



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

State Society and Governance in Melanesia

DISCUSSION PAPER

FROM 'PRIMITIVE' TO CONTEMPORARY: A STORY OF KANAK ART IN NEW CALEDONIA

Discussion
Paper 01/2

ABSTRACT

In New Caledonia, the late 1980s saw the emergence of new cultural institutions and development programs dedicated to the indigenous Melanesian people of the Territory. After their struggle for immediate political independence failed in the mid-1980s, New Caledonia's indigenous Kanak people obtained French recognition of their cultural identity through the 1988 Matignon Accord. The French Government subsequently implemented new measures both to preserve the Kanak cultural heritage and encourage indigenous artists to come up with new cultural expressions. In the last fifteen years, new Kanak artists have appeared, producing hybrid forms of art which claim to be rooted in the traditional Kanak world whilst at the same time being very much influenced by Western art standards, media, and techniques. This paper attempts to define the contemporary Melanesian art world in New Caledonia and to underline both its modernity and hybridism. It will show how contemporary Kanak art is breaking some dominant aesthetic rules and is changing the way both Westerners and Islanders decide what indigenous culture should be like. It will also focus on the emergence of new art professionals and new

aesthetic icons, thus trying to give a better view of social and cultural change in this Melanesian postcolonial society.¹

FROM KANAKY TO THE TJIBAOU CULTURAL CENTRE: THE "REVIVAL" OF KANAK CULTURE

New Caledonia is a small group of islands in the South Pacific. The main island (*la Grande Terre*) is about 300 km long and 50 km wide with a chain of mountains running down the spine. New Caledonia is divided politically into three "provinces": the South, centred on the capital Nouméa, long called *Nouméa-la-blanche* ("Nouméa-the-White"), and mainly inhabited by white people of European and other origins, but with an increasing number of Melanesian residents as well as Asian and other Oceanian people; the North, where the few inhabitants are mainly Melanesians; the Loyalty islands, located to the northeast of the main island and also mainly Melanesian. The population is today about 200,000 people, half of whom live in the capital and 42.5% of whom are Kanak.² New Caledonia was missionized from the 1840s, since when Christianity has had a very strong influence on indigenous culture and beliefs. The

CAROLINE
GRAILLE

The contribution
of AusAID to
this series is
acknowledged
with appreciation.

island became a French possession in 1853 and then a penal colony. Some free Europeans were also encouraged to develop the country through farming, grazing, and especially mining. All these new arrivals eventually displaced the indigenous population, especially on the main island, forcing them on to *réserves* in the less fertile areas, which until after World War II they could not leave without official permission. Other ethnic groups, especially from Vanuatu, Indonesia, and Vietnam, were also imported to work on European enterprises. Hence, as a result of both immigration and displacement, the indigenous people eventually became a minority.

This specific colonial background shaped the whole country's social and political situation, creating a multicultural society in which the different ethnic groups maintain a degree of separation.² As the French anthropologist Alban Bensa puts it, there has been no real social and cultural *métissage* (intermixing) in New Caledonia.³ The difficult relationships between Melanesians and white people have both created and maintained a very unstable political situation based primarily on histories of colonial domination and indigenous resistance.⁴

In the 1970s, Melanesians renewed their claims to their land and the acknowledgment of their identity and culture. The past thirty years can be divided into two distinct periods: from 1970 to 1988, when indigenous political leaders used the idea of a common Kanak culture to press their claim for an independent Kanak country that they called "Kanaky"; from 1988 to the present, following the signing of the Matignon Accord by both independence and pro-French "loyalist" leaders. In this treaty, the independence party, the FLNKS (Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front), appeared to postpone or even renounce some of its demands (which is why the FLNKS leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou was killed in 1989 by a Kanak extremist), while the French government agreed to set up new cultural or customary institutions dedicated to Kanak culture and arts. The most notable such institution was the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, opened in 1998 and named after Tjibaou to commemorate his move to peace and reconciliation.

In talking about cultural institutions and artistic production in New Caledonia, I shall concentrate on the second period, developing three main points. First, I describe how the French Government started raising public funds to promote Kanak art and culture and I explain the new cultural policy which aimed to promote creativity and the emergence of new indigenous

artists, build new cultural sites for exhibitions and art works, and hire new people to run them. Second, I explain the very specific status of contemporary indigenous artists and discuss the role of cultural institutions. In doing so, I question the classic opposition (still very prevalent in New Caledonia) of "tradition" and "modernity" and describe the way in which contemporary art by both indigenous and non-indigenous artists reflects social and political change in New Caledonia. Last, I compare this situation to that in neighbouring countries (Papua New Guinea, Australia, and New Zealand), where contemporary indigenous art has become very popular and is being exported worldwide and where the art business is consequently thriving. I explain why contemporary art is still an emerging concept in New Caledonia or, as Susan Cochrane puts it, "is just becoming adventurous" (1997b:40). Observing the country's political and cultural environment, I give some details about the local art market and discuss how French museums and art galleries deal with non-Western art, especially contemporary productions, before concluding with the situation of contemporary Kanak and Caledonian arts within the Asian-Pacific region.

MORE MONEY FOR MORE CULTURE: VISUAL ARTS AS A NEW PUBLIC MATTER

The 1970s and 1980s were described as a "cultural desert" by most people I talked to in the late 1990s, though some important cultural events had taken place during this period.⁵ In the Matignon Accord, three political leaders representing the FLNKS, the loyalists, and the French government agreed to set up some long-term cultural policies. One was to create the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture (ADCK) which would mainly be run by indigenous elites taking over the development of a public culture, though they sometimes recruited non-indigenous art and communication specialists on three-year contracts. As its name implies, the ADCK is in charge of promoting a distinctively indigenous Kanak art and culture. Its brief includes:

- looking for new artists and giving them the opportunity to get access to training (mainly through practical courses in art schools overseas) and to art performances;

- buying contemporary artwork from the Pacific area and organizing local exhibitions for visual arts, as well as dance performances and plays;
- publishing a cultural magazine (*Mwà Vée*, first published in 1993);
- designing a cultural site dedicated to Kanak culture: the ADCK was ironically housed initially in an old colonial house in the centre of Nouméa before it moved to the new Tjibaou Cultural Centre in the suburb of Tina in 1998.

The ADCK took a while to get started, beginning with exhibitions of the work of four female painters who had first been helped and encouraged by a few European artists and designers.⁶ In 1990, the ADCK organized *Ko i Néva*, an exhibition which also involved about fifty male sculptors from all over the country (ADCK 1992). This was more significant than it sounds, since indigenous carving had almost completely disappeared by the late 1970s and thus had literally to be reintroduced.⁷ The art works produced for the 1990 exhibition embodied the traditional style whereas the women artist's paintings and installations have always been more innovative – mainly because their modes of artistic expression were not practised in precolonial culture and because women did not produce the objects which European collectors would later classify as "primitive art".

Representatives of the ADCK quickly started buying most of the art work produced by emerging local artists; they also ordered large special pieces by the young Kanak artist Norman Song and by artists from Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Irian Jaya, Arnhem Land, and Aotearoa-New Zealand to put in the *Jinu* ("spirit") house in the Tjibaou Cultural Centre.⁸ They took the opportunity provided by inter-Pacific exhibitions to buy many contemporary art works from different countries. Within a few years and by the time it moved to the new cultural centre, the ADCK had already established a very large collection of contemporary Pacific art – more than 350 items in 1999 – and had emerged as a symbol of living indigenous cultures in the Pacific.

At the same time, other measures and public actions were taken, mainly in the capital, to promote material culture and art as a whole. A local office of the French Ministry of Culture was created in Nouméa in 1990 to which all cultural projects must apply for French public funding. A biennial music and dance festival was organized by the City Hall which in 1990 also established a culture department that since 1994 has run the Nouméa Biennale of

Contemporary Art.⁹

This new cultural and artistic dynamic is encouraging. On the other hand, one might be sceptical or at least critical about the cultural revival and the frantic moves towards new artistic productions. It is important to emphasize the influence of postcolonial politics and new-born institutions on contemporary aesthetics. The story is very similar in all countries undergoing decolonization or independence: the indigenous culture is back on the agenda and a lot of money is spent on its promotion. In this particular context I question the limited autonomy and freedom of the artist or, rather, the influence of institutional policy on the refashioning of Kanak cultural identity and consequently on Kanak artists' productions. This phenomenon is crucial in New Caledonia, as the director of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, makes clear:

Whereas, in the past, the Kastom chiefs ordered the art pieces, now, the cultural institutions are doing it;... it is true to say that we strongly influence what [the artists] are making, even though we are not the only influence; but we do not force anybody; we address individuals: we try to select the one who produces something new, rather than the one who simply copies what's already there, the one who tries to innovate, rather than the one who does not.¹⁰

Speaking on behalf of the ADCK, Kasarhérou does not pretend that the Cultural Centre is simply picking up whatever is made by the artists. He even admits that the institution itself controls most of what is being made, because what is being made, he suggests, is not always satisfactory from the institution's point of view in terms of quality and creativity.

Accordingly, I was struck by the fact that, whereas local indigenous artists have the opportunity to hold their own exhibitions very quickly, they obviously depend greatly on how they comply with the ADCK's artistic "standards" and also on what the institution is willing to do to help them. Suggesting that artists should try to "innovate" rather than to "copy" is part of the self-determining will of Kanak cultural institutions to escape from the Western representation of Kanak culture as "primitive" or "traditional" (i.e., just like that "classical" Kanak art exhibited mainly in anthropological museums), and also from what is commonly called "tourist art" or "airport art". The intention here is to promote a living and dynamic indigenous culture as expressed through the artists' works.

THE EMERGENCE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AS A KEY SOCIAL FACTOR

The ambiguous relationship between the modern cultural institution and contemporary indigenous artists testifies that the latter are prominent players in New Caledonian society today, while simultaneously the emergence of many new artists from various ethnic groups is an obvious sign of social and cultural change.

When I began fieldwork in 1996 as a student in anthropology aiming to study social change through contemporary cultural productions, I quickly realized that I needed to concentrate on the place where the different cultures and ethnic groups meet. Accordingly I have done most of my fieldwork in an urban environment. Nouméa and its suburbs are not much of an ethnic “melting pot” since members of the different social and ethnic groups do not merge together and there is spatial separation between “cheap black” popular areas and “expensive white” ones. But at least the different groups live relatively close to one another and this is also the habitat of both the emergent artistic avant-garde and its scarce audience, mainly white expatriates. The Contemporary Art Biennale takes place in the capital and the Tjibaou Cultural Centre is built in the Nouméa area.

It is important not to overemphasize the opposition between “the bush” and “the city” as two different worlds separated by a huge cultural gap, though these oppositional categories are still very much used and taken for granted in New Caledonia, as elsewhere. Yet most of the artists I have met from the rural areas would rather work for “easy money” producing so-called “airport art” because this is what tourists are looking for: tourists travelling through New Caledonia are more likely to stop where they see a sign saying “Traditional sculpture” or “Kanak art” and to buy something typically “traditional”, “Kanak”, and exotic. However most contemporary artists are urban – they grew up in towns, studied in France, Australia, or New Zealand or have travelled overseas. Most indigenous people producing visual arts today have attended art courses at the Nouméa School of Art or in schools overseas and so there are few remaining supposedly “purely traditional, self-made” artists from the bush.

Today’s artists commonly spend their time in the city and make regular visits to the

Tjibaou Centre where they can discover and study other contemporary art works, meet the staff, and discuss the Centre’s programs and aesthetic policies. They eventually get involved in exhibitions and meet other visiting artists. Moreover, urban artists are more likely to give up “traditional” forms and come up with new artistic ideas. They also have a more external perspective on non-urban life when they go back to their tribe and family for customary weddings, funerals, or just to visit their relatives. Consequently, because movement between different cultural milieux is part of their daily life and personal education, indigenous artists develop a “double vision” between *la coutume indigène* (“indigenous custom”) and Western culture which is evident in their art works (see Thomas and Losche 1999): they always seem to be expressing some kind of cultural continuity, making the connection between the past and the future, simultaneously keeping up with the ancestors and creating the Kanak tradition-to-be. Like most indigenous artists from the Pacific region, Kanak artists such as Ito Waïa describe themselves as “bridging” or “in-between” (see Narokobi 1993; Howard 1998; Roper 1999; Thomas 1999):

There is no rupture between me and the ancestors. I am in a sense the support of continuity. It is my own way to write down what hasn’t been written yet. It is a way of setting up tracks, of handing over to those who come next. Everything should go towards creation.... One must not stop at what is already made. One must have the courage to go ahead, to be a creator (Waïa 1995:56).

The key is not to quibble over whether or not the work produced by such artists is “still traditional” and “genuinely Kanak” or how they relate to their ethnicity or tradition but to acknowledge that the emergence of contemporary indigenous artists and their clearly hybrid art works denotes a profound social structural change. This in turn changes the way insiders and outsiders alike view New Caledonia and its people as a postcolonial and multicultural nation.

Emerging artists are obviously one part of a larger social phenomenon. They have strong similarities with their “patrons”: as the art works are mostly bought by the Tjibaou Centre, the best supporters of contemporary Kanak art are undoubtedly the indigenous people who previously attended French universities and are

actually running the cultural institutions and promoting local indigenous artists. Artists and art department staff alike feel different from the "ordinary tribal people" because of their education and social status in the modern institutions and they feel different from Europeans because of their specific cultural background.¹¹ They see themselves as working to bring together the indigenous Kanak culture from which they originated and the French culture that has become increasingly important during the past 150 years. In her final report for a postgraduate degree in anthropology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, Solange Néaoutyine, a young Kanak from Poindimié who is now in charge of the Territorial Museum, puts the matter thus:

All the people from the Kanak community have trouble dealing with their cultural identity; although it influences their behaviour, they do not perceive or explain this trouble as a distortion between the past (used as a cultural reference) and the present (which does not match that reference anymore). And even though they worry about their future, about what they will become tomorrow, they usually lack the distance to really think about it. They simply live with it. There must be an elite enabled to analyse the situation and to suggest reflections and actions in order to help the community deal with this temporal predicament. This elite will gather different culture experts, who could be acknowledged as such or not, and these experts will have the responsibility to solve this problem and to build up a bright future for everyone. As its role is to serve the common interests and the people's will, the situation of this intellectual and political elite is far from being comfortable, because it always exposes itself to criticism (1996:67).

However, the emergence of such an elite exacerbates social and cultural differences amongst Kanak themselves. Contemporary indigenous art also shows some of the misunderstandings between traditionalist people from the *tribus* ("tribes") and young urbanized Kanak artists. Some artists get into trouble with customary authorities by using traditional designs, names, or dancing styles to which they have no entitlement according to *la coutume* ("custom"). Appropriating indigenous symbols as aesthetic icons in contemporary art

exhibitions can be controversial. For example, in his contribution to the Third Nouméa Biennale of Contemporary Art in 1998 the Kanak artist Calixte Pouémoin upset some people by representing Kanak "money", a key symbol in customary exchanges which was thereby given a new symbolic function belonging to the present. Young, urbanized artists often feel rejected by their own people because they grew up in a modern, westernized world, while at the same time they still feel a need to express their tribal origins. A young female artist told me that because she grew up in Nouméa she cannot really speak the language of her tribe and that she was thinking of re-learning it in order to feel more comfortable both as an indigenous person and as an artist.

Contemporary art is even more obviously an expression of social change with respect to European and non-Kanak artists generally. In the last few years, New Caledonia has seen the emergence of a new type of art made by local white and other non-Kanak artists, as was strikingly demonstrated in the Nouméa Biennales in 1996, 1998, and 2000. Like Kanak artists, they speak as individuals for a wider group, in this case the non-indigenous communities generally, and they express concern about the political future of the Territory. They often stress their attachment to the country and the Pacific region, even those born and brought up in France but who have spent part of their lives in New Caledonia or whose children were born there. They use wood, plants, shells, natural colours and pigments, or even symbols of Kanak culture such as yams or taros to suggest strong personal connections to the land and the natural environment. Some even use their art to raise polemical questions about ethnicity, nation, and the state, through controversial messages revealing the very ambiguous relationship between the different ethnic groups within this multicultural society: the "Caldoche" artist René Boutin,¹² for example, criticizes the influence of politics on art, opposing the public support of indigenous artists and contemporary Kanak art.

Other non-Kanak artists use modern items or revisit indigenous and Christian symbols in order to produce new icons speaking for an emerging "national" consciousness. This was particularly true at the last Nouméa Biennale of Contemporary Art held at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre between October 2000 and February 2001. It started during the Eighth Festival of Pacific Arts and some of the selected art works blatantly echoed the current political situation: several made reference to a multicultural society,

suggesting that each ethnic group must have something to share with the others while at the same time each is distinctive in some ways – such as through a common history, a shared attitude to the natural environment, a particular life style, and so forth. Some non-Kanak artists who produced naïve and obvious peace symbols suggesting reconciliation between the colonizers and the colonized were arguably going too far in “political correctness”,¹³ effacing real differences and enduring grievances in an ingenuous appeal to national unity under the slogan: “we all live happily, together in the same country”. But reconciliation is on top of the political agenda in New Caledonia at the moment, as it is in Australia and New Zealand: the new political ideology trumpets building a “multicultural Caledonian identity” and this requires the creation of visible national icons by local artists, especially those chosen by the dominant cultural institutions to *represent* New Caledonia during a major regional arts festival. For that reason, some art works that were poorly researched, conceptually shaky, and of limited aesthetic value were nonetheless selected for the 2000 Biennale, advertised in the official catalogue, and exhibited at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre for four months.

A further remark is in order about the social and political situation of the Territory: the admission of non-Kanak artists into the previously *Kanak-only* sanctuary of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre as legitimate “contemporary artists from the Pacific” is both sudden and surprising. I remember talking to one of the curators at the Tjibaou Centre in 1998 who confessed that admitting white artists was simply unthinkable!¹⁴ Now, however, Kanak and non-Kanak artists seem to be increasingly involved together in local artistic events. It looks like a textbook example of the supposed postmodernist tendency to break down long-lasting ethnic boundaries and celebrate hybridism and multiculturalism as new social, political, and consequently aesthetic models.

This is not a new phenomenon: what is happening in New Caledonia today recalls events years ago in some decolonizing African countries and is common elsewhere in the Pacific region in countries with comparable social and ethnic situations. But the emergent, “adventurous” aspects of the phenomenon in New Caledonia have historical and political correlates specific to the Territory that I shall now briefly sketch

IMAGES OF NEW CALEDONIA: AN ISLAND THAT BELONGS TO THE PACIFIC

If we compare the visual arts in New Caledonia with those in neighbouring countries with strong expressions of indigenous cultures and spirituality, what do we see? In Papua New Guinea, Aotearoa-New Zealand, and even more so in Aboriginal Australia, contemporary indigenous arts have long been very popular both nationally and internationally. There are numerous art galleries in Australia showing “traditional” and modern art by Aboriginal artists.¹⁵ Curators, merchants, and visitors buy “genuine” contemporary Aboriginal art in vast quantities. Some of these artists are invited worldwide to perform large “dreamtime” paintings in museums, art galleries, and ethnic arts exhibitions. As for the Maori, an exhibition of their traditional culture was successfully presented in the United States in 1984, returning to New Zealand with a new legitimacy that boosted living Maori culture and contemporary Maori people.¹⁶ Contemporary art from Papua New Guinea has already been celebrated in exhibitions and art books while neo-traditional shields featuring beer brands and comics characters are enthusiastically received worldwide by art critics and curators.¹⁷ Also, journals like *Art and AsiaPacific* and *Art and Australia* are regular publications with articles and exhibition reviews by curators, academics, and art specialists.

In the wider Pacific, then, the contemporary art business is becoming very centralized and organized, with a few institutions already emerging as major art sites. On the international scale, Western curators, art critics, and audiences show a real interest in the work done by emerging artists from “Asia-Pacific”, as has long been the case with artists from “Africa”.¹⁸

Despite expectations to the contrary, New Caledonia is not yet part of this upsurge in contemporary Pacific artistic production and fame, though the three-year-old Tjibaou Cultural Centre is probably the most beautiful and most popular indigenous art centre in the whole Pacific region (Kasarhérou 1995; Bensa 2000) – its architecture and design are displayed on dozens of websites – and the people running it are competent, sensible, and motivated. It might be thought that the close political relationship between France and New Caledonia and the considerable French investment in cultural development in the

Territory would lead to some kind of partnership to help promote New Caledonian artists to the art business in France and Europe, where there are many art spaces in museums, art galleries, and international exhibitions. But Kanak artists get little such access and few have had their work exhibited in France during the last ten years.¹⁹ No artist from New Caledonia has yet achieved international success.²⁰ Very few books or essays have so far been published on contemporary Kanak art apart from a few books released by the ADCK and the catalogues of the Nouméa Contemporary Art Biennales.²¹ Kanak art works are still very cheap compared to other contemporary indigenous creations.

The main reason for this low profile is that New Caledonia is a small country, completely outside the contemporary art world, with little access to major international artistic events (notwithstanding Nouméa's Biennale of Contemporary Art and its Cultural Centre), and with no real audience or clientele for contemporary art production. Local artists must therefore work on a very restricted scale and anyone who wishes to make a living from art depends mainly on a couple of local institutions and exhibition spaces in an industry involving only a handful of people. Again, while this is neither a novel nor an unusual problem, it is particularly marked in New Caledonia, where the public audience for contemporary Kanak art is particularly small. Indeed, apart from the art department of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, which is doing most of the buying, and the policy which decrees that 1% of the budget for erecting a public building shall be spent on its decoration by contemporary artists, people simply do not buy contemporary Kanak art. Because of the ongoing political conflicts between ethnic groups, many Europeans will not even go to the Cultural Centre "because it's too Kanak" and rarely go to art exhibitions at all because they equate an interest in art and culture with being left-wing, which implies support for the idea of Kanak political independence.

On the other hand, most Kanak people with no real connection to the urban environment see no point in going to the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, even the "customary sacred area" designed for traditional ceremonies and situated a reasonable distance from the main buildings, because it stands for modernity and cultural commoditization: "*C'est un truc pour les Blancs*" ("this is a white people's thing").

There is an element of caricature in my analysis, but this is the way many people

think and talk and a generational change will be required to alter popular attitudes towards "high culture". This is why most visitors to the Tjibaou Centre are scholars or school children and probably also why the oldest art gallery in Nouméa went bankrupt and had to close down. Emmanuel Kasarhérou admits with no illusions – but also with no sadness or resignation – that "the people at the Tjibaou Centre work today for what might happen in twenty years". French cultural complacency – France has always regarded the assimilation of French cultural values as a great gift to its colonies – also affects the postcolonial construction of a national culture in New Caledonia. Moreover, art has only been significantly on the agenda for about ten to thirteen years: it took ten years to get the Tjibaou Cultural Centre designed and built; it takes time to establish professional artists and for them to become familiar with the art business and confident about their creations.

In France itself, primitivism remains an entrenched value in cultural institutions, which care greatly about "primitive" art but ignore the new expressions of indigenous material cultures. "Traditional" (= "pre-contact") artefacts are deemed "authentic", "meaningful", and "valuable" but the authenticity and market value of contemporary indigenous art is consistently denied. Gallery owners equate "modern art" with the "modern primitivism" of French artists at the beginning of the last century whose work was inspired by "primitive" arts.

During the last two years, newspaper headlines and items in anthropological or art journals have been devoted to the new exhibition of "arts premiers" ("primitive" art from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific) at the Louvre museum in Paris and also to the project to build a new "postcolonial" museum in Paris, which will consolidate most of the collections from the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie. I met the director of this new museum-to-be, Stéphane Martin, in Paris and when I raised the question of contemporary indigenous art, he replied: "It's nothing for us. They should go to Beaubourg [the Musée national d'Art moderne in Paris]". I later heard him give a paper on the new Paris museum at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre during the Eighth Festival of Pacific Arts. He drew an audience of no more than a dozen people. His attitude and his experience in Nouméa dramatize the gulf between metropolitan and Kanak ideas of artistic relevance.

Of course, some metropolitan exhibitions do include contemporary indigenous artists. One of the most discussed and advertised was “Magiciens de la terre” (“Magicians from the Earth”), held in Paris in 1989 with Jean-Hubert Martin as curator.²² The same man was invited to make the selection for the last Contemporary Art Biennale in Lyon (2000), where works by indigenous artists from all over the world were assembled in an attempt to “Share Exoticisms” (*Partage d'exotismes*). There was also a contemporary African art retrospective in Lille in northern France in 2000. Even though these exhibitions attracted good audiences, they have mainly been derided by Western and non-Western critics alike, either as “postmodernist” or as “exoticist/Eurocentric/neo-colonialist”. In any case, with one exception (see note 19), no contemporary Kanak artist has been selected to participate in any of the “postcolonial”, “ethnic” art exhibitions so far held in France.

Turning now to New Caledonia's cultural role and artistic representation within the South Pacific region, it seems that the Territory is not yet fully integrated into its Asia-Pacific environment. As a French territory still, New Caledonia continues to suffer from the very bad image of France in the Pacific region, not helped by the violent events of the 1980s and the French military response. Also, because French is New Caledonia's official language and most people, including artists, do not speak English, it is difficult for them to share their experience and concerns with artists from elsewhere in the region except in formal symposia organized, for instance, by the Pacific Art Council or the Pacific Arts Association, and supported by the South Pacific Community's facilities, including programs, translators, publications, and so forth.

Apparently, though, New Caledonia is now catching up with its neighbours in terms of visual arts production and promotion, developing the idea of a pan-Oceanian artistic identity within which Kanak and, very recently, Caledonian artists would find their own space of expression. The ADCK has indeed been buying many art works from the whole Pacific region and the Tjibaou Centre is becoming a major regional site for contemporary indigenous art. Moreover, the ADCK also organizes its own inter-Pacific exhibitions and it is now able to invite Pacific artists and provide them with living and working facilities during their stay at the Tjibaou Centre. The ADCK works in partnership with overseas cultural institutions and organizes short trips (exhibitions) as well as medium-term residencies (apprenticeship or

training) for local Kanak artists.

The Nouméa Biennale also opens up New Caledonia's artists to the international art world. In 1996, the selection included artists from Australia (Gordon Bennett), New-Zealand (Peter Robinson), Vanuatu (Juliette Pita), and France (Pierrick Sorin and Georges Rousse). In 1998, the Nouméa-Tokyo Biennale assembled art works by nineteen artists selected by the French art curator Jean-Hubert Martin, including five Japanese artists. The 2000 Nouméa-Pacifique Biennale hosted one hundred artists from all over the region.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I emphasize the major role played by New Caledonia's cultural institutions and newly developed artistic environment in the emergence of contemporary ethnic aesthetics and new national symbols. From the Tjibaou Centre's point of view, promoting contemporary Kanak art proves that indigenous Kanak culture, like other indigenous cultures of the region, is still alive and well. This is not only a political message on a local scale but a key factor in social and cultural change and an attempt to deal with postcolonial modernity.

The project to construct “postcoloniality” in a multicultural context as neither a Kanak national state nor a French-dominated quasi-colony is still very recent in New Caledonia and artistic consciousness is as a result in its infancy. Local artists are only just beginning to produce “national” aesthetic icons whose symbolism will necessarily break with a very Eurocentric, essentialist vision of Kanak culture as “traditional”/“pre-contact” (and thus colonized and dead), but also be very different from the colonialist vision of New Caledonia as a “small France in the Pacific”. It will certainly be interesting to see what happens in the next few years as local artists get more confident and more involved in their artistic environment and its political settings. For the time being, most artists still keep a very shy and localized sense of artistic identity and it will be some time before they see themselves as part of an interconnected web of international – or even simply trans-Pacific – contemporary art production (cf. Kasfir 1999:129).

AUTHOR NOTE

Caroline Graille is a member of the Université de Montpellier III, France

NOTES

¹ This discussion paper is based on a seminar given to the Division of Pacific and Asian History, RSPAS, Australian National University, while I was a PhD Visiting Fellow in the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project in 2001. I am very grateful to Dr Bronwen Douglas for initiating this paper and for her invaluable notes and comments.

² Separation is especially the norm for the two main segments of the population, the indigenous people (42.5% of the total) and the Europeans (37.1%). There are also minorities from Wallis and Futuna (8.4%), French Polynesia (3.8%), Indonesia (3.6%), Vietnam (1.6%), and other ethnic groups (3%) (Estimate July 2000, CIA, *The World Factbook 2001*, <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/nc.html>>).

³ Despite a good deal of physical *métissage* in New Caledonia, there is little social or cultural mixing: "A child born from a mixed union becomes either 'Kanak' or 'European'", Bensa explains, "according to which ethnic group would raise him/her. Unlike the situation in the French West Indies, for example, the colour of the skin has no special meaning. Only their legal status and cultural environment (language, family, education, etc.) establish almost irrevocably their membership of one or other ethnic group. There is nothing like a *metis* category" (1995:121; see also Kohler 1987:52). I have translated all French quotations into English.

⁴ Kanak violently opposed French domination on numerous occasions during the nineteenth century. The best-known so-called "revolts" occurred in 1878 and 1917.

⁵ A notable Melanesian festival called Melanesia 2000 was organized in Nouméa in 1975 by the emerging leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou. Melanesia 2000 was a political attempt to bring together in the white city of Nouméa most of the different Melanesian communities from the main island and the Loyalty Islands in order to show that, despite significant cultural differences (including about twenty-eight different languages), Melanesians also had much in common and made up a single people. Melanesia 2000 was supported by French authorities, especially the French Ministère des DOM-TOM (Ministry of Overseas Territories; see Missotte 1998:72-75 and footnote 137; Guiart 1996:98). They also planned a second festival called Caledonia 2000, representing all the different ethnic groups living in New Caledonia. When New Caledonia was chosen to host the Fourth Festival

of Pacific Arts in 1984 (held every four years in a different country), it replaced Caledonia 2000 but ultimately had to be cancelled due to the political crisis and the effective civil war occurring in the early 1980s (Douglas 1998:74-76). The Festival of Pacific Arts took place in French Polynesia in 1985 instead.

⁶ The artists were Paula Boi, Micheline Neporon, Yvette Bouquet, and Denise Tiavouane.

⁷ There were only 36 sculptors still working in 1986, but 72 by 1992. The revival of indigenous carving was made possible mainly through the work of the anthropologist Roger Boulay from the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris, who visited most anthropological museums in Europe, took pictures of the most significant traditional art pieces, and assembled them into a book simply called *Sculptures kanak* (Boulay 1984). This portfolio was given all over the country to any Kanak person (usually men) willing to re-learn carving techniques and use the forms and styles shown on the pictures as genuine Kanak references. Every sculptor I met possesses his own copy of the portfolio. It is however mainly used today as a catalogue for people wanting to order copies of "true" Kanak art from those artists. The ADCK presented a second exhibition in 2000: Ko Néva. One major purpose was to show the vitality of Kanak art and sculpture through those ten years.

⁸ According to the ADCK, these monumental sculptures commissioned by the Tjibaou Cultural Centre "shed light on the origin of the people and things within the Pacific universe. With their respective rites, myths, and histories, artists from Papua New Guinea, Irian Jaya, Vanuatu, Australia, New Zealand, and New Caledonia give meaning and shape to the sculptures on show" (Centre culturel Tjibaou Page, <<http://www.adck.nc>>).

⁹ Furthermore, a School of Art focussing mainly on Pacific art was established in 1990 and has since been accredited by the French Ministry of Education; a Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports was created in 1998 after the Government of New Caledonia was set up under the Nouméa Accord; the Théâtre de l'île (an old theatre on Nouville Peninsula) reopened recently after renovation; last October, New Caledonia hosted the Eighth Festival of Pacific Arts, including 24 countries and more than 2000 artists from across the region.

¹⁰ Interview with Emmanuel Kasarhérou, Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Nouméa, 3 November 1998.

¹¹ Yvette Bouquet is an interesting exception in several respects, as an older woman, who knows her vernacular language well because she was raised in a *tribu* (at Bourail), where she says she was surrounded by *chambranles* ("door posts" carved with ancestral motifs) and other sculptures, knew many sculptors, and was constantly told old stories by her father and other relatives. She talks of being inspired by touching sculptures and petroglyphs and of living the legends as a child. Yet she has lived for many years in Nouméa, is an ardent member of

the Assembly of God (a pentecostal denomination), having been raised a Catholic, and is inspired by efforts to bring women of all ethnic groups together to celebrate their productions, mundane as well as artistic. She is very aware of the hybridity and modernity of her art and of the novelty in Kanak terms of being a woman artist whose medium is canvas and paint (personal communication, Bronwen Douglas, based on an interview with the artist, Nouméa, 28 July 1997).

¹² “Caldoches” are people of European origin who were born in New Caledonia, especially those whose families have been resident there for several generations.

¹³ See for instance Florence Giuliani’s “*Partage de richesses*” (“Sharing of Wealth”) and Christine Launay’s “*Une grande famille*” (“A Big Family”) in the 2000 Nouméa Biennale catalogue.

¹⁴ A Kanak artist herself, Denise Tiavouane was brought up in a European environment. As a member of the Contemporary Art Department at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre (working with the Australian contemporary Pacific art specialist Susan Cochrane), she was in charge of the relationships between the Centre and local artists.

¹⁵ See for instance: Stanton 1988, 1989; Caruana 1993; Morphy and Coates 1997; McCulloch 1999; National Gallery of Australia 2000; Kerr 2000.

¹⁶ Mané-Wheoki 1995; Thomas 1995; Stevenson 1998.

¹⁷ Cochrane and Stevenson 1990; Cochrane 1997a.

¹⁸ See Magnin and Soulillou 1996.

¹⁹ Micheline Neporon was invited by the anthropologist Roger Boulay to take part in an exhibition of traditional Kanak art (“*De jade et de nacre*”) held at the Musée national des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie in Paris in 1990. Denise Tiavouane represented the Pacific region, along with an Aboriginal artist in “*Messagers de la Terre*” (“Messengers from the Earth”), a one-year exhibition held in Rouillé (southwest France), from February 2000 to February 2001. Very few Kanak paintings or contemporary carvings make their way to Parisian art galleries or contemporary ethnic art exhibitions: ironically enough, some works by the painter Yvette Bouquet were bought by a Parisian art dealer in 1997 because she thought “they looked just like paintings from Aboriginal Australia” (personal communication, Bronwen Douglas, 27 April 2001).

²⁰ Compared to some contemporary paintings from Aboriginal Australia, for instance, which have been included in Sotheby’s catalogues.

²¹ One essay by Hamid Mokaddem (2000) includes some interviews conducted with Kanak artists in the early 1980s. Surprisingly, Susan Cochrane’s last book about contemporary Pacific art (2000), although published both in English and French (respectively by Halstead Press and the ADCK), is nowhere to be found.

²² Jean-Hubert Martin directed the Kunsthalle in Berne (1982-1985), the Musée national d’Art moderne in Paris (1987-1990), and the Musée national des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie in Paris (1994-1999). In 1998, he was also the director of the Third Nouméa Biennale of Contemporary Art. He is now the director of the Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak. 1992. *Ko i Néva: sculpteurs et peintres kanak contemporains*. Nouméa: ADCK.
- Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak. 1993-2001. *Mwà Vée, revue culturelle kanak*. Nos 1-31. Nouméa: ADCK.
- Bensa, Alban. 1995. *Chroniques kanak: l'ethnologie en marche*. Paris: Peuples autochtones et développement.
- Bensa, Alban. 2000. *Ethnologie et architecture. Le Centre culturel Tjibaou, une réalisation de Renzo Piano*. Paris: Adam Biro.
- Biennale d'art contemporain de Nouméa. 1996. Exhibition catalogue. Nouméa: Multipress.
- Biennale d'art contemporain de Nouméa. 1998. *Nouméa-Tokyo*. Exhibition catalogue. Nouméa: Graphoprint.
- Biennale d'art contemporain de Nouméa. 2000. *Nouméa-Pacifique 2000*. Exhibition catalogue. Nouméa: ADCK.
- Boulay, Roger. 1984. *Sculptures kanak*. Nouméa: Office culturel et technique canaque.
- Caruana, Wally. 1993. *Aboriginal Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Cochrane, Susan, and Hugh Stevenson, ed. 1990. *Luk Luk Gen! Look Again! Contemporary Art from Papua New Guinea*. Townsville: Perc Tucker Regional Gallery.
- Cochrane, Susan. 1997a. *Contemporary Art in Papua New Guinea*. Sydney: Craftsman House.
- Cochrane, Susan. 1997b. Expanding Horizons: the Noumea Biennale of Contemporary Art. *Art and AsiaPacific* 16:40-41.
- Cochrane, Susan. 2000. *Béretara, art contemporain du Pacifique*. Nouméa: ADCK.
- Douglas, Bronwen. 1998. *Across the Great Divide: Journeys in History and Anthropology*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Guiart, Jean. 1996. Avant et après le festival Mélanésie 2000: le contexte. *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 102:91-112.
- Howard, Michael C. 1998. Maro paintings of Irian Jaya. *Art and AsiaPacific* 18:54-61.
- Kasarhérou, Emmanuel. 1995. Men of flesh and blood: The Jean-Marie Cultural Centre in Nouméa. *Art and AsiaPacific* 2(4):90-95.
- Kasfir, Sidney. 1999. *Contemporary African Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Kerr, Joan. 2000. Millenial Icons for Australia. *Art and Australia* 37(2):212-221.
- Kohler, Jean-Marie. 1987. *Colonie ou démocratie : Eléments de sociologie politique sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie*. Nouméa: Edipop.
- Magnin, André, and Jacques Soullillou, ed. 1996. *Contemporary Art of Africa*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Mané-Wheoki, Jonathan. 1995. The resurgence of Maori Art: Conflicts and Continuities in the Eighties. *Contemporary Pacific* 7:1-19.
- McCulloch, Susan. 1999. *Contemporary Aboriginal Art: A Guide to the Rebirth of an Ancient Culture*. St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen and Unwin.
- Missotte, Philippe. 1995. Vingt ans après le Festival Mélanésie 2000: dossier-témoignages. *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 100-101:72-73.
- Mokaddem, Hamid. 2000. *Kanak Contemporary Expression: a Pacific Way of Life*. Province Nord de Nouvelle-Calédonie: Expressions.
- Morphy, Howard, and Rebecca Coates, ed. 1997. *In Place (Out of Time): Contemporary Art in Australia*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art.
- Narokobi, Bernard. 1993. Development of Contemporary Art in Papua New Guinea. In *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner, 161-168. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- National Gallery of Australia. 2000. *Aboriginal Art in Modern Worlds*. Canberra: National Gallery of Australia.
- Néaoutyine, Solange. 1996. Le Centre culturel Jean-Marie Tjibaou et la construction de l'identité kanak: contribution à une réflexion sur la notion de patrimoine. DEA thesis. Paris: EHESS.
- Réunion des Musées nationaux. 1990. *De jade et de nacre: patrimoine artistique kanak*. Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux.
- Roper, Robyn Christine. 1999. Traditional Arts, Contemporary Artists: A Study of Influence and Change in Irian Jaya, Indonesia. MA thesis. Melbourne: Victoria University.
- Stanton, John. 1988. *Innovative Aboriginal Art of Western Australia*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press.
- Stanton, John. 1989. *Painting the Country: Contemporary Aboriginal Art from the Kimberley Region, Western Australia*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press.
- Stevenson, Karen. 1998. Negotiating Tradition: the Art of Lily Laita and Ani O'Neill. *Art and AsiaPacific* 18:68-73.
- Thomas, Nicholas. 1995. *Oceanic Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Thomas, Nicholas. 1999. *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Thomas, Nicholas, and Diane Losche, ed. 1999. *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Waïa, Ito. 1995. Je suis le fruit de ma culture. *Mwà Vée* 8:54-57.



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

The State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) Project was launched in 1996 in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. Funded by the ANU with financial assistance from the Australian Government through AusAID, it comprises three Fellows (Dr Bronwen Douglas, Mr Anthony Regan and Dr Sinclair Dinnen), a Convenor (Mr David Hegarty, on secondment from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) and an Administrator (Ms Helen Glazebrook).

SSGM Discussion Paper Series

- 96/1: Peter Larmour, *Research on Governance in Weak States in Melanesia*
- 96/2: Peter Larmour, *Models of Governance and Development Administration*
- 96/3: David Ambrose, *A Coup that Failed? Recent Political Events in Vanuatu*
- 97/1: Sinclair Dinnen, *Law, Order and State in Papua New Guinea*
- 97/2: Tomasi Vakatora, *Traditional Culture and Modern Politics*
- 97/3: 'I Futa Helu, *Tradition and Good Governance*
- 97/4: Stephanie Lawson, *Cultural Traditions and Identity Politics: Some Implications for Democratic Governance in Asia and the Pacific*
- 97/5: Peter Larmour, *Corruption and Governance in the South Pacific*
- 97/6: Satish Chand, *Ethnic Conflict, Income Inequity and Growth in Independent Fiji*
- 97/7: Sam Alasia, *Party Politics and Government in Solomon Islands*
- 97/8: Penelope Schoeffel, *Myths of Community Management: Sustainability, the State and Rural Development in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu*
- 97/9: Philip Tepahae, *Chiefly Power in Southern Vanuatu*
- 98/1: John Haglegam, *Traditional Leaders and Governance in Melanesia*
- 98/2: Binayak Ray, *Good Governance, Administrative Reform and Socioeconomic Realities: A South Pacific Perspective*
- 98/3: Eric Wittersheim, *Melanesia Élites and Modern Politics in New Caledonia and Vanuatu*
- 98/4: Bronwen Douglas, Sinclair Dinnen and Anthony J. Regan, *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project: Review 1995-98*
- 98/5: Peter Larmour, *Making Sense of Good Governance.*
- 98/6: Bronwen Douglas, *Traditional Individuals? Gendered Negotiations of Identity, Christianity and Citizenship in Vanuatu*
- 98/7: Raymond Apthorpe, *Bougainville Reconstruction Aid: What are the Issues?*
- 99/1: John Rivers, *Formulating Policy for Community Relations Programs*
- 99/2: Lissant Bolton, *Chief Willie Bongmatur Maldo and the Incorporation of Chiefs in the Vanuatu State*
- 99/3: Eugene Ogan, *The Bougainville Conflict: Perspectives from Nasioi*
- 99/4: Grace Molisa and Elise Huffer, *Governance in Vanuatu: In Search of the Nakamal Way*
- 00/1: Peter Larmour, *Issues and Mechanisms of Accountability: Examples from Solomon Islands*
- 00/2: Bronwen Douglas (ed), *Women and Governance from the Grassroots in Melanesia*
- 00/3: Bronwen Douglas, *Weak States and Other Nationalisms: Emerging Melanesian Paradigms?*
- 00/4: Philip Hughes, *Issues of Governance in Papua New Guinea: Building Roads and Bridges*
- 00/5: KJ Crossland, *The Ombudsman Role: Vanuatu's Experiment*
- 00/1: Peter Larmour, *Westminster in the Pacific: A 'Policy Transfer' Approach*
- 00/2: Caroline Graille, *From 'Primitive' to Contemporary: A Story of Kanak Art in New Caledonia*

State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project
 Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
 Australian National University
 Canberra ACT 0200
 AUSTRALIA

Convenor: David Hegarty

Telephone: +61 2 6125 4145

Fax: +61 2 6125 5525

Email: dhegarty@coombs.anu.edu.au

Administrator: Helen Glazebrook

Telephone: +61 2 6125 8394

Fax: +61 2 6125 5525

Email: ssgm@coombs.anu.edu.au

<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia>

ISSN 1328-7834