as \textit{xape thiitake}, literally ‘taboo places’, the same term that is used for sites with spiritual power. Outsiders may sometimes ask permission to accompany friends or family members from the village on fishing trips within the reserve, but this is generally criticized by other villagers. Oundjo’s fishermen protect the site by chasing down any unauthorized fishing boats and seizing their catch, while brandishing guns if necessary. They also cut any nets that outsiders

\textsuperscript{11} ‘Matthieu Thaxou’ is a pseudonym, as the person concerned preferred that I not use his real name and chose this one instead. I have used it consistently throughout the text to refer to him, however, so that – in accordance with the approach outlined in Chapter 2 (Section 2.5.) – readers might become acquainted with him and his personality as well as his relatively unusual life history (see Appendix 1).
have set. Many people proudly asserted that, because of such actions, outsiders now respect the zone.

Oundjo villagers claimed that their protection of the reserve was justified because these outsiders were usually people from the nearby towns of Voh and Koné and fished merely for recreation whereas the villagers depended on marine resources for their livelihoods. As a 51-year-old fisherman explained, ‘Sometimes we tell them, “Oh no, no more of that, you have your livelihood over there. You aren’t going to come destroy our livelihood here. We live only from fishing.”’ (Jules Josaia Diela, July 2001, Oundjo). Oundjo residents often referred to the fishing zone as their ‘cultural heritage’, which they saw primarily not as a vague intellectual notion but as a concrete economic birthright.

Many residents of Oundjo spoke of the ease of a situation in which one could catch fish rather than having to purchase food, and hoped that their descendants could experience the same lifestyle. However, they lamented the fact that the area’s marine resources were being exhausted because of an increase in the numbers of people fishing there, and feared that with the arrival of workers for the refinery project, this depletion would accelerate. One 50-year-old woman who was born into the Diela clan, the members of which had customary rights at Pinjen but were largely opposed to the construction of the refinery there (see Section 5.4.), referred to Pinjen’s mangroves as ‘my treasure’, noting that she had gathered crabs at that site since her childhood and that she was always certain of having a good catch there (Hélène Phoea Goa, July 2001, Oundjo). She noted the irony of the fact that the villagers had long fiercely defended their fishing zone from outsiders but now had given the mining company leeway to destroy the area (July 2001, Pinjen).

Those who supported the construction of the refinery on Pinjen, however, were less concerned. Raymond Diela was confident that, despite any increase in immigrants, the villagers would continue to defend the reserve from outsiders (July 2001, Oundjo). Others felt that the mining project would provide benefits that would more than compensate for any decline in the fisheries resources. Despite his long participation in the fishing cooperative, Millot Tein was not optimistic about the future of fishing at Oundjo even in the absence of any local mining pollution. He believed that the villagers needed to embrace the economic opportunities that the project provided.
The elders have gone and taken their time with them. It’s our past. Now the young people have to look at the horizon. What is the future? We’re not going to keep on just turning around five kilos of crabs per day. That time is finished. (August 2001, Oundjo)

He stated that the lagoon was already overfished by recreational fishermen from nearby towns and so fishing was no longer profitable; in contrast, the mining project would provide a market for marine products as well as other employment possibilities. A careful examination of Millot’s statements reveals a paradox. He claimed that the lagoon was already overexploited and thus economically useless, yet in the next breath predicted that the mining project employees (who would, as he knew, fish in their spare time, further depleting the resource base) would provide a market for the marine resources that he had just claimed did not exist in sufficient quantities to be profitable. Placed into context, however, the assumptions behind Millot’s discourse are quite clear and exemplify the two main points of this chapter. First, people like Millot, who expected financial gain from the mining project to outweigh any ecological damage, had no reason to be concerned about their marine resources. Secondly, people were willing to wager on economic benefits from the project when they or their close allies – in Millot’s case, the Caunyan (see Section 4.4.2.2.) – were in a social position that allowed them control over the land in question, control that they assumed would increase through their acceptance of the refinery.

7.2. Implications for cultural identity

In contrast to Millot, many residents viewed the heritage contained within Oundjo’s fishing reserve and on clans’ customary lands as worthy of consideration, and not solely for economic reasons. For the Kanak, places may have not only pragmatic worth but also cultural significance as the foundation of identity. Certain sites, markers of clan history, serve important psychological and strategic purposes as both mnemonics and proof of clans’ relationships to the land (see Section 3.2.1.). The significance of such places was brought into relief by the advent of the Koniambo Project. Within local communities, clan members pointed to the meanings of certain sites as evidence of their clan’s relationships to areas of interest and, hence, of their rights over these areas. Thus, as with natural resources, cultural heritage became a stake
to be factored into assessments of the mining project’s benefits and costs as well as arguments to support particular positions.

7.2.1. Threats to Kanak culture

Just like natural resources, the cultural meanings of specific natural features were threatened by the changes to the landscape that the mining project would inevitably entail. People who did not expect the Koniambo Project to increase their control over land expressed particular concern about their loss of these cultural resources. As we have seen, relationships to particular places are crucial in determining a person’s position in the local social hierarchy; however, relationships to place and ‘nature’ also form an important element of a uniquely Kanak personhood (Horowitz 2001b; see Section 3.4.4.). At Ouélisse, the 50-year-old head of the Economic Development Committee of the village’s Council of Elders recounted that he had initially been in favour of the construction of the refinery at Wapan, in view of the benefits that it would provide in terms of increased water supplies and possible employment for his fellow villagers (Georges Bouigou Goa-Bealo, November 2001, Ouélisse). However, he later realized that this reaction had been superficial, and that there were ‘deeper’ reasons to refuse the dam, based on Kanak people’s desires to maintain their cultural heritage, of which they had lost much due to colonization and acculturation. He explained that the late petit chef, Mepone Wedoy, had ‘culturally defended’ the area, which was the home of their ancestors, belonged to the villagers by birthright, and which they had successfully reclaimed to use for small-scale projects that would directly benefit the village (see Section 4.4.4.).

Similarly, in the context of Inco’s Goro-Nickel project (see Section 4.1.4.), a member of the Customary Senate worried that industrial projects would demolish natural resources that were important for cultural reasons. While he shared environmentalists’ concern about the natural surroundings, he added that the Kanak had special relationships to certain places and species that were managed and maintained for their cultural values. ‘What differentiates me from them, it’s that when I talk about environment, for me it’s not only ecological. For me it’s cultural as well.’ To him, the customary reservation of certain areas and animals to be utilized for ceremonial purposes constituted a reason to oppose the project.
There are places, fishing zones where we would only go fishing for very special circumstances. Take the case of Yaté. They go fishing there, in those places, to catch turtles, the day of eating the first yams. Not just any old time. If we destroy that, the day when we’re going to eat the yams, where will we hunt for turtles? It breaks the culture. (Dominique Oyé, July 2001, Nouméa)

At Wahat, a community in the central mountain chain just beyond Ouengo (see Figure 8), the president of the Council of Elders explained that *notous* (an endemic species of pigeon) and *roussettes* (a group of bat species) were used for customary ceremonies. Therefore, he wanted to ensure that the mining project would not eradicate the forest habitat of these animals – not because of their intrinsic worth but because of their cultural significance (Auguste Pidje-Patche, May 2000, Wahat).

7.2.2. Concerns about local cultural heritage

The relationships of particular clans to the landscape was an even stronger consideration in debates about the Koniambo Project. Several people reminisced about the strong emotions they felt when on the land where their forefathers were buried and the ‘shivers’ that this ancestral presence caused. One 22-year-old man recounted that he occasionally visited Pati, his ancestors’ former residence on Pinjen, to ‘clear away the bush around the tombs’. While in favour of the refinery’s construction on the peninsula, he spoke of the importance of ensuring that such burial sites not be destroyed by the mining company’s machinery since these places constituted his heritage (Simon Maama Tidjite, October 2001, Oundjo). Thus, as with concerns about dangers from spirits (see Chapter 8), these sentiments usually did not entail opposition to the mining project or even to the construction of the refinery on local lands; rather, people were quick to specify that they were simply concerned to ensure that certain sites, small in area, would be left alone.

On the other hand, villagers who feared a loss of control over their land often evoked their cultural heritage as a reason to oppose the local construction of the refinery. Many spoke of the importance to the Kanak of their ancestral lands, the only place where they were sure of finding a place to live and garden, and where they could truly feel at home. This sentiment is common throughout Melanesia; as Miriam Kahn discovered during her fieldwork in a village in Papua New Guinea, ‘to be without a
place is to exist humilitatingly outside the bounds of sociality’ (1996: 180). Claiming that the mining company had already conducted prospecting activities on his clan’s portion of Pinjen, André Diela complained that the pro-construction clans’ desire for money had led to disrespect for customary boundaries. On a more practical level, he pointed out that if the physical evidence of the sites of former habitations were removed by the mining company’s activities, others could deny the validity of Kanak land claims: ‘I often hear people say that “the Kanak claim all that, but it doesn’t show that they are the ones who did all that”’ (August 2001, Oundjo). One 74-year-old member of a clan with customary rights to Vwavuto spoke very pragmatically of his privileged relationship to his ancestral domain; he complained that if the refinery were built there, his clan would have no place to go if they had to leave Oundjo (Tone Goa, September 2001, Oundjo). His late brother’s wife explained that their clan remained in the village only with the consent of its customary landowner clans, who could theoretically revoke this decision at any moment (Odile Didin Goa, September 2001, Oundjo).

For others, cultural heritage included more recent history. Memories of their efforts to reclaim the lands in the 1980s imbued Pinjen with a particular political significance. A 45-year-old woman recalled the emotional impact of a moment during this period when, in digging the soil to build a hut on the land, people had discovered human bones. ‘That’s when I knew that our ancestors were there. [...] I truly saw that it belongs to our ancestors’ (Henriette Cae Diela, July 2001, Oundjo). André Diela noted the irony of the fact that if the villagers rented the peninsula to Falconbridge/SMSP they would no longer be at home on the land they had striven so hard to reclaim: ‘We will have done just the opposite of what we fought to obtain’ (August 2001, Oundjo).

Several people in the Voh-Koné area expressed the fear that a loss of the particular features of their clan’s lands, which commemorated both ancestral and recent history, would entail a sense of disorientation.

If we accept any old thing, I am no longer me. I won’t have my reference points any more. I won’t be me any more, I won’t have my identity any longer. Where will I have my identity? Everything is being destroyed. I’ll become like an immigrant. In the name of what will I speak? (Matthieu Thaxou, August 2001, Oundjo)

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12 Edvard Hviding and Tim Bayliss-Smith (2000: 242) discuss similar concerns in Marovo, Solomon Islands. Another example comes from the Kawelka of Papua New Guinea: ‘If any group is jealous of us or says that we are recent immigrants or settlers in this area we can reply, “Yes, you say this but whose place is this? Who set up this stone?”’ (in Strathern and Stewart 1998: 215).
Matthieu, a man in his late 30s, explained that without the sites that marked the passage of his clan’s ancestors, he would have no way of proving the history that formed the basis for his identity. Envisaging a future conversation with a group of fellow Kanak, he imagined,

They’ll say to me, ‘Where do you come from? How did you get here?’
‘I came like that.’
‘But where? We don’t see anything there anymore. There is nothing left there. It’s a big wall. There’s smoke coming out of there.’

In customary language, when you make customary speeches, to retrace your relationships with such and such a woman, with such and such a clan, you say, ‘I come from such and such a place, I came that way.’ How can you do that if you have nothing left? (Matthieu Thaxou, August 2001, Oundjo)

Matthieu also spoke of the strength that he acquired from visiting sites that commemorated his clan’s history.

For example when I go to a place that I knew from my history, I feel that somewhere there I have contacts with nature, through nature; that reminds me of certain things that I learned orally, through my history, and in coming out of there I feel strong, armed to face reality, or the new things that arrive. (August 2001, Oundjo)

Decrying the upheaval caused by the inevitable presence of large-scale industrial projects, which were radically altering both nature and local lifestyles, he insisted that people needed to maintain certain culturally important sites as reference points in order to be able to assimilate all the new elements in their surroundings. However, on other occasions, Matthieu expressed hopes for a job driving trucks for the mining project and optimism about the employment opportunities it would provide for local youth. This evidence of distinct bundles of expectations and concerns, or ‘sub-selves’ (see Section 2.1.2.), indicates that, like many villagers, he was torn between a desire to maintain his cultural heritage and an interest in the economic development that the mining project would bring.
7.3. Debates about the refinery

As the previous sections have shown, Voh-Koné area villagers perceived the Koniambo Project as involving a trade-off between employment on the one hand, and natural and cultural resources on the other. Whether or not they deemed the trade-off to be a prudent one depended on their expectations of the degree to which their subgroup would be able to access the benefits that the project would offer. A case in point is the conflict at Oundjo over the proposed construction of a refinery on Pinjen. Opponents spoke of the threat to their natural resources that the construction would pose while supporters were convinced that such ecological dangers were insignificant.

7.3.1. Opponents' concerns about pollution

Many opponents of the construction of the refinery on Pinjen worried that it would pollute their fishing zone. Léopold Xawhana Wabealo, a 32-year-old professional fisherman, was concerned about illnesses that could be caught from consuming fish from polluted areas and believed that contamination from the refinery would be worse than that from ‘natural’ sources. The latter, such as mud after heavy rains, were nontoxic and inevitable, just the opposite of human-induced pollution. He articulated his bewilderment at the fact that the clans occupying Pinjen did not appear to be considering the long-term consequences.

They were fishermen like me. I don’t understand. Soon they will return from Pinjen. As soon as the refinery is built, they’ll go fishing, they’ll eat the fish. They won’t feel well, they’ll go to the infirmary, they’ll do a blood test, they’ll say, ‘It’s polluted, it’s because of the fish.’ ‘Oh yeah? It’s because of whom?’ ‘It’s the waste from…’ We had to think, react beforehand. (August 2001, Oundjo).

Léopold was clearly worried about the potential health effects of the refinery’s activities; undoubtedly, this consideration influenced his opposition to the project. However, it is notable that the villagers who expressed serious concerns about pollution from the refinery were those who, like Léopold, did not expect benefits from the project. These people did not anticipate that they would obtain employment with the
mining project and thus feared for their livelihood. Nor were they among the customary landowners at Pinjen, who expected a rise in prestige from their relationship with the mining company (see Section 5.1.) and, as will be demonstrated below, believed that the mining project’s economic benefits would outweigh its ecological costs. In my analysis, this discrepancy between the two groups would indicate that confidence or concerns about pollution levels reflected people’s expectations, or lack thereof, of obtaining jobs and prestige from the project.

Some people, especially women who gathered shellfish at Vwavuto, opposed construction at this site as well and wished that the refinery would be built somewhere far away, at a site already contaminated by mining activity or where people relied less on marine resources. Some women used a religious idiom to articulate their opposition. For instance, one born-again Christian believed that God had created the land for planting and the sea for fishing; while in favour of the employment that the mine would bring, she asserted that it would be wrong to destroy what God had created (Lizzie Weke Wabealo, August 2001, Oundjo). Alice Kahmene, another born-again Christian, was against construction at both sites even though she rarely went fishing, because she believed that ‘God spoils us’ with the beauty of the landscape and abundance of natural resources (Alice Kaleine Kahmene, July 2001, Oundjo). Rather than expressing opposition to the entire mining project, she simply wished that the refinery would be built elsewhere because her fellow villagers depended on fishing for their livelihoods and she did not expect that they would find employment with the mining project. When the mining company was unable to resolve the conflict over Pinjen, it began to look elsewhere for a construction site. Alice saw this as a sign that God had prevented construction at Pinjen. She referred to the fact that her sister-in-law, Roda, had received visions showing that the refinery could never be built at Pinjen (see Section 8.3.). ‘They can’t do it because God already said, even by the proof to the sister, that, “I don’t want you to destroy what I created.”’ (October 2001, Oundjo). She doubted that the construction would proceed successfully on Vwavuto, for the same reasons. Nonetheless, she endorsed her in-laws’ demands for preferential employment at the construction site on Vwavuto, based on claims to indirect customary rights to this area. It is clear that Alice’s primary concerns were not purely based on Christian notions of nature’s ‘moral claims on people’ (Robbins 1995: 219), in which case she would have opposed the project outright. Instead, like many of her fellow villagers, she valued the
local ecosystem to the extent that it was useful to local people in the absence of other livelihood options.

In contrast to Alice, several people who opposed the planned construction on Pinjen voiced a clear preference for construction at Vwavuto, as the site had already been used as a port for mining operations in the past, and was therefore ‘already polluted’. One reason for their preference for this site was the fact that it was less controversial and the choice of Vwavuto rather than Pinjen would, they felt, restore community harmony. Another possible (although unstated) reason behind some people’s support for this location may have been that they had customary rights to it and expected to benefit in terms of social status and reception of royalties from construction of the refinery there (see Section 5.1.). Some invoked religious beliefs to support their opinions. Roda Kahlmene explained that God had decided that ‘nature’ (which she defined as the place where cattle grazed) ‘must not be destroyed’ at Pinjen and instead the refinery should be constructed at Vwavuto, where her family claimed indirect customary rights (October 2001, Oundjo). Her father agreed that God had arranged for the refinery to be built at Vwavuto, where currents would carry the pollution farther north, rather than at Pinjen because He had ‘seen in my heart’ the wish for the lagoon not to be polluted at Pinjen (Pwa Millot Kahlmene, October 2001, Oundjo).

7.3.2. Support for the construction

Conversely, strong religious statements could be used in support of the construction of the refinery at Pinjen. Susanne Wae Poadataba, a member of the Pwadaatraba clan which was in favour of the refinery’s construction on Pinjen (see Section 4.4.2.1.), had a long-term relationship with a member of the Caunyan clan with whom she had four young children. A born-again Christian, she expressed a typically Judeo-Christian view that the Earth and its resources existed in order to be used and managed by humans. She felt that God had created all natural resources, including nickel ore, for human benefit. God was not concerned about nature, which inevitably had to be partially destroyed for any form of economic development, but instead cared

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13 Oundjo-based clans claiming customary rights to Vwavuto included the Fowang and Gwa (see Section 4.4.3.), led by Dipiba Fowang who had called on his allies among the Xahmen to join him in claiming rights (see Section 6.2.4.).
about people, to whom He had given the wisdom necessary to make the best use of their environment. In her view, the surrounding area had already been polluted by human activity, but God ensured that the fish remained abundant, and would continue to do so (October 2001, Oundjo). Her brother, another born-again Christian, was confident that the refinery would be built ‘with God’s help’ (Jean-Baptiste Walai Poadataba, July 2001, Oundjo). Thus, in ways similar to their invocations of different systems of rights (see Section 5.3.), people used religious ideologies strategically; apparently, their micropolitical positions in relation to the project defined their religious statements about it, rather than vice versa.

Supporters of the construction of the refinery on local lands used other arguments as well. While cautious, many people claimed that some ecological sacrifices would be necessary for the greater good of the community and that one must adapt to one’s times. However, Raymond Diela explained, environmental protection and economic development were not mutually exclusive.

It’s true that when we speak now of a place where we mustn’t pollute, it’s as if we were saying that we don’t want to progress. But indeed, we have to accept progress. But especially, also, we have to be careful about what we have already. (July 2001, Oundjo)

Bernard Tchaounyane admitted that mining projects always entailed negative ecological aspects; he stated that his primary concern was the environment and that it would be necessary to be very careful. Nonetheless, he insisted that ‘we have to go that way’ (July 2001, Pinjen). Similarly, supporters of the construction on the peninsula argued that Falconbridge and SMSP had solid economic reasons for choosing Pinjen and that in any case, the benefits to be gained from the project would far outweigh those from fishing or cattle raising, activities with no future. In sharp contrast to those who were against the construction of the refinery on Pinjen, who emphasized the importance of fishing resources to the village economy, several pro-refinery people estimated that few Oundjo residents went fishing. Moreover, Raymond, a retired schoolteacher who supported the construction on Pinjen, pointed out that fishermen had no pension later in life (July 2001, Oundjo).

Among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea as well, as described by Joel Robbins (1995: 218), ‘there is a sense that God wants people to use everything He has provided.’
Meanwhile, supporters of the local construction of the refinery expressed less anxiety about ecological consequences than did their opponents. As will be described below (Section 7.4.), they tended to place more faith in the mining company. Bernard was convinced that if the refinery were constructed at Pinjen, the situation would not be nearly as dire as the cattle-raising cooperative’s flimsy arguments would have suggested. The mangroves would not be touched at all, he asserted, and there would be plenty of space for the cattle to graze around the refinery (July 2001, Pinjen). The petit chef pointed out that people lived all around the refinery at Doniambo, near Nouméa, which used the same technology as the planned Northern Refinery; he believed that if the Doniambo refinery were truly polluting, people would not live there (François Tratrae Tchaouynyane, October 2001, Pinjen). Many supporters of the construction of the refinery on local lands mentioned that other economic activities practised by their fellow villagers caused pollution, especially cattle farming. Moreover, they believed that natural areas could easily regenerate; as an example, they described the mangroves’ regrowth after the main highway, the RT1, had been redirected through a nearby marsh a few years previously. Countering others’ observations that pollution had already occurred from prospecting activities, they noted that the mining company had not yet made the decision to go ahead with the project and thus had not yet fully invested in anti-pollution measures.

Furthermore, several people pointed out that the mine, not the refinery, would be the primary source of pollution and hence the main threat to local marine resources. They remarked upon the fact that only the customary landowner clans of the massif, and not of the surrounding area, had been consulted for approval of the Koniambo Project. They observed that the mining company should have realized that the ore would need to be shipped via the sea and therefore should have consulted the clans along the coast, who would also be affected by the mining activities. Oundjo’s petit chef noted that the village’s geographical location, at a low elevation and near the mouths of several small rivers, would cause its residents to be the first to suffer any pollution from the mine. His clan had not been among those to accept the Koniambo Project originally, as they had not been invited to the 1998 ceremony at the Voh stadium. He pointed out the irony of the fact that some members of the Diela clan, which had participated in this ceremony, were now opposing the construction of the refinery on Pinjen (see Section 5.4.). For François, however, the threat from mining pollution was in fact a reason to advocate the construction of the refinery on land owned by the villagers. That way,
they could rent the land to the mining company and thus at least receive some benefits from the project to compensate their losses (François Tratrae Tchaouyane, October 2001, Pinjen).  

François believed that people who cried ‘pollution’ were actually out to sabotage the mining project (October 2001, Pinjen). His brother’s partner, 32-year-old Maguy Leack, did not feel that mining activities presented a genuine threat to local marine resources; according to her, fish populations were abundant and healthy at Népou, a nearby centre of mining activity. She believed that people’s apparent interest in the environment was spurious since it surfaced only when money was involved.

There is no-one who thinks of that. But as soon as a big thing like that is involved, people will go looking, poking left and right to find little… That’s when they’ll talk about the environment. […] We Kanak, we are too attracted by money. As soon as there is an economic benefit, when it’s a question of money, we’ll search for a little… We’ll talk about the environment, we’ll talk about the fish. (August 2001, Oundjo)

I agree with Maguy that it is instructive to examine exactly who took what stance in relation to the project’s potential damage to the environment and what was behind this positioning. Nonetheless, unlike her, I believe that some people were indeed nervous about losing their fisheries resources. Logically, however, as Léopold Wabealo disconcertedly pointed out from his perspective, which was opposite to Maguy’s, pro-refinery people should have had the same worries (see Section 7.3.1.). The difference was that because of their status as customary landowners and their resultant privileged relationship to the mining company, Pinjen’s self-proclaimed customary landowner clans expected jobs and royalties that would more than compensate for the loss of natural resources. (As explained above (see Section 7.1.), villagers considered these natural resources to be only a poor substitute for mining revenues and salaried employment anyway.) In contrast, members of the other clans feared that since they did not have a close relationship to the mining company or a position of decision-making authority in relation to the use of the peninsula, they would lose their livelihoods and receive nothing in return.

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This reasoning resonates with that used by residents of Lihir, Papua New Guinea, who prefer to receive compensation payments rather than to attempt to limit mining pollution (Simon Foale, pers. comm. March 2002).
Moreover, people’s concerns did not revolve solely around the environment or, as Maguy implied, around economic competition and the hope for compensation. Instead, the conflict largely centred on the socio-cultural significance of the peninsula itself: the dignity and control over land which the cattle cooperative would lose, and the customary landowner clans would gain, if the refinery were built on Pinjen. Their expectations of these benefits and costs of the construction of the refinery influenced their discourses about and, in my view – pace Maguy – their genuine perceptions of the project’s environmental impacts.

7.4. Trust, or lack thereof, in Falconbridge

People’s expectations of the Koniambo Project’s politico-economic implications also influenced the degree to which they were willing to trust the promises that Falconbridge made regarding the project’s future environmental impacts. These implications included changes in the political and economic landscapes, at both the local and national levels.

7.4.1. Falconbridge’s promises

Like Maguy, Falconbridge/SMSP representatives privately vented cynicism about local people’s abilities to assess environmental risk and the real reasons behind residents’ expressions of concern. When a resident of Témala requested an informational meeting about the potential environmental impacts of the project, Falconbridge’s Director of Environment hesitated for fear of creating a ‘dangerous precedent’ by holding such sessions on demand. He eventually organized a meeting, but later commented to me that he had been obliged to design his talk to be very simple and colourful so that the villagers would be able to understand (April 2000, Nouméa). Another Falconbridge employee opined that local residents were only pretending to be concerned about pollution in order to squeeze more economic benefits from the project as compensation for damages; he remarked that the same people had shown no signs of being interested in the environment in the past (May 2000, Koné).
However, the mining company’s public response to villagers’ anxieties was to try to reassure local people. At first, their official statements seemed to reflect a goal of no negative environmental impacts whatsoever from the project. In 1996, Falconbridge’s financial and administrative director, on visit from Canada, stated, ‘We want the mining activity not to affect the region’s environment at all’ (in Hummel 1996). In 1998, SMSP’s CEO, André Dang, asserted in a public speech delivered before 500 people, ‘Our project must not take anything away, neither from the water, the air, the land, nor the people’ (in Chaumereuil 1998). There is an obvious if unintentional irony to these statements, considering that a mining project, by definition, removes something from the land. By 2000, however, Falconbridge’s representatives had nuanced their discourse, repeatedly insisting that in any instance of industrial development, ‘Zero risk is impossible.’ Nonetheless, in November 2000, Falconbridge’s Director of Environment assured the Mining Committee, composed of administrative officials, elected representatives, and local residents, that the company’s goal was to design their antipollution dams so as to approach ‘100% efficiency’. At an informational meeting for the villagers of Témala and Ouélisse in May 2000, which I attended, the president of Témala’s Council of Elders asked the Director of Environment to list the ‘positive and negative elements of the dam.’ He was told that the development would provide a reserve for water and edible fish and might promote tourism. When the council president again insisted on knowing the potential negative aspects of the project, the Director of Environment replied that the dam would resist ‘all kinds of rain’. He then admitted that Falconbridge was not sure as to what the impact on the flora and fauna would be. However, he quickly added that it might provide new habitat for crayfish and a migratory pass for fish and prawns. In a similar vein, that same year the official answer to local residents’ complaints that the rivers had become muddier since the start of the prospecting activities was to insist that the real cause of this pollution was the record levels of rain witnessed in 1998 and 1999.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} Some local residents had their own explanation for this meteorological phenomenon (see Section 8.6.1.).
7.4.2. Expectations of micro- and macro-level benefits and costs

Many local residents were unsure as to whether or not they could believe such claims and promises; during one interview, for example, a young woman switched back and forth from worrying about the destruction of her favourite shellfish-gathering spot to expressing confidence that there would be no pollution as proven by the slides the mining company had shown (Georgette Nyai Tchaounyane, September 2001, Oundjo). For the most part, though, whether or not villagers chose to trust Falconbridge depended on their expectations of other benefits and costs from the mining activity. Potential benefits included the hope that collaboration between the Canadian company and SMSP would increase Kanak economic (and, ultimately, political) autonomy at a national level (see Section 4.3.). People’s beliefs on the matter, in turn, often partly depended on individuals’ expectations as to whether or not the project would increase their own, or their subgroup’s, control over local lands.

As explained in Chapter 5 (Section 5.1.), customary landowners’ attempts to increase their control over land by forming relationships with developers were ultimately aimed at attaining recognition from the developers as well as the respect from their fellow community members that such recognition would imply. This desire for recognition led them to be more willing to grant resource-use rights to outsiders; in the case of natural resource exploitation projects, as Joel Robbins ironically points out, ‘land only warrants recognition or confers voice when one is prepared to give it away’ (Robbins forthcoming: 29).

Bernard Tchaounyane, the leader of the pro-refinery group at Pinjen, stated that the mining company’s work on the massif compared very favourably to other, more polluting, mining activity that he had observed in the past. To him, this change vindicated Kanak people’s desire to see mining projects on their lands. Their new, pro-mining position was a radical departure from their previous opposition to mining during the period when Kanak had been excluded from the mining sector.

It’s true that in the past, when we talked about mining, right away it’s pollution. So maybe people have a view of what was done more in the past. Things weren’t done correctly. Now, with the regulations that are in place, that has changed lots of things. So maybe that’s why it’s more the Kanak who are demanding it. We Kanak, we had talked about resource access; now it’s the case, there has been the exchange between the two massifs, so for us it’s something positive. (July 2001, Pinjen)
This change in attitude may indeed have resulted, at least in part, from observations of improvements in environmental standards followed by mining companies. It is likely, however, that Bernard’s last sentence reveals a more fundamental reason behind his interest in this project: the fact that, unlike past mining activity which had removed resources from their land against their will and generated wealth in which the Kanak did not share, the Koniambo Project’s major goal was to benefit the people of the Northern Province, giving them ‘resource access’ (see Section 4.3.). In other words, his sense that the project would increase Kanak control over nickel resources made him inclined to place his trust in Falconbridge. Similarly, a member of the Customary Senate (Sénat coutumier), a representative from Poindimié on the east coast, believed that Falconbridge’s relationship with SMSP made it more accountable to the Kanak and their interests, including their environmental concerns.

The difference with Falconbridge, it’s a big company but it is in partnership with the Kanak, with SMSP. […] It has to take account of what we say because the mines belong to SMSP. […] It has to take account of our environment. (Dominique Oyé, July 2001, Nouméa)

Bernard and other members of customary landowner clans who had received demonstrations of respect from Falconbridge through customary exchange ceremonies (see Section 5.1.) also tended to feel that, in being given a voice, they themselves had been granted a degree of power over the mining activity. They were therefore more inclined to feel that the mining company would respect their decisions and concerns. Raymond Diela explained that he and the other local customary authorities had agreed to allow the project to proceed, but only with the proviso that the mining company take precautions to protect the zone’s rivers and marine resources.

I myself gave the gesture\textsuperscript{17} to Falconbridge to tell them that, ‘We give you the massif, but be careful to work neatly.’ The word we gave is, ‘Be careful with our rocks so that our fish don’t die.’ (February 2000, Oundjo)

For others, who had not been recognized by the mining company and did not expect special treatment, the fact that Falconbridge was a multinational company was a

\textsuperscript{17} He is referring to the ceremony performed at Voh in 1998 in which ritual gifts of cloth, tobacco and cash (often called ‘gestes’) were exchanged (see Section 5.1.).
further reason not to trust it. Some people believed that the company and its fellow-
Canadian rival, Inco, operating in the Southern Province, had chosen New Caledonia in
order to avoid the strict regulations they experienced back home. The fact that
decisions were being made half a world away could only increase their sense of
alienation from the process. Convinced that despite the company’s promises, they
would be no different from other, nearby projects which had caused substantial
environmental damage, these people pointed out that Falconbridge had no long-term
commitment to the area. As fisherman Léopold Wabealo opined, the company was only
interested in short-term profit and, when the nickel was exhausted, would leave local
residents with a polluted environment, no natural resources, and no source of income.

The village doesn’t need nickel, it needs the sea. They don’t see that. All they
need is nickel. Afterwards, they don’t care. The waste, all the things, they don’t
care. They gather or they collect for as long as they want; there isn’t any more,
they’re off. The consequences of twenty years, thirty years afterwards, they
don’t care. (August 2001, Oundjo)

One 74-year-old villager agreed that large, wealthy mining companies did not care
about the Kanak; as evidence, he listed both their lack of concern about the environment
and the fact that they often employed people from elsewhere rather than local residents
(Tone Goa, October 2001, Oundjo). Others resented the fact that, according to them,
the mining company had spoken only of the future employment opportunities that the
project would provide, without clearly explaining the ecological damage that would
result. One senior villager compared the company to politicians who, once granted a
mandate, no longer listened to their constituency (Bwahnu Wabealo, October 2001,
Oundjo).

7.5. ‘What can we do?’

Most of the people in the Voh-Koné region with whom I spoke had mixed
feelings about the Koniambo Project; they were ‘for’ the employment opportunities that

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18 According to one Falconbridge employee, mining companies had held informative sessions three
or four times at Oundjo, and therefore those who claimed to have inadequate information were
‘lying’ (August 2001, Nouméa). Several villagers confirmed that the mining company had visited
Oundjo (although, by their account, only once or twice) to show slides and to talk about the project.
Some were reassured by the presentations while others demanded more information.
it would create yet ‘against’ the pollution it would entail. At the same time, the vast majority of local residents felt powerless to affect the project’s outcome, believing that this was the prerogative of people other than themselves and that in any case, development was inevitable. One 70-year-old fisherman warned that, although he could not presume to tell people how to manage the project, they would ultimately realize that he had been right: ‘One day, they will see, “Oh yes, it’s true, it’s true what he said, it’s true. There are no more fish, what are we going to do?”’ (Pwa Millot Kahmene, July 2001, Oundjo). Nonetheless, they were eager to welcome any external sources of support. Meanwhile, some recalled past actions taken against mining companies’ abuses of their ecological rights, while others actually took action to make their opinions heard, or threatened to do so if mining pollution occurred.

7.5.1. A sense of powerlessness

Some community members expressed a sense of powerlessness; they felt that the Mining Committee meetings were useless and that their advice was not heeded. They wished to be able to monitor and control the mining activities, but despaired of being granted such authority. Unlike the supporters of the construction of the refinery at Pinjen, these people did not occupy a social position that caused them to be recognized by the mining company as figures of authority. Instead, they stood to lose control over their land and resources to a large, powerful, multinational mining company from which they felt alienated and which, therefore, they chose not to trust.

For various reasons, many of the people who were concerned about the potential ecological impacts of the Koniambo Project felt that they had no say in the matter. First, because of the enormous macro-economic and political stakes involved (see Section 4.3.), many people in the Voh-Koné area expressed a sentiment that they were powerless to influence the outcome of the project in any way. Matthieu Thaxou believed that most local villagers were concerned about potential impacts on their natural resources but did not dare express themselves because of the political dimension of the project (August 2001, Oundjo). On a somewhat similar note, Léopold Wabealo lamented that he and his fellow fishermen had very little power in comparison to the State and wished for provincial legislation that would support them and allow them a political voice (August 2001, Oundjo). Others complained, in private, that all the
rhetoric about ‘our children’s future’ did not account for local villagers’ needs in the present. Still others viewed Falconbridge as a powerful force that they could not hope to influence. For instance, one man in his early 20s was sure that the local landscape would change and that ‘nature is done for.’ He asked me whether the smoke from the refinery could cause illness and whether the sea would be the same as before. However, his final remark was simply, ‘I hope they’ll do their best’ (February 2000, Oundjo).

Secondly, many women, whose traditional role is to gather shellfish at low tide and crabs from the mangroves, were particularly fearful about pollution from the mining activities. Just as in the area of Solomon Islands’ Marovo Lagoon, where ‘it is the women who often voice the strongest concerns over pollution of reefs and mangroves by land-based logging and mining’ (Hviding 1997: 132), many (although certainly not all) Oundjo women were opposed to both possible refinery construction sites because each was an important source of shellfish. As with local residents at the Lihirian mine in Papua New Guinea (Simon Foale, March 2002, Canberra), another reason for women’s concerns may be that they do not expect to benefit financially from the project. In any case, however, they felt incapable of influencing the situation, considering this to be ‘men’s work’. Some women tried to sway the decisions of their husbands or sons, but expressed frustration at their inability to do so. Indeed, when I asked one pro-construction man about his wife, Alice’s, opposition to the mining project, he assured me that ‘I am the boss of the family’ (Wright Kahmene, October 2001, Oundjo). Part of their helplessness resided in married women’s ambiguous affiliations. In theory (if not always in practice), marriage entails a loss of the land and resource rights they enjoyed within their birth clan. Thus, women who were born into a clan with customary rights to Pinjen but had married into another clan would be told that, in marrying, they had lost all authority to speak about their birth clan’s lands. At the same time, they are only relatively recent arrivals in their husband’s clan. Thus, women who came from another village, even if they had married into a customary landowner clan, would be told that they had no right to speak because they were ‘outsiders’.

Similarly, many young people claimed that they were more concerned about the ecological impacts of the mining project than were their elders, but that they had no scope for voicing their opinions. Other people mentioned the fact that the customary authorities had accepted the mining activity as proof of the project’s inevitability, as
they could not retract their word. Oundjo villagers often referred to a petition that had been circulated in April 2001, which stated,

Further to the meeting that was held at the OUNDJO Community Centre, the 28th of March 2001 relating to the resumption of discussions about the future site of the Northern Refinery,

We the undersigned, Chief, President and members of the Council of Elders of the village of OUNDJO as well as all the clans living in the said village give our consent for the construction of the Northern Refinery on the customary lands of PINDJEN.

This text was composed by Bernard Tchaounyane. Below were spaces for the signatures of the members of the Council of Elders and for the members of each individually-named clan. It was circulated (by some accounts rather aggressively) by Émile Wabealo, a 65-year-old man who had become estranged from his immediate family and had long resided with the petit chef and his brothers. Bernard described the petition as an unofficial document deposited at the provincial office and the town hall to show the villagers’ support for the mining project. However, local people took this document very seriously, asserting that nothing could be done now that the paper had been signed. Kanak custom places great value on keeping one’s verbal promises, and the signatures in this case replaced the spoken word.

Furthermore, Oundjo residents often stated that it was up to the customary landowner clans of the relevant areas, and not the other villagers, to make decisions concerning the mining project. Although most of the representatives of these customary landowner clans were eager to accept the project, a few expressed opposition to it. However, they were daunted by the idea of trying to combat such a powerful multinational company, especially without any external support. One senior man, whose clan (according to some versions) had customary although unofficial rights to Vwavuto, did not want the mining company to build its refinery on his customary lands but felt unable to prevent it. He contrasted this situation to that of Pinjen, noting that

19 Several members of the Vabealo clan have names customarily associated with various roles of service to the chief. Émile’s Bwatoo name, Xhetam, means dish. It was once the customary role of the person with this name to prepare and serve food to the chief. Although my informants stated that this was no longer practiced, they believed that his customary role had provided Émile with an especially close relationship to the petit chef and his family. Indeed, Émile resided with and was nursed by members of this family until his death from an unspecified illness believed to have been caused by ‘the stone’, another clan’s totem, in August 2001. Significantly, the Caunyan rather than the Vabealo family hosted the customary ceremony that followed his funeral.
GEO6 had been able to hire a lawyer and file suit against Falconbridge, whereas his clan did not possess adequate financial resources to make that a possibility (October 2001, Oundjo). Earlier, he had half-jokingly asked me whether I planned to tell SMSP of his opposition, without much hope that my words could influence the mining company’s decision; however, his sister-in-law protested that I must not say anything (September 2001, Oundjo).

7.5.2. A possible source of external support for natural resource protection

On a Sunday afternoon in early October 2001, one potential source of outside assistance made its appearance in the form of two representatives of an NGO based in Nouméa. This organization, Corail vivant (Living Coral), had as its goal the inscription of New Caledonia’s coral reefs on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Its representatives gave a speech in which they explained that they were not opposed to industrial development but believed it needed to be monitored and regulated. They pointed out that if the coral died, the fish would as well. However, they did not propose external interference in local fishing practices or the creation of a strict nature reserve; rather, they claimed that UNESCO would entrust the management of the reef to members of the ‘First Nation’ who had lived for thousands of years without destroying it. They planned to demand that the mining companies provide clear explanations of the ecological consequences of New Caledonia’s various mining projects, and offered to transmit this information to the villagers, who in turn could monitor the state of the lagoon and reef. The speakers confirmed that they had the support of the Customary Senate and the FLNKS. The meeting ended with a general discussion, a plea to join the association, and the signing of a petition in favour of the World Heritage listing.

Although the president of the Council of Elders had announced the meeting just a few hours earlier at the end of a poorly-attended church service, and despite competition from a fund-raising fair at the village that same afternoon, 24 villagers (13 women and 11 men) attended. Reactions to the event were very positive. Attendees took copies of the petition home to collect signatures, and one resident (Matthieu Thaxou) took the initiative to visit many of the houses in Oundjo and nearby villages, petition and pen in hand. Many people expressed the hope that the NGO would show their signatures to local politicians, most of whom were supporting the mining project.
The villagers were not always entirely certain about the reasons for Corail vivant’s interest in the reef, guessing that it stemmed partly from a purely aesthetic attraction, but most believed that the speakers had demonstrated a genuine concern for the villagers and their marine resources. The possibility that the NGO might be concerned about the coral for its own sake occurred to no-one, as this idea did not fit with their anthropocentric valuation of the ecosystem (see Section 7.1.1.).

Villagers were optimistic about the possibility of working with the group in the future or even being employed by them to monitor the reef, and hoped for further meetings. Whether they opposed the refinery’s local construction or merely hoped to ensure the least possible ecological damage, many people saw this new relationship as a novel type of resource, a fount of information and support as well as a respectable and politically powerful ally: ‘That’s what will give us weight’ (Raymond Hauli Diela, October 2001, Oundjo). One 74-year-old resident remarked on the representatives’ scientific knowledge. He mentioned their statement that New Zealand scientists had found that the coral was being killed by increased radiation from the ozone hole, noting, ‘We Kanak, we didn’t know that’ (Tone Goa, October 2001, Oundjo). Prior to the group’s arrival, the president of the Council of Elders had been anxious that its members would try to impose regulations on the villagers’ fishing practices. However, afterwards he was quite pleased about their visit; his only regret was that it had not occurred earlier, before the customary authorities had given approval of the mining project (Henri Cip Kahmene, October 2001, Oundjo). Thus, as has historically been the case throughout New Caledonia (see Section 3.3.1.), Oundjo villagers demonstrated their openness to exogenous individuals and institutions. At the same time, they demanded that these outsiders not interfere but instead provide a source of support in assisting them to gain greater control over their land, sea, and natural resources.

7.5.3. Taking initiative

A few years previously, some local residents had not waited for external assistance but had decided to address the problem themselves. According to an article that appeared in the local newspaper *Le Quotidien* on 15 April 1997, the Council of Elders of the village of Koniambo had sent a letter in December 1996 to the director of the Société Le Nickel. The letter stated:
We regret to inform you that, following our meeting which took place Wednesday 18 December 1996 at 17:00, in our community centre, we decided that there would be no mining activities on the Koniambo Massif for one single reason: to preserve the water and the environment. (in Ravat 1997)

This letter evidences an exaggerated confidence in their own authority (what Holly Wardlow (2001: 32) has termed ‘fantasies of agency’; see Section 5.1.), since the massif did not legally belong to them. However, these villagers later became convinced of the project’s benefits and changed their minds. Meanwhile, in 1998, Koniambo residents created an Association for the Defence of the Interests of the Citizens of Koniambo and Koné (Association pour la défense des intérêts des citoyens de Koniambo et de Koné, or ADICKO). Although they aimed primarily to protect local employment, among the listed interests they hoped to defend were ‘pollution and the environment’ and ‘the royalties generated by the exploitation of the Koniambo Massif’ which they evidently expected but which Falconbridge had never promised and had no intention of granting.

Similarly, in April 1997, a group from the village of Baco drafted and circulated a petition against the mine:

Petition Against the Opening of the ‘Koniambo’ Massif

Reasons for our opposition:

1) The Koniambo Massif is a part of the Kanak heritage. Therefore it must be preserved for future generations.

2) Pollution.
   - Provision of water: Koné, Baco, Koniambo, Voh, Oundjo, Tiéta.
   - Marine resources.
   - Disrespect of the meaning of the Kanak flag.

3) We’ve had enough with the ‘Kopeto’ and the other Mining Centres, whether it be SLN or others (satisfaction of the needs of multinationals to the detriment of those of the resident population).
   - In the conviction of the conservation of nature, of our heritage, preservation of a natural site, we invite you to sign this petition.
   - For the deposit of the petitions and the claims file, we will meet 10 April at 13:00 at the Koné Town Hall. Organization of the steps to take in order to address the parties concerned.
1) Subdivision [representatives of the French state].
2) Northern Province.
3) FLNKS Policy-Making Committee.

Their leader, Antoine Cano Poady, later explained that their reasons for opposing the mining project had included both the fact that the massif was a cultural heritage and that local drinking water came from the mountain tops. Moreover, he had witnessed pollution at other mining sites, which had convinced him that there must be a better way of earning money, such as through tourism or the planting of orchards. His group was opposed to multinationals; as they saw it, such companies’ operations were on a large scale and so their pollution would be as well (June 2001, Baco). Another of the petition’s organizers affirmed that multinationals were interested only in profits and, when the nickel was exhausted, would leave the villagers with a scarred and polluted landscape (Édouard Ounémoa, August 2001, Baco).

Antoine explained that he had felt especially comfortable speaking out because he had taken an active role in the pro-independence ‘Events’ of the 1980s and was used to acting on his beliefs. However, he emphasized that his project was apolitical. He had tried to interest younger people in his struggle because they were aware of environmental problems and had not yet been corrupted like the local politicians, who had criticized the project only until they realized they could profit from it. He felt that his group could be more sincere because ‘we are a bit on the fringe’ (June 2001, Baco).

Similarly, Édouard Ounémoa was a member of the Palika party and a former independence activist. Nonetheless, he is quoted in *Le Quotidien* of 15 April 1997 as saying that their aim had been to ‘sound the alarm for the protection of the environment as a whole, as unaffiliated individuals, outside of our respective political structures’ (in Ravat 1997).

They had aimed for 500 signatures but obtained only 160, mostly from Baco and Bopope. According to *Le Quotidien*, the creators of the petition were disappointed by the fact that very few people had attended the 10 April meeting, yet they remained optimistic. The article quotes Antoine Poady as saying, ‘People have signed; for them that’s enough. Now, they are going to wait and see what will happen.’ Like their neighbours at Oundjo, who hoped for assistance from the NGO Corail vivant, Antoine and Édouard planned to work with another environmental NGO, Action biosphère, as well as with representatives of the Green Party, because these groups could offer their technical knowledge and skills.
At Oundjo, some predicted that if the mine and refinery proved to be terribly polluting, the villagers would rise up in anger. They proved their point by recalling past instances of forceful opposition to outsiders’ disrespect. One 25-year-old woman referred to an incident a few years previously in which, furious that the cars passing through the village did not respect the speed limit,20 young people had barricaded the highway and thrown stones at speeding cars (Georgette Nyai Tchaounyane, September 2001, Oundjo). A member of the Vujo clan warned that SMSP would likely pay dearly for their decision to negotiate only with the Caunyan clan. Remarking that young people were rebellious and did not heed their parents’ injunctions to remain calm, he wondered whether, in a few years, his children might express their anger at having been excluded from the negotiation process (Bea Voudjo, October 2001, Oundjo). Young people were not the only ones capable of taking action, however; Bwahnu Wabealo, at 59 years of age, declared that he and his fellow villagers would set up road blocks if the mining company did not listen to them (October 2001, Oundjo).

Oundjo villagers had already proven their readiness to oppose mining activities. Between 1957 and 1960, petit chef Bom Fouange had vigorously demanded protection of the village’s drinking water supply and recognition of their land rights (see Appendix 3). Recalling that time more than four decades later, the president of Oundjo’s Council of Elders regretted that the villagers no longer took such decisive action, instead only holding meetings that had no concrete results (Henri Cip Kahmente, October 2001, Oundjo). However, according to Bwahnu, who had signed a 1960 petition against the mining activity, the villagers had soon halted their protests in return for employment at the mine. He recounted that he himself, an adolescent at the time, had single-handedly stopped the mining trucks by threatening the drivers. This action had caused him to be severely reprimanded by Bom, whom he suspected of having made deals with the entrepreneurs. In any case, the mining operation had soon failed due to a sudden decline in the international demand for nickel (Bwahnu Wabealo, October 2001, Oundjo). Clearly, although petit chef François Tchaounyane was not nearly as well-respected and authoritarian as people remember his grandfather Bom as being, there is a considerable degree of overlap in the issues facing villagers in 1960 and in 2001. In

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20 The RT1, the main highway along the west coast, cuts through the middle of Oundjo. The speed limit is officially 70 km/h for the stretch that passes through the village, making a sharp turn, but vehicles rarely respect this.
both cases, Oundjo residents were concerned to ensure that the mining activity neither destroy their natural resources nor take place without their explicit consent.
In addition to the concrete, material sources of livelihood offered – or threatened – by the Koniambo Project, as discussed in the previous chapters, other, more abstract resources were at stake. These resources were based on people’s relationships to local ancestral spirits, and included cultural identity and freedom from metaphysical dangers. As demonstrated above (Section 1.4.5.), natural resource exploitation projects may spark fears of punishment from ancestors for the infringement of taboos. However, the conflicts concerning such dangers often centre around the knowledge and authority necessary to decide what activities are and are not permissible at certain sites. Arguments about taboos may also be used to further the socio-political agendas of persons or groups. Similarly, Voh-Koné area villagers’ statements and actions regarding dangers from spirits or taboo places were strongly influenced by their expectations of the project’s ability to strengthen or weaken their social status, as determined by their genealogies and proven by their relationships to their ancestors.

8.1. Dangers in an era of ‘progress’

As with local ecosystems (see Chapter 7), people’s concerns about the potential reactions of spirits were fundamentally humanist, revolving around the hazards for people that the ancestors’ anger might create. In New Caledonia, disrespect of a taboo
can result in illness, accidents, or natural disasters which often affect not the individual concerned but another family member or even his entire group of relatives (cf. Salomon 2000: 98-102). In the Voh-Koné area many Kanak, both young and old, unequivocally expressed anxiety regarding taboo places. While younger people would sometimes disparage belief in spiritual beings per se, and were ignorant of the oral histories that explained the significance of particular sites, they still feared these taboo places. They often explained that they were obliged to believe because they had personally witnessed evidence of the sites’ danger. Meanwhile, mountain tops were the domain of ancestral spirits. These spirits were considered to be potentially dangerous because, if angered or bewildered by unfamiliar activity, they could cause workers on the massif to become ill or have accidents.21

Some people, despite their support of the mining project, worried that if the activities unearthed ancestors’ skeletons, or if the spirits’ peace were disturbed by the sound of machinery, these beings would be awakened and, in anger, would harm those who had bothered them.22 A 19-year-old resident of Oundjo believed that workers had to start their engines as quietly as possible to avoid waking the spirits (José Ujie Kahmene, September 2001, Oundjo). Many also expressed the opinion that such dangers were now even more serious because the ritual knowledge concerning these sites had been lost. For instance, when I asked if it were possible to move a taboo site, the head of one of the customary landowner clans of the massif replied, ’In the past, yes, because they do that with their remedies, their medicines, to remove places like that, move them. But us, no. We can’t’ (Félix Yeiwene Foawy, April 2000, Tiéta). Similarly, many people mentioned that the elders had neglected to transmit to present-day generations the knowledge for curing sicknesses contracted from visiting taboo sites. A senior member of one of the customary landowner clans of the massif explained that taboo places must now be approached with extreme caution:

It’s OK for our elders because they can enter taboo places. Because they have perhaps the power or perhaps the medicines to enter places like that. But us, no. We’ve lost everything. (Samuel Aouta, May 2000, Koniambo)

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21 In Melanesia, most events are believed to be caused by the agency of individual actors, whether human or spiritual, and thus are rarely considered to be true accidents. Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart (2000) discuss manifestations of this belief in the Highlands of New Guinea.
According to a 36-year-old man who worked for the mining company, it was always a risk to venture to the tops of the mountains. ‘The elders are dead, we don’t know if they left medicines, if they did sorcery up there; that’s why it’s dangerous to go up there’ (Jacob Janan Couthy, February 2000, Voh).

Most people stated that the ones to suffer from the demolition of taboo places would be those actually performing the destructive actions. Some maintained that people of European origins would not be subject to such punishments, while others believed that everyone would be equally at risk. However, a few supposed that if the customary landowner clans gave permission for the activities to take place, they themselves would be the ones to experience the consequences. Boé Pauoueta, the president of the Ouengo Council of Elders, a man in his fifties, explained the situation:

Someone who breaks a taboo, if he goes in a taboo place without knowing it, then that’s not his fault and the taboo won’t… the place is not taboo. But if the same guy, he knows that it’s a taboo place, and he goes anyway, something unfortunate might happen to him, but to he who believes. But the owner isn’t affected. Otherwise, if the place is taboo and the people need to exploit something that is inside, if they ask authorization from the clan concerned or from the person concerned, and if the person says yes, and then if the spirits don’t agree, it’s the person or the clan concerned who is affected, who catches the curse. (May 2000, Voh)

These sites were believed to be gradually becoming less dangerous, due to an increase in the numbers of automobiles, airplanes, and other noisy machinery that disturbed the ancestors’ previously peaceful surroundings, causing them to seek refuge in places ever farther from human habitation.23 People also often mentioned the loss of forest cover from bush fires and cattle ranching as another factor contributing to the spirits’ departure. At Oundjo, Henri Kahmene mentioned that because ‘nature is changing’ as the forest was gradually being burned down, his ancestral spirit Xamen had not often been sighted in the last ten to twenty years (July 2001, Oundjo). Similarly, the village deacon expressed the opinion that the destruction of forested areas on Pinjen by colonists’ cattle had removed the mystery provided by a thick cover of vegetation and had thus already eliminated the frightening aspect of some taboo places.

23 Similar beliefs apparently obtain in Papua New Guinea, as described by Dan Jorgensen (1998: 105).
When [the cattle] comes and goes, that makes it so the place is no longer... it’s travelable. Because when a forest is not inhabited or is not gone through, we don’t cross it, you don’t even have a path. It’s bushy, it’s frightening to see. But when the cattle arrived, you don’t have any secret places, eh? All the places can be penetrated. Yes, it changes. Personally, I find that it changes. (Raymond Hauli Diela, April 2000, Oundjo)

It is interesting to note that Raymond did not say that the spiritual power of the sites had been neutralized. Rather, the psychological impact of these places was being eradicated by altering their appearance, stripping them of their dark forest screen. Christianity was another force that was gradually eliminating dangers from spirits based at taboo sites, as Boé explained:

It’s true, there are demons. [...] But all you have to do is simply not believe any more. Me, I became a Christian, I abandoned those adorations. Me, now, a taboo place, if I am told to go there, I won’t go to play the wise guy. But if it’s really necessary to go to get something important, I can go there. [...] Because of progress, you have to abandon. [...] We’ll have to manage to convince people. (May 2000, Voh)

Thus, these spirits had not disappeared; however, not ‘believing’ in them (which evidently meant not worshipping them) was a way to accept ‘progress’ and to integrate taboo places into natural resource exploitation projects.²⁴

For the time being, however, these areas still possessed a mysterious yet perceptible force,²⁵ as described by 65-year-old Henri Kahmene.

You go by all the time, the noise of the trucks, the noise of the engines at work, afterwards in three years or four years it will be OK. But for the moment, [...] in places like that where our ancestors lived before, it does something to us. We feel something. You don’t feel but us, we feel because we know the history of those places. It’s not that we see something, it’s not that we see the devils²⁶. It’s just a feeling. We know that someone is there. (July 2001, Oundjo)

²⁴ Similarly, Joel Robbins states that, among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, ‘a willingness to break taboos enforced by vengeful spirits is a sign of Christian faith’ even if ‘the spirits sometimes get their due, particularly when important taboos are broken’ (1995: 218).
²⁵ Christina Toren (1995: 171) discusses similar beliefs in Fiji.
²⁶ The French word diable (devil) – or, alternatively, dieu (god) – is sometimes used as a generic term for any spiritual being (cf. Leblic 2000b).
According to this analysis, the presence of spirits was a quality of the landscape that would provoke an emotional response in the observer, rather than being merely a factual feature of the surroundings.

All agreed that ancestral spirits were potentially dangerous; the implications of this danger, however, were open to interpretation. As will be demonstrated in later sections of this chapter, in the specific social and political contexts of various communities around the massif, the placements of taboo sites\(^{27}\) and the dangers from the spirits associated with these sites or with the mountaintops were conceptualized and articulated differently by different individuals with particular social positions. In other words, as Dan Jorgensen (1998, 2002) observed in a Telefolmin community in Papua New Guinea, people’s hopes and fears about mining were translated into visions of and stories about spirits.

8.2. Markers of cultural identity

Although nearly everyone to whom I spoke, young and old, concurred that taboo places could be dangerous if not respected, most believed that the areas, small in size, could be easily avoided. Taboo sites had another, greater significance, however: Their presence in the landscape served as proof of particular clans’ histories. With the advent of the Koniambo Project, therefore, knowledge concerning these sites became a micropolitical resource and thus an object of contention among local clans.

8.2.1. First-occupant clans’ relationships to local places

The first-occupant clans of an area have a privileged relationship to the local landscape. First, only these clans possess full knowledge of the placement of taboo sites. Therefore, members of other clans do not dare to go into the forest unaccompanied. Furthermore, the resident spirits, who are usually the first-occupant clans’ ancestors, recognize their descendants and allow them to pass through taboo places.

\(^{27}\) In Bwatoo and Haveke, these sites are called *xape thiitake*. The word *thiitake* literally means ‘prohibited’, although it is also used to translate ‘sacred’ in the context of Christianity; church is called *mwa thiitake* (literally, ‘sacred house’) and Sunday is known as *vwa thiitake* (literally, ‘doing sacred’).
places unharmed. As the head of a first-occupant clan at Tiéta explained, these ancestors will be suspicious of any outsider who enters their zone, and may cause the intruder to become lost until daylight, or worse.

We, the landowners here, when you go and you see that, you speak, you say, ‘Hey, let me pass through.’ But the guy that they don’t know, he’ll wander there until daylight. [...] They know us. But a guy who goes by, they say, ‘What’s he doing here? This is not his place here.’ (Félix Yeiwene Foawy, April 2000, Tiéta)

Another elderly member of a first-occupant clan at Oundjo described how in the past, when his family needed a natural resource such as fish, they would perform a customary gesture with their founding ancestors: two sisters who, as spirits, were present at three sites in the local landscape. He explained that only members of his family could perform this act.

Our family has to be the ones who do it, it’s not just anyone. Because the ancestors, if you go, they’ll say, ‘I don’t know you.’ And you’ll come back with maybe one arm, or two arms, or three arms [laughter]. Yes, they’ll get angry, ‘Hey, we don’t know you!’ (Pwa Millot Kahmene, February 2000, Oundjo)

First-occupant clans have particular responsibilities regarding the environment, and are the only ones who possess the spiritual power to enforce this authority. By invoking their ancestors, members of these clans can punish outsiders who display disrespectful behaviour, as Raymond Diela explained.

There is indeed the strength of the spoken word. They aren’t ill, but they have dreams, nightmares. The persons concerned [members of the first-occupant clans]. That’s what the strength is. For example, someone who goes swimming in the Confiance [a local river] and I arrive, and I see people who are littering, I scold them. For example, if I start a speech, eh? I ask Nature to finish and… you see, it’s sort of that. But I insist that it’s the strength of the spoken word of the person concerned. It’s not just anyone. We intervene, we tell them that you mustn’t do this or that, but to invoke the spirits, demand the presence of the spirits, that’s not humane. We have the power, but…. (May 2000, Oundjo)

A deacon in the local church, Raymond later expressed the view that Christians should not ‘believe’ in the power of taboo sites, so that if they saw evidence of a supernatural presence, they should not alter their behaviour accordingly. However,
even if such places were no longer to be feared \textit{per se}, he insisted that the sites must still be respected out of consideration for the clans that owned them.

You have to put things into perspective; it’s the respect of a clan’s place, of a taboo. Perhaps I interpret in my own way, but the taboo, for me it has a greater definition, which comes from the word ‘respect’. You still have that spirit of respect within yourself. You respect the taboo because it’s a place formerly inhabited by a clan. You have to respect that clan. (August 2001, Oundjo)

Thus, in many cases, respect for taboo places reflected less a fear of punishment from spirits than a desire to maintain a sense of respect for one’s predecessors. Showing such respect could form an important part of people’s cultural identity (see Section 3.4.4.; cf. Horowitz 2001b). For example, a man from Témala in his mid-40s, who had become the head of a small enterprise, explained his interpretation of the significance of taboo sites.

My thing is, I say be careful because it’s sort of all that that is my heritage, what I inherit from my elders, from my predecessors. I figure, well, be careful because this place is taboo. […] Even me, if personally, I don’t see what my great-great-grandfather was able to see in his time, I don’t see why, but I try to preserve. Even if the meaning of things escapes me, I try to preserve, that’s all, because my father told me one day that it has to be preserved and his father told him, and so on. […] If we stop believing in all that, well it’s all over, eh? No use saying ‘I’m a Kanak’. That’s sort of the characteristic of the Kanak. It was believing in all that. (Auguste Fouagne, June 2000, Nouméa)

8.2.2. Knowledge of taboo places as a micropolitical stake

In addition to a pan-Kanak solidarity, people have much more localized identities, referring to much smaller social groups. Thus, the significance of taboo sites was not merely cultural but also, and fundamentally, micropolitical since membership of a first-occupant clan, as proven by the history inscribed in the landscape, implies social prestige (see Section 3.2.1.). Not surprisingly, therefore, people disagreed as to the precise location of these taboo sites. Like the Duna people of Lake Kopiago, Papua New Guinea, as described by Gabriele Stürzenhofecker (1994: 27), Voh-Koné area villagers were ‘reinterpreting their landscape in a way that both conforms to their desires for development and locates ultimate ownership of the resources involved within their own sphere.’ In other words, beliefs about taboo places did not entail a rejection
of all mining activity but, rather, required miners to be careful in certain precise areas. Meanwhile, knowledge concerning these particular places became a micropolitical stake during Falconbridge’s baseline studies.

As explained in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2.), part of my research for the ‘Landscape Heritage’ study included locating, photographing, and mapping as many taboo sites as possible. Although knowledge of the precise location of such places is proof of customary landownership and thus is often kept secret by a select few, and I was later told that I had been the first person of European origins to visit the sites, I met with almost no resistance from those whom I approached. On the contrary, they expressed approval of Falconbridge’s intentions to avoid the dangers involved in destroying such places. However, the late CEO of SMSP, himself a Kanak, believed that another reason was involved in people’s willingness to reveal their taboo sites. According to him, self-proclaimed customary authorities hoped to manoeuvre themselves into a position of ‘privileged representatives’ in order to obtain a ‘parcel of power’ by presenting themselves as the possessors of these sites. Other community members’ recognition of the sites as taboo would allow the knowledgeable individuals to claim the position of ‘landowners’ with its associated high social status (Raphaël Pidjot, March 2000, Nouméa). Indeed, various people, some of whom had chosen at the time not to provide me with information, later told me that the map contained errors or even that it was ‘all wrong’. On one occasion, two people maintained that their rival, Raymond Diela, with whom I had worked extensively at the time, had invented some of the taboo sites indicated on the map and neglected to mention others (Saï Poadataba and Édouard Gounéboadjane, October 2001, Oundjо).

Clearly, the locations and hazards of taboo places were strategically invoked as a means of supporting particular discursive positions in relation to various features and aspects of the mining project. As defined by Chris Gregory (1997: 117), a deity ‘is not some abstract transcendental being but, rather, a concrete political manifestation of the relations of human reproduction.’ Simply put, beliefs about spirits both reflect and, in turn, become stakes and tools within, local politics. As with material benefits and natural resources, the conflicts did not centre solely around the object at hand (in this case, dangers from spirits) but, instead, were fundamentally concerned with human relationships.
8.3. Taboo places at Pinjen

People’s concerns about the existence of taboo places on Pinjen reflected their anxieties about losing control over the land. Opponents of the construction of the refinery on the peninsula feared that if the bulldozers ran over such sites, the workers could have accidents or become sick. Several people mentioned that after a few years, these places would no longer present any dangers because the spirits would eventually be chased away by the noise and commotion of the construction of the refinery (see Section 8.1.). However, the president of the Council of Elders explained that until all the spirits had left, the taboo sites would remain powerful.

Pinjen? For now it’s dangerous. Not dangerous, but... something that will happen, we’ll know it was that. Something that we went too far, we didn’t respect those places, the places of our ancestors. (Henri Cip Kahmene, July 2001, Oundjo)

A 51-year-old man who opposed the construction of the refinery on Pinjen felt that the clans occupying the peninsula would be in trouble because they might not know the locations of the taboo sites (Jules Josaia Diela, July 2001, Oundjo). Another senior man, also an opponent of the construction on that peninsula, was concerned that people who bulldozed the taboo places might become ill and no-one would be able to cure them as this knowledge had been lost (Noël Pwahmo Wabealo, August 2001, Oundjo). Another member of the Wabealo clan, similarly opposed to the choice of Pinjen as a construction site, explained that familiarity with the location of taboo areas was diminishing as people spent less and less time in uninhabited areas: ‘We don’t walk like our predecessors did in the forest so it’s hard to know where the places are’ (Bwahnu Wabealo, February 2000, Oundjo).

André Diela, who both had customary rights to part of Pinjen and was a member of the cooperative (GIE) GEO6, was concerned that some of his clan’s taboo sites might already have been bulldozed when Falconbridge had built roads on the peninsula as part of their prospecting activities, but did not dare to investigate because of the presence of the villagers who were occupying the area. He also referred to the ceremony performed in 1989, when the Rural and Land Development Agency, ADRAF, had granted the peninsula to the GIE. At that time, the customary landowners had explained to their ancestors that they were transferring responsibility for the lands to the cooperative, and
had asked the spirits to pardon them for this uncustomary act. André believed that this rite could not be repeated without seeming ridiculous.

If they come tell us that we have to build the refinery, what are we going to say, we’re going to redo a second ceremony? It’s difficult because forgiveness, it’s OK one time. But two, three times, it’s not believable. It’s beyond our customary domain. It goes beyond everything. […] It’s as though we’re making fun of people. (July 2001, Oundjo)

The supporters of the construction of the refinery on Pinjen agreed that the ancestral spirits were still powerful at certain places. However, they were convinced that few such places existed on the peninsula and that the necessary steps had been taken to ensure that those sites would not be destroyed. Several people referred to the study that my colleague and I, as consultants, had conducted for Falconbridge in 2000, in which we had photographed and mapped the sacred sites of the massif and the surrounding area (see Section 2.2.).

Nonetheless, both supporters and opponents of the construction of the refinery on Pinjen worried about the potential hazards of spirits’ involvement in the intracommunity conflicts created by the mining project. One source of concern was the danger involved in openly disagreeing with one’s maternal uncles, a kinship category that is highly respected throughout New Caledonia. Disrespect of these uncles, whose benevolence plays a major role in the physical and social well-being of their nephews, is believed inevitably to cause misfortune (Salomon 2000: 15, 73). As Raymond Diela explained, if someone became angry and inadvertently cursed his sister’s son, the latter could become sick, have an accident, or even die (August 2001, Oundjo). A 23-year-old man who was occupying Pinjen affirmed that he could not refuse to do what his maternal uncles, the petit chef and his brothers, requested of him (Steeve Wewe Tchaounyane, July 2001, Pinjen). Raymond’s son André, whose mother (Raymond’s

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28 Some Falconbridge employees, on the other hand, displayed a lack of concern about the placement of these sites; two of them assured my colleagues and me that they had already spoken with ’the elders’ who had shown them one taboo place, and that therefore they had all the necessary information (February 2000, Koné). In July 2001, I visited Pinjen with a Falconbridge employee who took me to see the prospecting activities that were taking place. I spoke with a few supervisors from the sub-contracting companies, who expressed interest in the fact that my colleague and I had drawn a map of the taboo places, a fact of which they had not previously been aware, and expressed curiosity as to whether there were any such sites where they were working.

29 In the extreme north of New Caledonia, maternal kin are known as hwan-hiri, which signifies ‘sacred entrance’. Similarly, the terms used to address maternal uncles on all three Loyalty Islands derive from the word hmi, which means ‘sacred’ (Ozanne-Rivierre 2000: 76).
wife) was originally from the Vabealo clan, stated that he respected his maternal uncles greatly and thus could not take the opposite side in the current conflict (July 2001, Oundjo). Raymond was convinced that this respect was the real reason that his sons, and certain other members of his clan, publicly opposed the refinery construction.

I’m sure that they’re game, but they can’t say exactly what they have… for fear that if they say that they’re against their maternal uncles, to some degree they will be cursed, if the uncles see something in their heart. (August 2001, Oundjo)

One woman feared that in the disagreement over Pinjen, each side would call upon its ancestral spirits for support by visiting the cemetery and speaking to recently-departed family members. A born-again Christian who had personally rejected such acts of sorcery, she worried that this conflict would degenerate into a war of ‘spirits vs. spirits’ (Alice Kaleine Kahmene, October 2001, Oundjo).

Alice’s sister-in-law Roda Kahmene (who was unmarried and thus still fully a member of the Xahmen clan; see Section 7.5.1.), also a born-again Christian, was certain that the refinery would never be built on Pinjen. She and other members of her religious group had experienced visions that demonstrated that the customary landowner clans’ spirits were creating conflicts amongst the clan members and thus preventing the project from going ahead. Seeing this, God had decided that the clans would first have to be reconciled before the project could proceed. As He was the only one who could destroy the clans’ ‘gods’, who were causing the disagreements, the clan members would have had to turn to Him in order for the project to be made possible. Moreover, she reported a vision that the ancestors of the clans at Pinjen were preventing my research, which she saw as connected to the situation there, from being a success.

We had a vision that you are seated in a tunnel. They [i.e. the spirits] are above. […] You are seated with your notebook, writing, but it’s because of the deadlock situation, it’s those who have their lands over there. The problem is them with their gods. […] We can’t talk to them [i.e. the spirits] because they are nasty. It’s better to abandon them, the way we have abandoned them; that means that we come to Jesus Christ. Because [the clans at Pinjen], when they don’t abandon them [i.e. the spirits], they are the ones who always prevent them [i.e. the clans], [causing them] to argue amongst themselves. […] You are below, doing paperwork, but you get nowhere, because their spirits are all around. (October 2001, Oundjo)

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In contrast, at Vwavuto, where her clan had customary land rights, the families concerned had quickly come to an agreement; this was a sign that God wanted the refinery to be built there. Like Boé Pauoueta (see Section 8.1.), Roda was convinced that all that was necessary in order to benefit from mining projects or other aspects of economic development was to renounce old spiritual beliefs and turn to Christianity. Just as Western economic structures offered a material standard of living far beyond pre-colonial economies, ancestral spirits were no match for the power of the Christian God. Roda and Boé perhaps did not explicitly make this particular comparison; however, the nexus between economics and religion was clear to them: To ‘abandon’ the ‘gods’ was to remove the obstacles (their taboo sites and constant bickering) that they posed. Thus, to accept Christianity was implicitly to open the possibility of economic development. Roda used the evidence of the failure of the clans at Pinjen to have the refinery built on their land as evidence that such development was impossible without true religious conviction as expressed through born-again fundamentalism. As a reward for her clan’s faith, God had decided that the refinery should be built on that clan’s lands at Vwavuto.

The modes of ascension within the social hierarchy thus remained the same: demonstration of connections to and control over land. The specific paths to that achievement, however, had changed as new relationships with external institutions and ideologies had been forged. As shown in Chapter 5, one way for clans to acquire status was through the mining company’s official recognition of them as landowners. As Roda and Boé saw it, the mining activities and associated development could only be realized via the acceptance of an originally exogenous (although thoroughly indigenized) belief system, Christianity, which would allow the faithful to overcome ‘nasty’ spirits and thus to control the use of the land.

**8.4. Hazards at Vwavuto**

However, Roda later had visions about Vwavuto. In November 2001, God contacted her to warn that the spirits of Mormons (who, she explained, wore long robes and covered their heads with a cap that revealed only their eyes; she had seen them in old movies) were present at a site on Vwavuto. These spirits, whom she suspected
might be working with people who still called upon their invisible elders and worshipped idols, wanted to block the construction of the refinery. Thanking God for this sign, she walked to the site and prayed energetically, at which point God burned the spirits into oblivion (November 2001, Oundjo).

Other than this particular person, few of the Oundjo residents with whom I spoke were concerned about the dangers from spirits at Vwavuto, Mormon or otherwise. The adjacent area of Traa was known to be the residence of mwaxheny, mischievous dwarves who were the Gwa-Cidopwan’s totem. However, Henri Kahmene, who preferred to see the refinery constructed on Vwavuto, assured me that the peninsula itself was free from these beings and that to his knowledge there were no taboo places there (November 2001, Oundjo). Dipiba Fouange, strongly in favour of the construction of the refinery at Vwavuto, laughed when I asked whether such dangers were important (October 2001, Nouméa). In contrast, his rival, Tone Goa, who had been excluded by Dipiba from discussions, and who opposed construction at this site, affirmed that it could be hazardous to build the refinery there because of the mwaxheny, and because knowledge of the location of taboo areas had not been passed on by the elders (September 2001, Oundjo). Thus, people’s evocations of dangers from non-human creatures or ancestral spirits on the peninsula correlated with their opposition to the construction of the refinery at the site.

8.5. Ancestral presence at Wapan

Although many people at Oundjo worried about possible punishments from spirits if the proper customary procedures were not followed, I rarely heard anyone evoke this concern as a main reason to oppose either work on the massif or the construction of the refinery. At Ouélisse, in contrast, the danger of disturbing the ancestors was one of the primary arguments used in refusing a dam at Wapan. Pierre, the man who represented the villagers in discussions with Falconbridge/SMSP (see Section 4.4.4.), explained that the area contained ancestral burial grounds as well as taboo sites marked by trees or stones. Members of the landowner clans were the only people who would have been able to cure illnesses contracted from accidentally behaving disrespectfully in a taboo place, but they had lost the relevant knowledge. Moreover, the water that would flood the ancient cemeteries would unearth the
ancestors’ spirits, who would then head directly for their descendants to punish them for having disturbed their rest. Pierre, as well as several members of the Wedoy family (who, along with the Kamu, were the customary landowners; see Section 4.4.4.), was certain that such an event would entail the disappearance of the landowner clans. Thus in September 2000, after a series of debates in which the members of other families were allowed to express their opinions, the Council of Elders accepted the customary landowner clans’ decision and sent a letter of refusal to the mining company.

That same year, Pierre (by his own account) refused to allow an archaeology team to visit the site for fear that the researchers would incur misfortune. Later, mining company employees landed their helicopter there without the authorization of the relevant clans. When they returned afterwards to apologize, Pierre accepted their apology but insisted that if they had fallen ill or had an accident, the clans would not have known how to remedy the situation (August 2001, Ouélisse). Georges Bouigou Goa-Bealo, a member of Ouélisse’s Council of Elders, explained that the petit chef, Mepone Wedoy, had made his sons and other influential villagers promise never to allow the dam. Now that Mepone had passed away, they had to keep their word or the clan would be punished through accidents or other misfortune (November 2001, Ouélisse).

All the villagers felt obliged to respect the landowner clans’ decision, but not all agreed that a categorical refusal was necessary. Émile Tein-Boanou, the president of Ouélisse’s Council of Elders, stated that during the intravillage debates, he had argued that there were rituals that could be performed in order to displace the taboo sites. Moreover, he pointed out that the villagers were all Christians, and their religion taught that such beliefs and practices concerning ancestral spirits were ‘the works of Satan.’ In addition, modern science had proven that humans themselves were the ones who created strange phenomena, through their own beliefs. Compromises would be necessary, both on the part of the villagers and the mining company; however, he felt that the dam project had much to offer in terms of economic development, and that it would be ‘more beneficial than those things [i.e. the preservation of taboo sites]’ (Émile Boanou Tein-Boanou, November 2001, Ouélisse). Like the Kachituños of Bolivia described by Libbet Crandon-Malamud (1991: 11), Émile was resorting to a range of ‘conflicting ideologies’ in order to explain his support for the dam. However, there may have been other reasons behind his interests in the benefits he believed it would bring, and his lack of concerns about its potential costs.
It is perhaps no coincidence that Émile’s parents were from the nearby village of Ouengo, where he was raised, and where – rather than at Ouélisse or Wapan – he had land rights. As Georges Goa-Bealo maintained, the ‘further’ that families were from the petit chef (that is, the more recent their arrival at the village), the greater their tendency to support the construction of the dam (November 2001, Ouélisse). Thus, as at Oundjo, people’s actions and discourses relating to ancestral punishments linked to the mining project depended directly on their expectations of the implications of the project for their own control over the land. However, micropolitical logic led the customary landowners at Ouélisse to take a different stance vis-à-vis Falconbridge than that of their counterparts at Oundjo. The customary landowners of Pinjen had nothing to lose (since the GIE had effectively taken control of the functional aspect of the peninsula) and everything to gain (recognition from the mining company and regain of control over the land) if the construction of the refinery were to proceed. For the customary landowners of Wapan, on the other hand, the dam would mean a permanent loss of the land they had recently successfully reclaimed (see Section 4.4.4.). They would experience not only ‘the excision of a fundamental ground of human relationality’ (Weiner 2001: 10) but the elimination of the entire basis of their social position within the local community, as well as the material symbol of the recovery of their dignity through a successful struggle against a colonial legacy of violent land spoliation. In contrast, those with no land rights to lose at Wapan stood to benefit from the increased water supplies and employment possibilities offered by the dam.

8.6. Spirits on the massif

Just as taboo sites became micropolitical stakes, so did the presence of spirits on the massif. Many people from the villages in the Voh-Koné area reported that mysterious beings, often in the form of silent old men, had been seen by workers on the mountains. These beings resembled relatives who had passed away, and thus were assumed to be ancestral spirits. Félix Foawy, the head of a customary landowner clan at Tiéta, described what he had heard: ‘They said that it’s an old man, thin and black with a long beard; we have elders like that who have died’ (May 2000, Tiéta). He later explained that in the pre-colonial era, warriors would climb to the tops of mountains to watch for enemies; also, people were sometimes buried there. For those reasons, their
spirits remained on the mountain tops (October 2001, Tiéta). Additionally, uninhabited spaces such as the sea, the forest, and mountain tops are associated with the spirit world (cf. Leblic n.d.), and thus the massif was inherently imbued with a supernatural quality. Depending on people’s expectations from the mining project, reactions to these apparitions were varied. Many used this evidence of the spirits’ uneasiness both to define and, more importantly, to support their micropolitical discursive positions.

8.6.1. Messages from the ancestors?

At Oundjo, people who trusted Falconbridge to provide employment opportunities and to cause as little ecological damage as possible – those who also supported the construction of the refinery on Pinjen – were prone not to worry about the spirits’ emergence. Albert Wenei Tchaounyane, a retired policeman who supported the Koniambo project ‘100%’, was not concerned about these visions. He reported that his son, who worked on the massif, had found an old bearded man on the mountain tops; however, he was certain that if the workers did not disturb these apparitions, there would be no problem. They could simply greet the spirits and continue on their way. He half-jokingly wondered whether outsiders might have more problems, since at the time when the ancestors were alive, Kanak didn’t much like white people (July 2001, Oundjo). The son in question stated that his colleagues, not he, had recounted having seen these spirits, but only at the beginning of their work on the mountain (Thierry Tea Tchaounyane, October 2001, Oundjo). Another young man, 26-year-old Hervé Fouange who drove a truck for Falconbridge on a contractual basis, also reported that these old men had been witnessed only at the beginning of the prospecting activity. He speculated that the presence of humans and machinery had frightened the ancestors away (October 2001, Oundjo).

Others, more mistrustful of Falconbridge’s promises, believed that the sightings of the spirits demonstrated that people had entered places they should have avoided. One 59-year-old man believed that these visions were an indication that Falconbridge had not kept its word and had ‘dug in any old place’ (Bwahnu Wabealo, July 2001, Oundjo). Many other local residents were concerned that Falconbridge employees might have made errors of judgement in some instances, provoking the ancestral spirits to express their anger in potentially dangerous ways.
Two years in a row after the beginning of exploratory activities on the Koniambo Massif, the Voh-Koné area experienced record levels of precipitation. Falconbridge officials pointed to this fact as proof that the weather, rather than their prospecting activities, was responsible for the muddy rivers that people had observed (see Section 7.4.). Villagers did not necessarily disagree that excessive rains were the primary cause of the pollution. However, their explanations of this precipitation differed from those of mining company representatives. Many speculated that spirits were behind these unusual weather patterns. For instance, the senior member of a customary landowner clan wondered whether the excessive rains were due to ancestors’ annoyance (Kowi Poangone, February 2000, Tiéta). Others were convinced that, indeed, the weather was a warning. Jules Josaia Diela, a 51-year-old member of a clan that claimed customary landownership of part of the massif, recounted that sometimes, while machines were constructing roads on the mountains, suddenly clouds would appear and rain would fall as a sign that the workers had hit something they should not have touched: ‘That means you stepped where you weren’t supposed to step’ (July 2001, Oundjo).

Even within the community, however, there was a diversity of explanations for the ultimate reasons behind the ancestors’ negative response. These understandings reflected individual assumptions, backgrounds, and social positions. Félix Foawy, the head of the Fwawi, believed that the rains were a sign that the customary landowners had not been adequately respected. He pointed out that his clan’s totems, mwaxheny (mischievous dwarves) and xhwaala (thunder), could control the weather. Angry that the mining company had not consulted the customary landowner clans at every step, they were demonstrating their discontentment.

Our elders, they didn’t want, they are not happy about that, that’s why they make it rain all the time on purpose so that the guys don’t work. […] But as soon as you ask forgiveness, do a thing like that, that’s it. (October 2001, Tiéta)

In contrast, Hervé Fouange had no claims to ownership of the massif. He reported that his colleagues had noticed that whenever they tried to enter a certain area on the mountain range there was a slight drizzle, just enough to prevent them from working. Like his fellow villagers, he mused that this might be a sign from the ancestors. However, he attributed an aesthetic rather than political sensibility to the spirits: ‘Maybe it’s the ancestors, they don’t want the mountain to be touched. […] Because nature’s
going to be destroyed. [...] Maybe that’s it, the ancestors don’t want the trees to be destroyed, it’s pretty’ (October 2001, Oundjo).

The spirits manifested themselves to humans through various other signs as well. Jules Diela had heard that the mine employees often saw an old white miner, dirty with the red soil typical of the mountain tops. On their way to or from the massif, the workers would often cross paths with this miner who, as is characteristic of spirits, did everything backwards, descending the mountain in the mornings and ascending in the evenings. Jules also reported that a young man had been digging with a bulldozer when he hit a blue rock that would not move. When he walked around the rock, he discovered a lizard. Fearing that if he continued he could be punished with insanity, the worker halted his efforts to displace the stone. According to Jules, both the white miner and the lizard were manifestations of the landowner clans’ totem, the lizard, which had appeared as a warning signal (July 2001, Oundjo). As Jules’s brother Raymond emphasized, the landowner clans’ power was limited by the fact that they were only representatives of the true landowners, their totems. Unusual sights on the mountain tops served as a reminder of the authority and superior power of these spiritual beings.

It’s a nephew who was working up there. He saw on a stone, engraved, a lion’s head. So I told him, ‘Tell people not to touch it; if they have to make a road, let them go around.’ [...] We can boast of being landowners, but without… Because the great landowner of the place up there, of which we are a part, is xhwaala. Xhwaala is thunder. (Raymond Hauli Diela, February 2000, Oundjo)

Nonetheless, by pointing out that these spirits were their ancestors, customary landowner clans emphasized the fact that they themselves had a special role to play. They referred to visions of ancestral spirits on the mountain tops as evidence of the dangers of not consulting them.31

31 Similarly, Lisa Gezon (1999: 63-64) describes the ways in which the ruler of a community in northern Madagascar used spiritual beliefs to legitimate his own power (see Section 1.4.5.). In his case, the strategy appears to have succeeded in obliging politicians and entrepreneurs to recognize his authority.
8.6.2. Informing the ancestors

Indeed, forgetting to respect customary authorities had already had disastrous consequences in the past. Félix Foawy warned that past mining activities that had occurred without the permission of the customary landowner clans had been punished by the ancestral spirits, and that future unauthorized workers would meet a similar fate.

But for example if they have done something without letting us know before, they will never be at peace. They will have accidents; that’s what happened at that time. There are people who went up to work everywhere, but they never came to us before going up there. SMSP and Falconbridge have nothing to do with it, but it’s all those contractors who have come by. Us, the real landowners, they mustn’t go over our heads, because accidents will happen. That’s done by the spirits, it’s not us. But that’s why we always respect. (May 2000, Tiéta)

Thus, visions of spirits on the mountain tops were a cautionary message from the ancestors.

There, they [i.e. the spirits] came out like that to show them that there are things to do. They [i.e. previous miners] must have done things that mustn’t be done. They went up; they acted carelessly, they went up without telling us. That’s why, that’s to tell them, ‘be careful’. It’s like a warning. (May 2000, Tiéta)

As described by Michael Taussig (1980) and June Nash (1993) in their respective studies of Bolivian miners, workers involved in dangerous resource-exploitation often try to prevent disaster by communicating with spiritual beings. They often achieve such communication through ritual forms. Ritual also serves a second purpose: Roy Rappaport theorizes that ‘in all rituals private psychophysical processes are articulated with public orders’; thus, in performing stylized behaviour patterns, an individual transposes ‘his private processes […] into a public liturgical order to grasp the category that he then imposes upon his private processes’ (1979: 188, emphasis removed). In other words, people find modes of expression for their subjective states, and also impose reassuring order and meaning on the flux of both internal and external phenomena affecting their personal lives, through conventional forms of stereotyped actions. Thirdly, ritual can fulfil a political purpose as a reminder of the underlying social order (Leach 1954: 16) or even as a weapon deployed in power struggles (Dirks 1994); in these cases, ‘ritual is a language of signs in terms of which claims to rights
and status are expressed, but it is a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony’ (Leach 1954: 278). In the case of the Koniambo Project, one particular ritual, which this section will describe, served all three of these purposes. It was a means of communication with powerful ancestral spirits, and also helped local customary authorities to regain a sense of control over the changes the mining project was bringing to their lives. Meanwhile, it served as a means for customary authorities to demonstrate their prestigious standing to their fellow community members.

8.6.2.1. Communication through ritual

In 1999, the customary landowner clans of the southern (Koné) end of the massif – the Fwawi, Pwagoon, Auta, Goyeta, Diela, and Gorouna (see Section 4.4.5.) – realized that the mining company’s prospecting activities were disturbing the spirits and causing accidents. They needed to apologize to their ancestors and to explain what was happening on the massif, in order to ensure the workers’ safety. To this end, they performed, at several sites, a ceremony that involved placing packages of cloth and tobacco in a hole in the ground, pronouncing speeches to the ancestors, and then planting columnary pines or kauri trees in the hole. Raymond Diela, who had participated, defined the purpose of this action as ‘to ask nature for the path […] to ask nature to let people work’ (February 2000, Oundjo). He later described what had been said to the ancestors: “We come because we told the people to go up there. If you hear sounds up there, it’s people who are going to work. We gave them permission to go.” That’s what we said.’ (July 2001, Oundjo). The head of the Auta clan described it in greater detail:

This mountain, it belongs to the clans who live around it. They have taboos. They have nephews, nieces, who one day or another will be able to work on the massif or at the base of the massif. So we land-owning clans, we had a meeting, how are we going to prepare the entry of our young people on the massif so that all those young people, they don’t get sick on the massif. For example if they pass by the foot of the massif, even if there are forbidden places like we put on the map\footnote{This refers to the map of the region’s sacred sites which, as consultants, my colleague and I had created for Falconbridge.}, we already asked for authorization to go, in a customary way. So, all my colleagues from land-owning clans of this massif, from Tiéta or from Oundjo, and there is another elder who is at Netchaot – Antoine Goromido. […]
And I proposed the two places, because the first is for the family, me and Fwawi/Pwagoon; it’s at Pwajo because that’s where they lived, and the central post is still standing. And there we do it, but we don’t do it with rice or bananas or taros. Because normally, we do that with yams. Not with any old product. […] So there are the others that we divided up, there is a kauri tree that they took to Tiéta, others they took to Oundjo; they planted up there in the cemeteries. […] Chief of Koniambo [Samuel Kahea] he plants there at his place, and Netchaot he plants over there. […] And each took his turn to speak to the ancestors. We each spoke our language. (Samuel Aouta, May 2000, Koniambo)

This form of communication with the ancestors was a potential source of power over disrespectful outsiders, and not merely in the sense of psychological support ‘at a nearly subconscious level’ (Nash 1993: 168). The head of the Fwawi clan, who resided at Tiéta, described what he had said to the ancestors. While reassuring them that Falconbridge had ritually asked permission to operate on the mountains, he also reminded the spirits to punish any future mining activity that might occur without authorization from the customary landowner clans:

I said, ‘Now people are going to go up on the mine site, it’s also good for our young people; you have to watch out for those people because they came to us before going up there.’ […] I said that, ‘I’m going to do la coutume 33, to protect our young people and to let the others work who have already… but those who go above our heads, who will go without telling us, you will supervise all that.’ (Félix Yeiwene Foawy, May 2000, Tiéta)

Like the Paiam of Papua New Guinea as described by Jerry Jacka (2001a), members of customary landowner clans in the Voh-Koné area were not resisting economic development but rather, through ritual means, asserting that this change must occur on their own terms.

As the only people who could transmit information directly to their ancestors, customary landowners of the Koniambo Massif were able to claim a position as the only group that could ensure the workers’ safety. These clans justified their prerogative to approve or reject the mining project by explaining that the resident ancestral spirits needed to be properly informed of the activities that would occur on the mountain tops. The mayor of Koné, a member of a clan from the Paicl/Cêmuki Customary Region that claimed rights to the massif (see Section 4.4.5.), explained the situation.

33 He is referring to the gifts of cloth, cash and tobacco that were placed in holes in the ground as offerings to the ancestors.
The clans that were there, their spirits are with them. So it’s not another clan next door that’s going to come give authorization because that won’t succeed in protecting the company or the people who are employed up there. […] As long as it’s the clan itself that gives permission, the spirits follow automatically. And that doesn’t follow simply from the spoken word, it’s with the ceremony that must be done. […] We do it less than before, but we do it when we have to. (Joseph Goromido, June 2001, Koné)

8.6.2.2. Influence with the ancestors

In some ways, like the Papua New Guineans at Kurumbukare described by Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi, the villagers in the Voh-Koné area were ‘caught between their desires for wealth and their fear of the ancestors’ and thus strove ‘to bring the ancestors into agreement with their mundane goals’ (1997: 650). However, the ceremony performed at the southern end of the massif also made it clear that the two objectives, economic development and respect of the ancestors, were perfectly compatible – as long as the correct protocol was followed by both the appropriate local customary authorities and the mining company. This action was thus not only an attempt to prevent potential accidents but also a means for the local customary landowner clans to affirm their authority over the massif (cf. Jacka 2001a for a similar example from the Porgera mine in Papua New Guinea). In describing actions performed by Bolivian villagers, June Nash states, ‘Rituals from the pre-conquest can reinforce the identity of a people in such a way as to strengthen their resistance to external domination’ (1993: 126). In the case of the customary landowner clans of the Koniambo Massif, their ceremony’s purpose was similarly to buttress a sense of power based on identity; however, the primary target of this particular action was not resistance to external structures of domination but, rather, reassertion of social status within the community. The ceremony was carried out in private, in the presence of a restricted set of observers, and without informing the mining company. Thus, it was performed directly as a statement to other community members. At the same time, customary authorities used this performance as a means of restoring or bolstering their own confidence through a reaffirmation of their influence with the spirits, which depended on a relationship that other community members did not have.

For the customary landowner clans, their performance of this ceremony thus served a triple purpose, as outlined above, by asserting their authority in three domains.
First, they were able to influence the spirits of their ancestors by providing them with information that would prevent them from causing accidents. Secondly, they implicitly proved to themselves that they had power over exogenous agents of development who failed to respect their authority, since the absence of their performance of such a ceremony would result in accidents. Finally, they demonstrated to their fellow community members that, as the only people who could communicate with their ancestors, they held a very important position.

Nonetheless, their action would not guarantee complete safety. Raymond Diela insisted that careless workers should not assume that they would automatically be protected; people needed to take responsibility for their own actions. ‘It’s too easy to accuse the spirits like that’ (July 2001, Oundjo). However, Samuel Aouta asserted that the fact that the customary authorities had spoken to their ancestors would make it easier for them to cure any supernatural illnesses contracted by workers on the massif.

If there are people who get sick up there, they can’t see just anyone. They must come directly to see the landowner clans of the massif. And what we did, we informed [the spirits] already; if there are cases like that, it will be less difficult for us to cure those who are sick. (May 2000, Koniambo)

Their action thus served as a reminder that in case of such illness, the people affected would need to seek help from the customary landowner clans.

8.6.3. Divergent interests

However, no similar ceremony was performed by the customary landowners of the northern end of the massif, which included the Xuti, Xutapet and Gwa-Cidopwan clans, although the landownership situation was more ambiguous than for the southern end (see Section 4.4.5.). This was an important oversight because each customary area had its own set of ancestral spirits who needed to be addressed separately. As Raymond Diela explained, ‘The customary ceremony that we did has no value for their place’ (February 2000, Oundjo). He claimed that in December 1999, the clans concerned had followed the ‘customary paths’, the same sequence that is implemented during customary ceremonies, in order to request that a similar ceremony be performed at Voh. In other words, Samuel Aouta from Koniambo had given him a ritualised gift known as
*la coutume* (a packet of cloth, cash and tobacco) which he had in turn dispatched to Félix Foawy at Tiéta, who was supposed to transfer it to Jacob Couthy, a member of the Xuti clan. However, the ceremony still had not been performed at Voh. Raymond was concerned that this negligence might lead to misfortune.

They are exploiting up there and they are starting to descend lower, near Voh. There could be accidents; ultimately, we have to do [the ceremony]. It’s to reassure those who work.\(^{34}\) […] One mustn’t remain ignorant of that. We can remain ignorant. But what about the result. If there is no result, if there isn’t someone who gets sick, who goes crazy, it’s OK. You know, you see someone who falls from the truck there… (May 2000, Oundjo)

Samuel Aouta suggested that the fact that the ceremony of addressing the ancestors had not yet been performed at Voh might explain the fact that, according to him, there had been accidents in that area as well as river siltation from soil erosion.

Around Voh, as the others have not done [the ceremony for the ancestors] because perhaps they don’t know, well maybe that’s the reason that trucks always fall or there are always accidents up there. There is always mud [in the rivers] around there. Whereas not here. (May 2000, Koniambo)

Jacob Couthy agreed that the current mineral exploration was upsetting to the ancestors, who expressed themselves through signs such as small footprints. ‘On the massif we are not at home; it’s the spirits’ dwelling. […] We are disturbing them, we have to reassure them’ (May 2000, Voh). However, he was in favour of the mining project, for which he worked on a contractual basis and which would provide employment to the members of his association for local unemployed people. Jacob denied that anyone had approached him with a request to speak to the ancestors; nor, according to him, would it be necessary as a ceremony had already been performed with the mining company at the Voh stadium two years previously (see Section 5.1.). His lack of anxiety concerning the need to communicate with the ancestors may have been due to his trust in Falconbridge/SMSP and his desire for the mining project’s economic benefits. In contrast, one elderly Oundjo resident, who was concerned about the mining

\(^{34}\) June Nash (1993: 163) writes of a similar comment from a Bolivian miner, speaking about the reassurance gained from addressing spiritual beings: ‘When Jorge rejected the traditional customs, Manuel objected, saying, “[…] The miner must believe in the Pachamama and the Tío because of accidents that occur. […] Without this belief he does not work in confidence. He is always uneasy.”’
activity’s potential impacts, claimed that after a series of minor industrial accidents, some workers had presented Jacob with a ritual gesture in an attempt to appease the ancestral spirits. The Xuti clan then summoned the other clans with customary rights to that part of the massif, the Xutapet and the Gwa-Cidopwan clans. All three clans accepted the gesture in order to ensure that similar accidents would not occur in future, although my informant expressed his own reluctance to do so: ‘I didn’t want to take it because they earn money but what do we gain?’ (September 2001, Oundjo). He resented the fact that, in his view, his gesture would protect the miners while providing no benefits for his clan or the other members of his village.

8.7. Interpretations of a helicopter crash

In November 2000, Raphaël Pidjot, the Kanak CEO of SMSP, perished along with five other mining company employees and the pilot. Just like the dangers of taboo places and the appearance of spirits, this event was interpreted differently by individuals with different concerns and interests. Among those who supported the construction of the refinery at Pinjen, some suspected that the crash was due to sabotage by right-wing elements who wanted to destroy a highly successful Kanak and to undermine a mining project that would benefit the Kanak people. However, like illness (Salomon 2000), misfortune is often believed to be caused by ancestors’ anger or by sorcery. Thus, some viewed the event as a punishment from the spirits for disrespect, individual greed, and/or planned ecological degradation, or else the result of jealousy.

Raymond Diela reported that some people believed that the accident had occurred because of disputes within the village community, especially those between maternal uncles and their nephews, concerning the construction of the refinery (July 2001, Oundjo). However, many attributed the crash to Raphaël’s ambition and pride, and speculated that he may have failed to think of his customary duties and forgotten to show respect to his relatives. Others, however, blamed the mining company; Félix Foawy was convinced that the accident had been the ancestors’ way of punishing Falconbridge/SMSP for neglecting to consult his clan at every step.

At first, they went through us to go up there [on the massif]. And then afterwards, they had a lot of meetings, we were excluded. […] And like I said just now, when we went to speak up there [see Section 8.6.2.1.], we said, ‘Those
who don’t want to see us, who want to go over our heads, that is to say they
didn’t follow our customary path, they’ll see the result.’ So you see, when we
did that, there are accidents like that right away; it doesn’t take long. (October
2001, Tièta)

Félix felt that Raphaël had been especially susceptible to such punishment because of
the fact that he was a Kanak.

Maguy Leack, a young woman whose partner was a member of the Caunyan
clan, agreed that Raphaël may have been punished by ancestral spirits for disrespect of
customary paths or for political or financial intrigue. However, she thought it more
likely that people from outside the Voh-Koné area had used sorcery to cause the
accident because they were jealous of Raphaël or of the people in the region where the
project would take place.35

Those who are opposed, or those who are jealous. Those who are jealous
because it will bring economic benefits to the Voh region and not to those
people there. (August 2001, Oundjo)

Conversely, in other areas of New Caledonia, rumours circulated that people from
Oundjo were the ones who had caused the accident by using their own supernatural
powers, perhaps by cursing Raphaël (Sonia Grochain, February 2002, Pouembout).

One 70-year-old man conjectured that the helicopter crash might indeed have
been provoked by sorcery, due not to envy but to concern about the maintenance of
natural resources.

When the nickel will fall [because of erosion], it will ruin all the crops, even the
rivers, all that. They blow [i.e. practise sorcery]. [...] ‘But who, who is it?’
they’ll say. ‘It’s Raphaël. Yes, he will gain, but us, what will we gain? The sea
will become red, what will we do? What will become of us?’ (Pwa Millot
Kahmene, July 2001, Oundjo)

Alice Kahmene, a 34-year-old woman, also believed that the crash may have been an
attempt to prevent ecological damage; however, she thought that it might have resulted
directly from ancestral action, without human intervention: ‘They come to visit the
mountains, to visit the sea, to build refineries, to build laboratories, to do all that. Well,
the elders from before, the elders who are already dead, they don’t want you to destroy

35 As discussed in Chapter 6 (Section 6.2.1.), accusations of sorcery due to jealousy are common in
New Caledonia.
the land’. A born-again Christian, she subsequently expressed the opinion that God, rather than the spirits, was responsible, just as He had prevented the construction of the refinery on Pinjen (see Section 8.3.): ‘He doesn’t want us to destroy His creation.’ The crash had been a warning to Falconbridge/SMSP, and by extension to all those who placed individual profit above the long-term well-being of the community. However, this message had gone unheeded: ‘He’s speaking to those bigwigs, Pdjot and company. […] But they don’t realize, or else they don’t understand; all they think about is money’ (July 2001, Oundjo).

This helicopter crash, which the mining company viewed as simply a tragic accident due to misty conditions and the pilot’s poor judgement, was imbued with cryptic meaning for the Kanak residents of the Voh-Koné area. From the diversity of their decodings of it, it is clear that people used the fact of this disaster as evidence to support particular discursive positions in regard to the mining project. They interpreted this event in light of the narratives they had been constructing about the direct and indirect dangers of the project in terms of its ecological, economic, and socio-political consequences.
9 Conclusions

Mining Company Representative: If we had to take each individual’s viewpoint into account, we’d never see the end of it!

High Chief Whanéroï: You have to account for an individual to make a village, to make a country, to make a state, including yourself. (Gope 2001: 34)

Local people’s responses to large-scale economic development projects depend on a variety of macro-level and micro-level socio-historical factors. As I pointed out in Chapter 2 and discussed further in Chapter 3 (Section 3.5.), New Caledonia is the only Melanesian nation that remains dependent (and significantly so) on a wealthy European metropole. For various reasons, discussed above (Section 4.3.) and further elaborated below, this political and economic context makes the Koniambo Project highly unusual. Meanwhile, as argued in the introductory chapter (Section 1.4.1.), particular customary rights and cultural meanings play a large role at the local level in shaping people’s engagements with natural resource extraction projects, making each site unique. Nonetheless, the findings contained within this thesis enrich the political ecological literature and challenge its traditional analytical approach. After briefly reviewing the particularities of the politico-economic context of the Koniambo Project, this chapter highlights the broader implications of my study and the contributions that this thesis makes to the field of political ecology.

9.1. The unusual politico-economic valency of the Koniambo Project

As shown in Chapter 3 (Section 3.5.), independence advocates are well aware that the substantial – and growing – financial assistance from Metropolitan France can
only increase New Caledonia’s dependence on the metropole. Therefore, the Koniambo Project is important for three reasons. First, small-scale development projects created or encouraged by Kanak leaders have met with little success, for various reasons concerning such factors as cultural identity, expectations of assistance, and intracommunity rivalry (see Section 3.5.2.). Instead, people now place their hopes in the Koniambo Project, a large-scale, exogenous venture that they assume will generate employment for local people. This project is jointly owned by SMSP, a Kanak mining company, and a Canadian multinational, Falconbridge. Thus, the second reason for the importance of the Koniambo Project is the fact that it is an opportunity for a Kanak organization to work in collaboration with a non-French company, further loosening New Caledonia’s dependence on Metropolitan France. Thirdly, resource rights represent, in the eyes of many Kanak, their growing attainment of recognition and autonomy. It is clear from statements such as those made by Bernard Tchaounyane (see Section 6.1.) that the fact that ‘now the Kanak have access to mining resources’ means, for those who ‘still demand independence’, that ‘the mine is a plus for the country’ (July 2001, Pinjen; see also Section 7.4.). Thus, as discussed in Chapter 4 (Section 4.3.), the Koniambo Project differs widely from the many examples from around the world in which local people actively resist large-scale, exogenous projects that deprive them of their natural resources and livelihoods.

These points beg the question as to why, when natural resource exploitation projects in other countries have been backed by official repression of local people’s demands for resource rights – sometimes provoking or aggravating calls for independence – the Koniambo Project has such a distinct politico-economic valency. The reason lies in the project’s broader political significance in the eyes of those who wish to maintain New Caledonia as a part of France. It is clear that since the late 1980s, the metropole’s strategy in dealing with the independence movement has been to provide economic benefits and symbolic gestures of respect for the Kanak people and their customs (see Section 3.4.). So far, this approach seems to have succeeded in mitigating demands for complete autonomy, perhaps because it makes the costs of a pro-independence struggle and an ultimate separation from the metropole appear to outweigh the potential benefits of such an effort and such an outcome (see Section 3.5.). The Koniambo Project is yet another example of this tactic. From their statements (see Section 4.3.), it is evident that loyalists and Metropolitan French politicians view the project as a means to deter separatist actions.
9.2. Wider-ranging significance of this study

At the beginning of this thesis (Section 1.1.) I outlined a number of broad, theoretical questions regarding local people’s interactions with exogenous, large-scale natural resource exploitation projects and, in the context of these projects, with each other. In the chapters that followed, I used these questions as a framework for an analysis of New Caledonia’s Koniambo Project. This thesis has demonstrated that the micropolitical interactions among the Voh-Koné area villagers were strongly influenced by macropolitics, cultural beliefs and preferences, local history, socio-political structures, and individual personalities, inter alia. Therefore, the observations made in this study are unique, and many of its conclusions cannot readily be generalized or assumed to apply to other sites with their own unique contexts. Nonetheless, in this section I argue that this thesis makes two notable contributions to the political ecological literature. First, by providing an example of ‘political-ecological thick description’ (Peet and Watts 1996a: 38), the present thesis offers an illustration of the cultural and micropolitical significance of natural resources. Secondly, I believe that my analytical approach – a focus on the individuals and subgroups within the community under study – is an important and underutilized angle of inquiry.

9.2.1. Contributions to political ecology

As argued in the introductory chapter (Section 1.2.1.), the field of political ecology has recently begun to focus to a greater extent on the local particularities of ecological struggles. Especially, as Richard Peet and Michael Watts (1996a) point out, this literature has started to address the fact that such disputes and competitions concern the socio-cultural values, and not just the pragmatic uses, of land and other ecological resources. This thesis contributes to that growing theoretical trend by demonstrating the various meanings, both cultural and socio-political, that certain sites and ecosystems had for people in the Voh-Koné area, and the influence of those meanings on the villagers’ engagements with the Koniambo Project.
Clearly, land signified more to local villagers than space in which to garden or raise livestock. Certain sites where ancestors had resided were particularly significant. Those places, as we saw in Chapter 7, may be small in size and may even simply consist of a particular stone located in the landscape, yet are important foundations of cultural identity because of the clan histories that they represent. Some people worried that if these landscape features were destroyed by the mining project, part of their cultural heritage would be lost. Additionally, as demonstrated in Chapter 8, those sites were often dangerous as they remained the home of ancestral spirits. For instance, representatives of the first-occupant clans at Wapan refused to allow construction of a dam at that site, on the grounds that such a change in the landscape would cause them to suffer serious punishments from their ancestors. Not only specific sites but also ecological resources were important for reasons other than their practical use, even if these reasons were fundamentally concerned with human well-being. For instance, some Oundjo residents affirmed that they enjoyed the activity of fishing and proudly stated that they – unlike wasteful, disrespectful outsiders – were careful to manage their marine resources.

Perhaps, however, what was more important to local people than the cultural meanings of land and natural resources were the socio-political implications of authority over places and ecosystems. In New Caledonia, as Chapter 3 explains, publicly-proclaimed (although constantly contested) relationships to the land play a central role in determining social status. Thus, when Falconbridge/SMSP began to show interest in Pinjen and then Vwavuto, customary landowner clans tried to reassert their rights to make decisions about the use of each peninsula (see Section 4.4.3.). At Oundjo, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, members of the clans that claimed customary ownership of Pinjen and/or Vwavuto believed that the mining company recognized their authority, as proven by the customary ceremonies performed at Pinjen as well as by conversations with the head of SMSP. Members of these clans felt that their positions within the community were no longer as respected as in the past. Therefore, their hopes for the reception of royalties or privileges corresponded to their expectations that such formal recognition by the mining company would serve as proof of their prestigious position as members of first-occupant clans. In other words, understandings of and competition over the advantages to be gained from the mining project were profoundly social, grounded in long-standing modes of demonstrating status. Thus the Caunyan, who had lost control of their lands to GEO6 and had lost authority within the village because of a
lack of respect for the *petit chef*, saw Falconbridge/SMSP’s support as a means to reinstate their social standing. Similarly, members of clans claiming customary landownership of the massif and of Vwavuto sought to prove their prestigious social position through their relationship with the mining company. In contrast, the customary landowner clans of Wapan stood to lose their lands entirely if the area were flooded.

As discussed in Chapter 6, Voh-Koné area villagers supported the Koniambo Project for its politico-economic importance for the Kanak. At the same time, however, some local residents, who feared that the construction of the refinery or dam would cause their subgroup to lose control over particular areas of land, demonstrated concern about the local economic consequences of the project. For instance, Oundjo residents who opposed the construction of the refinery at Pinjen – mainly GEO6 members and their allies – worried that the new jobs promised by Falconbridge/SMSP would not be sufficient to compensate the villagers for the loss of their marine resources and the cattle-raising activity on the peninsula. Conversely, at Wapan, it was the customary landowners who stood to lose their lands – in this case, literally and permanently – if the dam were constructed. They had already begun to study a development project on these lands (see Section 4.4.4.) and preferred to continue with it rather than giving up control of this area to the mining company, even if other villagers expected the dam to provide economic benefits for the community. Therefore, representatives of this group opposed the dam, although they feared that others might accuse them of failing to support a Kanak project. In a similar vein, the cattle-raising cooperative at Pinjen wanted to maintain its own development project rather than giving up control of the land. The opposition of these groups probably reflected their concerns about the loss of an important economic asset. However, another factor was at play in the intracommunity conflicts surrounding the Koniambo Project: social status. Status could not be improved through the accumulation or distribution of material wealth, which was not a socially acceptable object of overt rivalry. On the other hand, the reception of royalties from the mining company would constitute visible, tangible proof of one’s position as customary landowner. This proof was all the more important in light of the fact that although social positions are, in theory, determined by genealogies, in reality these positions are flexible and continually challenged by rivals (see Section 3.2.1.). Therefore, the social recognition that the customary landowners received from Falconbridge/SMSP (see Sections 4.4.2.1. and 4.4.5.) was, for them, an incentive to support the mining project.
Similarly, conflicts arose concerning potential environmental impacts of the Koniambo Project, as discussed in Chapter 7. Supporters of the refinery or dam were certain that the ecological damage and loss of cultural heritage due to the construction would be minimal and would be more than offset by material benefits. In contrast, their opponents feared that local livelihoods would be destroyed. The differences between the two groups were influenced by people’s relationships to the mining company, as determined by their social positions. The customary landowners at Pinjen, who expected recognition from the mining company along with preference in employment and royalties, were more likely to trust the mining company to minimize harmful environmental impacts as well as to believe that the project’s benefits would compensate for any such damage. Others, such as members of GEO6, expected that certain aspects of the project, such as the construction of the refinery, would reduce or eliminate their control over the land. Still others, including many of the women of Oundjo, did not expect to obtain employment at the refinery that would provide sufficient recompense for the expected loss of their marine resources. Both these latter groups were less prone to trust Falconbridge/SMSP and more liable to express concern about the mining project’s potential ecological effects. At the same time, however, many of the opponents of the refinery’s local construction occupied social positions that did not allow them scope to influence decisions about the use of the land at Pinjen.

Finally, as demonstrated in Chapter 8, villagers’ statements and actions regarding dangers from spirits or forbidden places were strongly affected by their expectations of the project’s ability to strengthen or weaken their social status. For example, during the period of pre-feasibility studies, knowledge concerning the location of taboo places (which were being mapped) became a micropolitical stake since this knowledge implied membership of a first-occupant clan. Additionally, members of customary landowner clans at both Pinjen and Vwavuto, who favoured the construction of the refinery on their land, tended to downplay potential dangers from spirits at taboo places around the construction sites. This formed a sharp contrast to the statements made by villagers who opposed the local construction of the refinery. At Wapan, the opposite situation occurred; customary landowners were the ones who evoked dangers from ancestral spirits as a reason to oppose the dam while other villagers remained unconvinced of the necessity of such caution. Meanwhile, a ritual performed by local customary landowner clans in order to prevent potential accidents on the mountain tops doubled as a means for members of these clans to affirm their authority over the massif.
Through the performance of this action, senior members of clans claiming customary ownership of the massif evoked the fact that they were the only ones who could communicate with their ancestors, as a reminder to others that their approval was a necessary precursor to any mining activity.

Ultimately, certain villagers’ opposition to the construction of the refinery at Pinjen and the dam at Wapan forced Falconbridge/SMSP to choose alternative sites for their infrastructure. This came as a surprise to the mining company, as its representatives had initially assumed that the intracommunity conflicts surrounding the construction could be resolved. However, they had adopted a modernist paradigm (see Section 1.2.1.) in which people’s interest in money would obviate any socio-cultural constraints or other concerns, at least once they had progressed to that level of development. Thus, mining company officials had presumed that villagers would – or at least should, and eventually would – have positive attitudes towards the mining project and the employment opportunities it would provide, no matter what the local historico-cultural context. Moreover, company representatives underestimated the communities’ capacity for internal dissension and micropolitical intrigue – what Colin Filer (1997b) has dubbed ‘the Melanesian way of menacing the mining industry’.

Falconbridge employees had never operated previously in New Caledonia despite extensive experience in other locations around the globe. They did not consider that each local group with which they worked would have specific concerns and reactions, based largely on unique cultural relationships to money and status. As we have seen, contrary to mining company representatives’ expectations, Kanak modes of attaining or proving a high social position substantially influenced local people’s engagements with the Koniambo Project.

9.2.2. The importance of a micropolitical approach

Clearly, the cultural and micropolitical significance of land and natural resources may influence local people’s engagements with and interpretations of natural resource exploitation projects in ways that may surprise exogenous developers and outside observers. In an example from Papua New Guinea, provided by Thomas Ernst (1999: 91), the Onabasulu changed their discourses – and even adapted certain myths – in order to stake land claims and to reify social categories ‘in the context of an emerging
ecopolitics’. Thus, in the Papua New Guinea highlands as well as in New Caledonia, ‘cognized models’ as deployed are not always merely mimetic but may constitute highly politicized discursive practices’ (Ernst 1999: 96, original emphasis). In other words, the ways in which people engage with and even think about the situations they find themselves in – such as their anticipations of the benefits and/or threats a mining project may pose – reflect their socio-political objectives.

Within a community, and even within a single family or clan, different people will inevitably have distinct social positions, depending on their genealogy, personal history, allies, skills, age, etc. A person’s place within the larger group may determine his or her right to make decisions about areas of land or natural resources that interest exogenous developers. Meanwhile, depending on cultural context, this social position may be – to a greater or lesser degree – unstable and contested. Although customary rules for attaining or demonstrating a high social position may appear, at first glance, to be quite straightforward, in practice they may be subject to interpretation and the vagaries of shifting alliances and enmities. This is especially true in the contemporary context, which provides a variety of novel opportunities for achieving recognition as well as unprecedented circumstances in which long-standing conventions must be interpreted. Hence, people need to secure their status by looking for support from both customary rules and exogenous institutions. It should come as no surprise therefore when natural resource extraction companies, and other representatives of tremendous sources of wealth and power, find themselves entangled in villagers’ competitions for recognition. As Pierre Bourdieu explains, the quest for this ‘symbolic capital’ need not be viewed as cynical, ‘conscious calculation of utility’ (1994: 158); rather, ‘social agents have “strategies” that are only rarely based on a genuine strategic intention’ (1994: 156). Thus, people may internalize culturally appropriate goals and act accordingly, without explicitly formulating or even conceptualizing their intentions. In this way, as I have tried to demonstrate, Voh-Koné area villagers selected, from among the range of beliefs available to them, the strategies and arguments that would best support their need to ensure respect of their social positions, from both the mining company and their fellow community members.

In attesting to the large role played by micropolitics in determining local people’s engagements with development projects, the findings contained within this thesis point to the importance of an expansion of the political ecological framework (see Section 1.2.1.) through the application of insights from micropolitical theory (see
Section 1.3.) to natural resource exploitation projects. Such an approach can only serve to emphasize the complexity of communities and thus help us to rethink simplistic analyses (as demonstrated in Section 1.4.). As we have seen, representatives of Falconbridge/SMSP encountered difficulties when they made the mistake of assuming that each village could be represented in its entirety by the customary landowner clans of, respectively, Pinjen and Wapan. Instead, the communities I studied proved to be a far cry from the homogenous, unified groups assumed by much of the academic, activist and popular literature on natural resource exploitation projects (see Section 1.2.2.). While I fully support the concerns of many authors to promote the interests of the communities they study by arguing their cases before an audience of scholars and policy-makers, I believe that idealistic portraits of ‘harmonious communities’ – whether painted by multinational companies, campaigners, or scholars – can only result in misguided actions which may ultimately harm the people concerned. Instead, I advocate attempts to develop balanced, nuanced analyses of intracommunity diversity, inequalities and conflicts that objectively yet sympathetically portray local people as real human beings.

Moreover, a focus on the statements and actions of subgroups and persons within each community (see Section 2.1.) can help us to examine people’s engagements with ‘modernity’. As Francesca Merlan (1991) points out in the context of Aboriginal people’s responses to mining development at Coronation Hill, Northern Territory, Australia, it is misleading to divide people into mutually exclusive categories of ‘traditionalists’ and ‘modernists’. In the contemporary context, as (to some extent) throughout history, there is a multiplicity of ideas in which to believe and with which to formulate an identity, and many Kanak interweave various elements of the belief systems they discover around them into their discourses on topics of concern to them. As far as I could determine, nearly all the villagers with whom I spoke worried about their natural resources and the potential anger of their ancestral spirits, at the same time that they accepted, or even embraced, what they saw as the inevitable advance of economic development. However, the degree to which people expressed concern about the potential dangers of industrial expansion, or interest in its benefits, depended on how much they believed they would gain from or be harmed by the mining project. Their concerns were not only or primarily directly economic but, rather, centred around ‘recognition capital’ (Bourdieu 1994: 189), which in the Kanak case takes the form of
authority over land – the ability to remain or become a master, not stranger, in one’s own home.

**9.3. Ideas for future research**

While this thesis has argued for the importance of focusing closely on village-level micropolitics, I recognize that there is scope for even greater depth of analysis. One potentially interesting angle of investigation would be a more psychological approach to the study of individual actors within communities. This is not a new idea; nearly half a century ago, Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales (1955: v) advocated drawing on the ‘intimate interrelations’ among the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology. More recently, Sherry Ortner (1994: 395) and Dan Sperber (1996: 75) have called for such ‘cross-fertilization’ of disciplines. Indeed, such an approach has been applied in several notable instances (e.g. Levy 1973; Rosaldo 1980; White and Kirkpatrick 1985). However, it has been underutilized in the field of political ecology, which has historically tended towards a more macro view (see Section 1.2.1.). On one hand this would entail applying insights and employing techniques, developed in the field of psychology, to other social scientific research (see Section 2.1.2.). Meanwhile, however, Alan Howard (1985: 402) cautions us to beware of ‘Western psychology as pretender to a universal analytical framework for personal experience’ (cf. Wagner 1974; Strathern 1994: 201). He points out that from Malinowski’s time to the present, anthropologists have challenged assumptions about the worldwide applicability of the complexes and life stages described by psychologists. Thus, he advocates efforts ‘to reform scientific psychology so that it provides for cultural context’ (1985: 418). This would involve contributing discoveries gained during fieldwork in other cultures to ideas developed through Western psychological research. It would also require a shift in perspective, an attempt to understand the categories, definitions, and expectations that form the bases of other peoples’ analyses of human behaviour.

Such an ethno-psychological approach would be indispensable to a completely thorough analysis of the interactions of individuals and social subgroups, which would require an empathetic understanding of the attitudes and behaviour of group members. This methodology would allow us to analyse people’s actions not only from a distant, ‘externalist’ viewpoint but also, crucially, from an ‘internalist’ perspective that would
closely examine individuals’ actions and attempt to understand them from the actors’ points of view (Habermas 1987 (1981): 153). Such an up-close, actor-oriented approach would be particularly important in studies of community members’ engagements with large-scale natural resource exploitation projects, since such activity ‘elicits a myriad of conflicting emotions’ (Wardlow 2001: 40) that influence individual choices and social interactions.

While conducting my fieldwork, I focused, to the extent possible, on the discourses and behaviour of individual community members. However, acquiring a deeper, more psychologically-informed understanding of the people with whom I work would greatly enhance future research. One technique, examples of which are only rarely found in the anthropological or sociological literature (cf. Levy 1973; Kaufmann 1992; Finnegan 1998), is to include long narratives describing individuals’ lives, their personalities, and their beliefs about and experiences with the topic of investigation. I expect that this will form an important component of my future research, in New Caledonia and at other sites around the world.