

"The return to tradition is a myth-I keep saying this over and over again; it is a myth. No people has ever done it. I see the search for identity for a model, as being ahead of us, never in the past-it's a permanent process of renewal. I feel that what we're striving for at the moment is to bring as much as we can of our past and our culture into constructing the personal and social models we want to guide the building of our polity. Some might view it differently, but that is the way I see it myself. Our identity is *ahead* of us. At the end, after we are dead, people will take our picture and put in on the wall, and it will help them fashion their own identity. Otherwise, you never move out of your father's shadow, you've had it."<sup>1</sup>

Those were the words of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the New Caledonian Kanaky independence leader. They were spoken months after the Hienghene massacre on 4 December 1984 when 10 Kanaks, including two of Tjibaou's brothers, were killed on the road to their home village of Tiendanite. They were killed by a group of Caldoches, New Caledonian born people of European origin. Jean-Marie Tjibaou made his comment about the Kanaky struggle to re-establish their identity and purpose in life during an interview in Paris with *Le Temps modernes* in March 1985. The Kanaky leader was in France to rally French public opinion to support the Kanak people in their bid to gain independence from metropolitan France. Four years later on the 4 May 1989 Jean-Marie Tjibaou was shot and killed on the island Ouvea. Tjibaou was killed by a fellow Melanesian. A dissident who did not agree with Tjibaou's decision to sign the Accords de Matignon that promised an independence referendum in 1998. Kanaky militants had opposed such referendums in the past as they did not think the "whites" should be given a vote.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Kanaky*, writings translated by Helen Fraser and John Trotter, Pandanus Books,

New Caledonia is not yet a state in its own right. The diktats of the DOM-TOM, the Ministry of Overseas Departments and Territories, no longer hold the force they once did. There is a limited amount of regional autonomy. There is a 54-member Congress made up of three provincial assemblies with members from the Loyalty Islands Province, the North Province and the South Province including Noumea. The main parties are the right wing RPCR (Rally for Caledonia within the Republic) and the left-wing FLNKS (Kanak Socialiste National Liberation Front). Jean-Marie Tjibaou was the founding leader of the FLNKS.<sup>2</sup> In 1998 the Noumea Accord was signed by RPCR, FLNKS and the French State that provided for self-determination in 15 to 20 years time.<sup>3</sup>

Jean-Marie Tjibaou's memory has received much more than a picture on a wall. There is the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, an extraordinary collection of buildings located on a small peninsula about 10 kilometres north east of Noumea. Marie-Claude Tjibaou, Jean-Marie's wife had this to say in her introduction for the Cultural Centre's guidebook:

" The Tjibaou Cultural Centre is not a monument. It symbolises the recognition and the existence of the Kanak people. After being made into ' French' people, we are now recognised as indigenous people, and the custodians of a different culture. This Centre is designed to be a place for the celebration of that culture. We, the Kanaks, see it as

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Canberra, 2005 pp 162.

<sup>2</sup> *New Caledonia*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray, Victoria, 2001 pp 34-36

<sup>3</sup> *Jean-Marie Tjibaou*, op cit, Chronology pp 304

the culmination of a long struggle for the recognition of our identity; on the French government's part, it is a powerful gesture of restitution."<sup>4</sup>

The Cultural Centre was approved by President Mitterand and cost the French taxpayer some \$US60 million. The architect Renzo Piano modelled his design on the traditional Kanak grande case or large grass hut. The buildings seem to grow out of the soil with tall timbers supported by steel, singing in the prevailing southeast trade wind. The buildings look unfinished. As if they are work in progress. Renzo Piano says:

" In one sense, the project will never end. I think that buildings, like towns, are 'infinite' and non-finished constructions...that is why we should not fall into the trap of perfection; architecture is a living creature which evolves with time and use..."<sup>5</sup>

Overlooking the site on a small hill is a man-sized bronze statue of Jean-Marie Tjibaou. He looks every inch a leader. Commanding and dignified. In March 1984 Jean-Marie Tjibaou made the following comment to a Noumea researcher:

" While I can share with a non-Kanak what I have of French culture, it is impossible for him to share with me what is universal within my culture. Reconciliation of town and bush will come about through of recognition of the Melanesian personality and the complete restoration of our values."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Tjibaou cultural centre*, Agence de developpment de la culture, ADCK 1998, English edition Australian Consulate General, Noumea 2000 pp 9.

<sup>5</sup> op cit., pp 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Jean-Marie Tjibaou*, op cit pp133.

The Tjibaou Cultural Centre goes some way to accomplishing that goal.

Australian interest in New Caledonia affairs has a long history. It goes back to the days of "blackbirding" when privateers scoured the South Pacific for cheap labour to work in the Australian cane fields. Ben Boyd pioneered the Kanaka trade and he had no compunction about taking people without the chief's permission. Although some sources suggest that there was widespread Australian support for the Kanaka trade (the Lonely Planet New Caledonia Guide says Australian public opinion supported the blackbirders) other, earlier sources, believe that it was the disgust generated by the nefarious practises of the slave-traders that prompted Australia's first federal members to enact the Immigration Restriction Act or the so-called White Australia Policy.<sup>7</sup> William "Billy" Morris Hughes saw the act as a brave step of self-determination. He praised the new act as "an assertion of the right of a free people to determine who shall come into the country- one of the pillars of Australian national life."<sup>8</sup> When the United States "Great White Fleet" suddenly appeared out of the mist to weigh anchor in Sydney Harbour in 1908, Billy Hughes saw it as a warning. Although this was a friendly invasion by the Americans what was to stop a less friendly power doing the same thing? Hughes warned the fledgling nation that there were 16 foreign naval stations within striking distance of Sydney. Noumea was one of them.

Australia's nervousness about its neighbours did not end with World War One. In 1921 a Naval Intelligence clerk, based on Garden Island, Bob Wake, was sent to Noumea with an Australian Navy burial party. The French officials in Noumea had

asked the Commonwealth Government if help could be provided to take care of the dead following an outbreak of Spanish Influenza. Bob Wake's job was not to work with the burial party. He was sent to Noumea to get drawings of the French fortifications and find out more about the Japanese mining interests in New Caledonia.<sup>9</sup> New Caledonia had some of the world's richest deposits of nickel. The Japanese were mining mostly at the east coast town of Thio. Some 1,200 Japanese men, women and children lived and worked in Thio until the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 when all Japanese were deported. Thio today is a town of about 2,600. It still exports nickel to Japan. During the "Events" of the 1980s, Thio was captured by Kanak militants and French officials were held hostage. There was a negotiated settlement and no killings. The Kanaky flag, a yellow circled *fleche faitiere* (an ornamental wooden spear at the top of a grande case) against a background of horizontal blue, red and green bars, still flies over Thio.

Australia got directly involved in New Caledonia affairs in 1940. France had capitulated to the Germans. The collaborationist Vichy Government was in power. Technically all French territories came under the authority of the Vichy Government. Canberra was appalled by the idea. Its worst fears were realised. The enemy held territory could easily act as an aircraft carrier for hostile aircraft and its warships would be a constant threat. After consulting with the governments in London and Wellington, Canberra sent the light cruiser HMAS *Adelaide* to accompany Free French officials to Noumea. The local administration was divided. There were both Vichy and Free French supporters. On 19 September, HMAS *Adelaide*, stood off

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<sup>7</sup> William Morris Hughes, *His Life and Times*, W. Farmer Whyte, Angus and Robertson, 1957, pp 109-113

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. pp 111

Noumea aware that there were at least two pro-Vichy warships in the harbour. A pro-Free French demonstration ashore and the presence of the Australian warship forced the issue. The two pro-Vichy warships withdrew. New Caledonia became part of the Allied war effort. This successful operation was in marked contrast to a similar operation organised by the Royal Navy off the French possession of Dakar that failed.<sup>10</sup>

During World War Two the largest foreign force on New Caledonia was the American Army. The presence of large numbers of segregated Negro regiments was believed to have given the local Melanesian people fresh ideas about their rights and freedoms. The Australian military presence in the Territory was small. On top of Quen Toro, at 128 metres, overlooking the popular tourist beach of Anse Vata there is a plaque that reads:

" During the Second World War, as part of Australia's contribution to the defence of New Caledonia, an Australian coastal artillery unit called ' Robin Force' was commanded by Captain Carty-Salmon spent seven months on Quen-Toro to install and operate two 6" guns and to train local personnel."

If the graves at the war cemetery south of Bourail are any indication, then the New Zealand presence was larger. Some 40 New Zealand servicemen were buried in the cemetery, most of them airmen. New Zealand had a large camp outside Bourail. The Bourail museum with its welcoming message:" what we know is little compared with

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<sup>9</sup> *No Ribbons or Medals, the story of 'Hereward' an Australian counter espionage officer*, Valdemar Robert Wake, Jacobyte Books 2004, pp 36.

<sup>10</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, Peter Dennis et al, Oxford University Press Australia, 1995 pp 420

what we don't know" has an exhibition about the New Zealand camp. In it are photographs of the New Zealanders being granted the freedom of the town and marching with fixed bayonets along the main street. Bourail was and still is a strong Caldoche community that enjoys deer hunting and fishing.

After the war the Native Code was repelled but the Kanaky people were still struggling to have their voice heard by those in authority. The boom and bust cycle of nickel mining was reflected in the fortunes of the local economy. In 1947 the South Pacific Commission was formed made up of the old colonial powers and the emerging island nations of the Pacific. As the island communities gained their independence the old colonial powers withdrew. First the Netherlands and then Britain. But France held on. Today the Secretariat of the Pacific Communities (SPC), as it is now called, has 26 members of the Pacific island communities and four remaining founding countries viz. Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States of America. It was unlikely that Jean-Marie Tjibaou saw the SPC as a stepping stone to gain Kanaky independence on New Caledonia. He did believe in a loose federation of the Melanesian people made up of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. These were the people of the yam culture that Jean-Marie Tjibaou talked about during a lecture he gave to the University of Geneva in March 1981.

" For people in traditional Melanesian society, yams control the whole calendar, running right through the year. This is counted in moons. And that is the basis for all the celebrations and festivals scheduled. The time to enthrone the chief, at the moment of the new yams, or afterwards, when there is plenty to eat and so on. The time to build houses is set for the end of the year, before the cyclones, when it is dry,

when the straw is ripe, so that it is not gathered too early, lest it rot. That's the way everyone does it. I think it is important to note that it is the rhythm of nature which provides the rhythm of society, and thus, in the end, the rhythm of man himself."<sup>11</sup>

In 1971 the South Pacific Forum (SPF) was organised. Jean-Marie Tjibaou saw more political opportunities in this forum than in the SPC. France was not a member.

Tjibaou thought the SPF might work as an agency to form co-operative enterprises throughout the islands. He believed that New Caledonia as a French colony was in his words "out of the circuit" in being able to tap into inter-island trading that took place long before the French came. Tjibaou gave as successful examples of island generated economic activity the copra co-operatives in Vanuatu, sugar and copra co-operatives in Fiji, palm oil refineries in the Solomon Island and the passion fruit co-operatives on Niue. Tjibaou did not think that New Caledonia's reliance on nickel was a good idea. He claimed that the French administration did not have a policy for managing its mining resources. Fundamentally as a Kanaky, Tjibaou strongly objected to the land's rich resources being exploited for some one else's benefits. It was part of the Kanak culture that the land could not be bought and sold. The land belonged to the tribe that was indivisible. As far as existing mining practises was concerned Tjibaou was highly critical. In 1983 about 16 per cent of the Societe Le Nickel (SLN) workforce were Kanaks but there were only two Kanak managers. SLN's smelter at Dioniambo on the northern outskirts of Noumea has a workforce of 1,400. Tjibaou was not opposed mining. He even suggested that the Kanaky people should train in the necessary skills to run their own mines but he was opposed to current practise and even suggested that the export of all nickel ore should be stopped

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<sup>11</sup> *Jean-Marie Tjibaou*, opt cit pp 85-86

after 1989. What Tjibaou wanted was jobs. Jobs that would be created by the building of more smelters to process the ore. He was also opposed to SLN's monopoly. The Dioniambo smelter was the only smelter in the Territory since 1937. Now the Canadian nickel giant Inco has built a smelter at Goro in the Southern Province.

The New Caledonian independence movement had mixed feelings about tourism. On

14 June 1984 the Fayaoué tourist centre on the island of Ouvéa was burnt down.

Tjibaou said:

"...despite the problems at the Fayaoué tourist facility, there is a desire to get involved in the economy, and when they say that we Melanesians are socialists, it is in terms of traditional ideas about ownership. If you have things you have to give some away. That said, we are not against businesses making profits, provided that society as a whole benefits."<sup>12</sup>

The 1981 presidential election of the French socialist leader François Mitterrand was largely welcomed by Jean-Marie Tjibaou and the FLNK party. The Kanaky independence movement thought that a socialist French president would be more sympathetic to their point of view. It was not anticipated that Mitterrand would support the vested interests of the Caldoche, especially the mining interests as represented by Jacques Lafleur of the RPCR. But during his first seven-year term Mitterrand, like many other New Labour leaders, discovered the importance of market forces and privatisation. When the Socialists lost their majority in the National Assembly, Mitterrand was forced to work with the right-wing majority leader Jacques

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<sup>12</sup> *Jean-Marie Tjibaou*, op cit pp 118.

Chirac. Mitterrand successfully sought to seek a second presidential term in 1988.

During the campaign for his re-election Mitterrand made a statement about the Kanak claims for an independence referendum. He said in part:

" Mr Tjibaou and his party do not call for the exclusion of people of French origin and other races. They simply want, so to say, to decide this themselves, because they alone constitute universal suffrage.

I know this theory. For the seven years that I have been meeting him, Mr Tjibaou has not wavered. He is a man I respect, for whom speech goes beyond mere words. But I don't believe that the historic position of the Kanaks as the first occupants of this land is enough to put them in the right. One history against the other: Caledonians of European background, have also, through their labour, shaped that earth, been fed by it and put down roots."<sup>13</sup>

Mitterrand took a pragmatic approach to the issue of independence. He said if the population of New Caledonia were homogenous then the country would already be independent. But it wasn't. Mitterrand warned that independence could lead to civil war between two opposed communities of comparable size.

There was certainly no love lost between Jean-Marie Tjibaou and the Caldoche. The weight of history was too much. The practises of the *fait colonial* when Kanak women were given to Colons or French colonists in the 19th century without the permission of their chiefs or tribes was something the Kanak people never forgot. The Kanak

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<sup>13</sup> *Jean -Marie Tjibaou*, op cit pp 222.

revolts of 1878 and 1917 were brutally put down by the French authorities. According to the 1887 Native Code a Kanak man could only have a drink if he renounced his entitlement to be recognised as a Kanak. In 1956 the Kanaky people were given the right to take part in local affairs. But the authority of the French metropolitan government was consolidated in repeated parliamentary acts that tended to exclude Kanaks and limited their freedoms.

Jean-Marie Tjibaou was born in Tiendanite in 1936. The north east side of the Territory was dominated by Kanaky tribes and customs although there was limited contact with the Caldoche, often a humiliating experience for the young man. Jean-Marie Tjibaou was ordained a priest in the Catholic Church in 1966. He was sent to France and attended courses in Lyon and Paris. He left the priesthood in 1971 and married Marie Claude. They had four boys and adopted a girl. Jean-Marie Tjibaou was never meant for the priesthood not least because he wanted to restore the pride of his people in their own culture. In 1975 he organised the Melanesia Festival when more than 50,000 people turned out to see the Kanak culture on display for the first time. He organised the Maxha Group with its "raise your head campaign" to get Kanak people elected to local government. In 1977 he led the way by becoming Mayor of Hienghene.

Then came the dreadful events of the 1980s. In December 1984 within weeks of Tjibaou being elected President of the Provisional Kanaky Government, a group of Caldoche sharpshooters killed 10 Kanak men from Tiendanite. The following year Kanak leaders Eloi Machoro and Marcel Nonaro were killed by Gendarmerie marksmen. There was a 24-hour riot in Noumea following the murder of a young

Caldoche man. In 1988 four gendarmes stationed on Ouvéa Island were killed by Kanak militants. The militants took 27 hostages. The French Army stormed the militants' stronghold and 19 Kanaks and two soldiers were killed. Then came that awful day 4 May 1989 when a former pastor Djubelly Wea shot and killed Tjibaou and another Kanak leader. One of Tjibaou's bodyguards shot and killed Wea.

After all this blood letting the leaders on both sides appealed for peace and calm. The government in Paris became more conciliatory. The opening of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre on 5 May 1997 marked a new and important chapter in the Kanaky story. The Noumea Accord that was signed a year later with its promise of self-determination in 15 to 20 years time, is a promise that may come true but there are still many local conflicts yet to be resolved.

There are now about 200,000 permanent residents in New Caledonia (permanent might be misleading as some French people hold property in Noumea but don't live there year 'round.) The Kanaks are the largest group making up about 45 per cent of the population. People with a European background make up about 35 per cent, with the rest made up of Wallisians, Indonesians, Tahitians, Vietnamese, ni-Vanuatu, Indians, West Indians, Arabs and others in descending order of size.<sup>14</sup> The Wallisian group came to the Territory to work in the mines. Many of them support French rule. Kanaky independence supporters saw them as stooges. In the Noumea suburb of St Louis local militias were formed. There were repeated clashes between the two groups. Violent incidents were still taking place as recently as 2002.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *New Caledonia, Lonely Planet, Population and People.*, pp 38 (figures rounded up)

In September 1988, some eight months before he was assassinated, Jean-Marie Tjibaou gave an interview to RFO (*Radio France Outre-Meri*) during which he made the following comment:

"Their nationality doesn't matter: they can stay Chinese or stay French; if the country becomes independent- which in any case is what I wish for- then let everyone stay and keep working together to make this a dream country."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Pacific Islands Report*, Pacific Island Development Program with the support of the Pacific Islands Studies Unit, University of Hawai'i, Political Reviews, New Caledonia, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> *Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Kanaky*, op cit pp 266-267.