Introduction

The events of November 1984 didn’t just happen—although it is by no means clear exactly what conjuncture of circumstances caused them to take the form that they did.


To the refusal of self that colonialism imposes on us, we oppose the acceptance of self.


Assassinations, ambushes, massacres, gunfights at roadblocks and rural homesteads, destruction of property, the influx of thousands of French riot police and paratroopers to defend white settlers and mining firms from armed blacks in Rastafarian dreadlocks—such dramatic news images typified reporting on the Kanak uprising in New Caledonia in the 1980s. In rhetoric reminiscent of the Algerian independence war of the 1950s, the conservative metropolitan newspaper *Le Figaro* attacked the Socialist regime in Paris for allowing a “Caledonian disease” of criminal terrorist disorder to threaten France. A local loyalist Melanesian leader, Dick Ukeiwé, blamed the “infiltration of Marxism in this part of the world through links between the [Kanak Liberation Front] and Libya, Cuba and the Soviet Union.” *Le Figaro* portrayed the indigenous rebels as “savages” living in the “stone age” who obeyed the “law of the jungle,” and reporter Thierry Desjardins asserted, “there is no Kanak culture or civilization” (Spencer 1988, 180–185). Yet behind such sensationalist stereotyping lay a long history of foreign labeling and colonialism.

The term “Pacific” itself came from Ferdinand Magellan in 1521, because he felt relieved to escape the storms off Cape Horn, the southern tip of South America. Europeans created such names for their own mapping (Kirch 2000). By the eighteenth century, the vast island world in the heart of the Pacific that ancient voyagers had first settled and linked together with exchange systems was called “Polynesia” (many islands); it later became the eastern part of “Oceania.” In the 1830s, northwest Oceania became “Micronesia” (tiny islands) because of its many coral atolls, though it also has large volcanic islands, and the southwest became “Melanesia,” a racial label meaning islands of dark-skinned peoples. In culturally diverse Melanesia,
Europeans created “new” place-names for convenience, including “New Caledonia,” named after Scotland by British explorer James Cook in 1774. The term kanaka, a Hawaiian word for “person,” traveled around the region in shipboard and plantation pidgin and became canaque in French. Descendants of colonial settlers in New Caledonia would later call themselves calédoniens, while “Melanesian” was often a more polite label than canaque for the indigenous people. In the 1970s, local nationalists revalued “Kanak” (an invariable term, whether singular or plural) as a unifying identity formation because the indigenous people spoke thirty languages. Etymology and polarized politics ultimately pitted Pacific “Scots” against Melanesian “Hawaiians.” But the 1980s Kanak uprising was not simply about timeless ethnic markers, “tribal” warfare, or the Cold War.

Three historical changes had pushed New Caledonia to the breaking point. First, from 1959 to 1969, France unilaterally withdrew previously granted self-governing powers from the territory in order to keep control of local nickel mining, which it regarded as a strategic resource. The democratically elected majority in the Territorial Assembly called that regression a betrayal of trust. An analogy might be if the US Congress had revoked Hawaiian statehood and pushed back the clock to the territorial period before 1959. Second, in violation of United Nations General Assembly resolution 2621 (1970), the French state and its local administration deliberately encouraged new immigration during a nickel-mining boom in order to marginalize supporters of self-government. Kanak were already a slight demographic minority, and many felt that their identity as a people was in danger of extinction. Third, in response to these two structural changes, young New Caledonians returning from university studies in France, who had experienced the May 1968 student-worker uprising, felt that powerful outside interests and a flood of migrant opportunists were extinguishing local progressive voices and recolonizing the country. They formed a protest group, the Foulards Rouges (Red Scarves), in what became known as the Kanak Awakening (Réveil Canaque). Increasing political, ethnic, and economic polarization thus culminated in the pro-independence revolt of the 1980s. Together with widespread opposition to French nuclear testing in the Tuamotu atolls near Tahiti, the Kanak struggle to decolonize also aroused anti-French sentiments around the Pacific.

Despite the revocation of local self-government and the artificial creation of a loyalist majority through orchestrated migration, pro-French settlers seemed unwilling to believe that their metropolitan-educated offspring could turn toward anticolonial behavior on their own. Criticisms of state repression in New Caledonia or of nuclear testing in French Polynesia were attributed to intrusive global leftism or to an “Anglo-Saxon” conspiracy to seize France’s colonies (NR 1986, Doumenge 1990). A local-born history professor at the University of New Caledonia also critiqued “Anglo-Saxon” writing about his country for having “in their mirror the situation of first
peoples in their own countries.” He said such authors did not contextualize French colonialism within the larger historical process of European expansion: “The Caledonian case thus seems to have been a particular site for expiating the general sins committed by colonization in the Pacific islands.” The United States, Australia, and New Zealand “became sovereign not in the name of the aborigines but in the name of multi-communal societies that more or less marginalize a certain number of migrant communities and the indigenous peoples” (Angleviel 2003a, 139).

The comparative study of colonization is certainly a topic that needs more work in the Pacific, and anglophone settler countries of the region have indeed marginalized their own indigenous minorities and aroused protest movements. At first, post–World War II decolonization in New Caledonia had moved even faster than in anglophone Oceania, for example in the granting of French citizenship and voting rights after 1946, yet that progressive trend had reversed direction after the return of Charles de Gaulle to power in 1958. Meanwhile, most of the anglophone south Pacific colonies decolonized peacefully in the 1960s and 1970s. When several postcolonial secession revolts in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea and military coups in Fiji made headlines in the 1980s, some French writers then argued that the “anglo-saxons” had “abandoned” their colonies too soon by “inflicting” independence on them suddenly, whereas France had chosen to stay on as a peacekeeper and developer (de Deckker 2000, 133–135). As recently as 2002, a French geographer wrote that instability was making Melanesia into the “black hole” of the Pacific, except for French New Caledonia, despite the armed Kanak uprising in the 1980s that forced Paris to negotiate. He blamed indigenous cultures for creating their own problems rather than any changes caused by foreign colonialism or development projects (Doumenge 2002; Chappell 2005). Insulted Kanak retorted by calling him “the last white hole in Oceanian university research” (Tahiti-Pacifique Magazine, Jan 2003, 43).

Near-parity between indigenous and immigrant inhabitants creates a peculiar kind of stress. Imagine, for example, if almost half the population of the continental United States, Hawai’i, Canada, New Zealand, or Australia were indigenous: what forms of politics might result? In independent Fiji, the tension caused by such a bipolar indigenous-to-immigrant ratio provoked the country’s first military coup in 1987 because Fijians controlled the army and wanted to suppress a perceived threat to their paramountcy by Indo-Fijians. New Caledonia has had a similar bipolar ethnic ratio, but when France revoked its autonomy, local anticolonialists had no organized military card to play because the country was not independent. The indigenous Kanak kept their civil rights but felt pushed aside by immigration and had to improvise to survive. That raised the question of how the nation should be defined. Was New Caledonia a settler state that extended France around the world, as most immigrants advocated, or
an indigenous-centered country in Oceania, as pro-independence parties asserted? Could it somehow become both, working toward “a common destiny,” as the Noumea Accord of 1998 has proposed? Perhaps it can through further consensual negotiations, but the legacy of the loss of autonomy and renewed immigration in the 1960s and 1970s was a structural rupture that explains why the 1980s uprising occurred when it did. That trauma has left deep scars on the generation who experienced it. In short, unilateral recolonization, after a real taste of local self-government, was a dangerously anachronistic policy.

So was French nuclear testing in the region. US and British atomic bomb tests in the Pacific had already stopped before the aboveground test ban treaty of 1963. Yet that year de Gaulle told French Polynesian representatives that a scientific testing facility would solve their budget woes. French nuclear tests had to shift away from the Sahara after Algerian independence in 1962, and European protests about fallout had already forced the testing underground before the program moved to the Pacific. Yet in 1966, France began exploding atomic bombs aboveground in the fragile Tuamotu atolls. After region-wide protests over the fallout, the tests were finally moved “below” ground in 1974, into holes drilled in the porous basalt under the coral. In 1985, French secret agents even bombed a Greenpeace protest vessel in Auckland harbor in New Zealand, killing a photographer (Firth 1987). Given de Gaulle’s desire to use overseas territories to help rebuild the prestige of France after World War II (Aldrich 1993), it could be argued that Gaullist France was actually more obsessed with national rivalry than the Anglophones who were supposedly “abandoning” the south Pacific. When de Gaulle observed the first atomic blast over Moruroa lagoon, the wind insisted on making France a “great power” with its own nuclear deterrence (de Gaulle 1966a). Like France, the United States and Britain had regarded Pacific islands as “remote” (from their own voters), but their bomb testing had already stopped. France blamed criticism of its own nuclear testing on a regional conspiracy of “Anglo-Saxon” labor parties, unions, and churches (Doumenge 1990). Yet the Nuclear Free and Independent Movement attributed the local inability to stop nearly two hundred French bomb blasts in the Tuamotus and ongoing US missile testing in the Marshall Islands to “nuclear colonialism” (Robie 1989; Danielsson and Danielsson 1986).

The challenge posed by ethnic polarization in New Caledonia resulted from a century of colonial segregation, which exacerbated “the sometimes difficult coexistence in the contemporary period of communities emerging from the colonial period, some still clinging to certain outdated privileges while others would seek an unshared sovereignty that excludes later migrants” (Angleviel 2003a, 139). That “unshared sovereignty” refers to the slogan of “Kanak independence” proclaimed by local activists from 1974 on. It was actually a call for re-centering the country in Oceania, where
identities are based on relationships with others. But settlers saw that call as a reverse racism that would turn the old colonial racial hierarchy upside down instead of as an invitation to build new kinds of alliances. The polarization theme cannot be avoided in any study of New Caledonia, but a purely dichotomous ethnic approach ascribes inevitability to the 1980s. It suggests a conundrum without a solution, except perhaps in belated “multicultural” assimilation or in provincial partition. Once drawn, ethnic boundaries tend to endure (Barth 1969). Nevertheless, the unilateral withdrawal of autonomy from New Caledonia in the 1960s was a policy decision based on metropolitan self-interest, so it was both structural and contingent. So was this consequence: in July 1969, returning university students spray painted anticolonial graffiti on the walls of public buildings in the capital, Noumea, on the eve of Bastille Day, when the French celebrate their own revolution of 1789. At first a handful of young students on “active” summer vacation, the Foulards Rouges would give rise to an independence movement that ultimately redefined the nation. But their role in sparking the genesis of local nationalism has so far been insufficiently studied.

France annexed New Caledonia in 1853, but formal negotiation between Paris and the local inhabitants did not occur until the 1980s, after activists had forced it to happen. The consensual peace accords of Matignon-Oudinot in 1988 and of Noumea in 1998 proposed economic “rebalancing” between the Kanak and non-Kanak communities and working toward a shared future in a context of restored autonomy. With hindsight, participants and observers in the country’s postwar history have seen missed opportunities. Maurice Lenormand, former leader of the multiethnic, autonomist Union Calédonienne (UC), called the 1960s negation of autonomy a “lost opportunity” that “ruined decolonization” (1991, 155). Ismet Kurtovitch and Jean-Marc Regnault have said the same about the polarization that undermined the UC’s optimistic motto of “two colors, one people” (2002, 165–166). Peace accord negotiator Alain Christnacht described the revocation of the 1956 loi cadre (or enabling law, which had first granted autonomy) as a “missed opportunity” that led to the independence movement (2004, 37–39). Former UC minister Jean Le Borgne said that the Gaullist regime ended a decolonization process, and by 1982 several leaders who had opposed autonomy in 1958 finally supported it, but too late (2006, 585–589). Former conservative politician Georges Chatenay noted the historical irony that peacemaking efforts in 1988, after the Kanak revolt, resembled those of 1982–1984, when centrists and Kanak formed a coalition (1994, 342). The pendulum swings of French domestic politics repeatedly exacerbated local contradictions, as Paris continued to extract prestige and profits from overseas territories in return for small fractions of its national budget (Freyss 1995).

Based on what I have discovered in my research in local archives and in two dozen interviews with participants, I think the voices of protest in the
1970s deserve to be heard again, in hopes that they may be better understood this time as communities seek a future together. Kanak nationalists and settler leftists both opposed colonialism. The former wanted respect for their cultural identity as the indigenous inhabitants and, on the main island of Grande Terre, to recover lost lands. The leftists condemned racial inequality and economic exploitation of the multiethnic working class and proposed democratic socialism. The two categories of activists were not mutually exclusive; their relationship was at times syncretic or symbiotic. For example, a Kanak nationalist told me about a small, white leftist pro-independence group that had recently disbanded: “They talked and talked to us about what should be done until we grew tired of them.” Yet that same Kanak belongs to a pro-independence party that officially espouses “scientific socialism.” The “socialist” aspect of Kanak independence actually helped to make it more inclusive of non-Kanak, but “socialism” was a bad word among most local-born settlers and nickel boom migrants during the Cold War. In the post-1998 context of seeking a common future, Kanak may yet come to be understood as a national, not simply an ethnic, identity.

Kanak and white leftist anticolonialists generated a new political discourse in the 1970s that shifted from recovering lost autonomy to achieving full independence. They proposed nationhood in place of the “Caledonian personality” that the old UC had first articulated. The idea of having a local citizenship and nationality—to allow more control over voting rights, immigration, and job hiring—is now enshrined in the Noumea Accord, which has been incorporated into the French national constitution. Kanak independence supporters also sought help from outside the closed French colonial circuit as early as 1975—for example, from the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement, the South Pacific Forum, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the United Nations. They gained the country’s reinscription on the UN Decolonization Committee’s list in 1986. That international aspect of their struggle needs another look instead of dismissal as Cold War meddling with local politics. Blaming indigenous activism on outside agitators is an old colonial ploy that treats educated natives as inauthentic and demotes nationalists to misguided subjects. Nineteenth-century French colonizers attributed Kanak protests to “incitations” from convicts or missionaries, despite indigenous land losses, a lack of political rights, forced labor, and unfair taxes (Delignon 1898, 169; Bullard 2000b, 89–90). But before beginning a more detailed discussion of colonization and struggles to decolonize in New Caledonia, we should first reflect on how “nations” come into being and also explore the two worldviews that encountered each other when France annexed New Caledonia in 1853. Historical interaction shaped the political emergence and confrontations of rival nationalisms in the 1970s and 1980s because they met in a colonial (unequal) context.
Making Nations

Theories about nationalism have become numerous enough to be called “a cottage industry” (Duara 1995, 3). Robert Ardrey once defined a “biological nation” as a group with at least two adult males who coordinate to defend a territory (1966, 191). Yet scholars debate whether nations are primordial (ancient) in origin or instrumental (modern) inventions that arise from confrontations with “others” who are defined as different. Clearly, a national identity needs emotive content to rally people around, such as a common language, religion, or customs; a historical link to a territory; and a claim to sovereignty, both positive (development) and negative (defense). Demographic mass and cyclically repeated myths and rituals can maintain “its mutability in persistence, its persistence through change” (Smith 1986, 32). Benedict Anderson said of “imagined communities” that “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1983, 15). Nations are creative acts of will, and nationalism, as their mobilized legitimacy, can precede the nation-state. In 1882, Ernest Renan spoke on “What is a Nation?” at the Sorbonne in Paris:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle…. Man is a slave neither of his race nor his language, nor of his religion, nor of the course of rivers nor the direction taken by mountain chains. A large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart, creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation [through] sacrifices which demand the abdication of the individual to the advantage of the community. (1996, 52–54)

Nation building combines both remembering and forgetting. Nationalists reify unifying connections among members but exclude domestic or foreign aliens. They downplay internal differences and untidy links with strangers. “A nation is defined through a process of exclusion; a self is defined in opposition to an other” (Danforth 1995, 20). Collective identity can vary from relatively pragmatic networks of customary community, through simplified “us” vs “them” ethnic stereotypes, to politicized nationhood seeking a state. Nationalists tend to be primordialists, unlike academics, because their audiences are different. The former seek to inspire people using kinship metaphors as solidarity symbols, such as mother country, fatherland, brothers and sisters, or ancestral heritage. They offer their members a kind of patriotic immortality, even anonymously as in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. But academics are professional quibblers who encourage people to think for themselves, and no one ever marched in support of complexity. Like a group safety net, “nationalism offers security and perceived stability at a time when life-worlds are fragmented and
people are being uprooted...a sentiment of wholeness and continuity with the past” (Eriksen 1993, 105).

Nineteenth-century European intellectuals fashioned a romantic, genealogical vision of nationality built on mythic golden ages, folktale collections, glorious battlegrounds, heroic martyrs, customs, costumes, dances, anthems, national holidays, flags, parades, monuments, integrative military service and school textbooks, birth certificates, fixed borders, and passports. The bureaucratized nation-state embodied “the desire to become a people rather than a population, a recognized and respected somebody in the world who counts” (Geertz 1973, 237), despite the risk of creating a totalitarian “iron cage” (Weber 1958, 181). Let us consider a pair of origin myths from opposite sides of the planet to get a sense of how rival nationalists in New Caledonia have sought metaphorical building blocks, whether generated locally or in a very distant region bordering the Atlantic.

A Tale of Two Islands (or Three?)

In the beginning, some Kanak elders say, the earth was turning in a spiral, covered with water except for the tip of a mountain, where Bumé (or Buumêê) stood. As the moon rose, Bumé tore from it a tooth and stuck it in the earth, where it rotted and gave birth to worms. The worms that fell deep into the sea and stayed there became eels, while those that swam on the surface and climbed onto emerging peaks of land became lizards, with human faces. Some shed their skins and became spirits, then shed them again and became fully human. Bumé named the first three lizard men Têê Kanaké, Dwi Daulo, and Bwae Bealo, and it was they who founded all the clans of the island. Têê Kanaké, the eldest and an orator, divided the emerging lands among them. Some elders say that the moon itself planted the tooth and that Bumé was the first man-lizard and the rest were his sons. Others say that Dwi Daulo, in seeking a wife, jumped on a stone, which broke and rolled down to the receding seashore. The waves threw sand against the fragments of rock, which bled, and the blood coagulated into men and women, who learned to eat leaves, cook yams, and fish, and gradually spread through the valleys. Another version says the sun tore the tooth from the moon and stuck it into the earth, starting the worm-lizard-man cycle, and Bumé was killed by his brother in a fight over the possession of their sister. Bumé’s spirit thereafter withdrew to their home, the moon, and his brother and sister gave birth to the three founders of the clans. Some spirit-ancestors returned to nature as petrified rocks or living trees, and in competing creation stories, other unnamed people came from fruit or from the moonlit, extracted fingernails of Gorouna, who had clung to a mountaintop in the flood waters holding the first shell money and a barkcloth-beater. He would exchange women in marriage with Bumé’s people to establish needed customary laws.
Anthropologists have collected and analyzed variations of this particular Kanak origin myth (Guiart 1963; Bensa and Rivière 1982; Godin 1999; Leblic 2000), which comes from the Païcî language region that stretches from Poindimié on the east coast of Grande Terre across the central mountain range to Koné on the west coast. Despite occasional conflicts, the inhabitants generally maintained a social equilibrium through complex alliances among clans and migration, from which arose the rival but intertwining creation stories. Sometimes intermarriage between the Dui and Bai clans founded by the mythic lizard-men prevails, and in other cases it does not. The scholars suggest, in their secular way, that these stories are poetic metaphors that employ spiritual beliefs in shape-shifting nature spirits and culture heroes in order to legitimize changing power hierarchies and social relations, and thus they do not describe actual creations. They say the origin myths may date back only a few centuries to when migrants from Vanuatu or the Loyalty Islands arrived on the east coast of Grande Terre and spread their influence across the island. In a more recent, indigenous spin on the core story, however, nationalist political philosopher Jean-Marie Tjibaou, in the Melanesia 2000 cultural festival that he helped to organize in 1975, melded the semantic similarity of Têê Kanaké with the chosen nationalist label Kanak, in a sense building on a common linguistic heritage. Tjibaou launched a “national myth” of Kanaky, a cultural synthesis for a new country linked to the archetypical Kanaké.

On the other side of the world, another national mythology centered around a little island in the Seine River known as Île de la Cité, in a region called Île de France. That cité, in the sense of community, was an island refuge, religious shrine, fishing village, craft center, and fortified base for ancient peoples like the Gallic Parisii, who traded on riverboats in a wide network of waterways. Druid priests led the tribes of Gauls in the worship of nature spirits, especially water sources and trees, and a pantheon of deities including Teutates, who protected travelers and inspired musicians and orators. The Gauls claimed descent from Death, a deity of rebirth and fertility with horns, a symbol of the moon (Bumé’s home). The Druids said that Death had come from across the sea and that the souls of the dead departed in that direction; and the Druids themselves claimed to have come from across the water, from England (Lavisse 1910). Waves of colonizers such as Romans, Franks, Vikings, and Burgundians later seized Paris, but the royal domain of Île de France gradually radiated its dialect outward as a national language. Many more layers of legitimizing myths were grafted onto this expanding realm: Frankish descent from Meroveus, who one legend claimed was fathered by the sea god in the form of a bull, and Christian legends of the headless walk of martyred Saint Denis to Montmartre, the salvation of Paris from the Huns by Saint Geneviève of Nanterre, or Clovis’s gift from an angel of a shield bearing the fleur-de-lis, a myth that divine-right monarchists cherished.
The *franco-gaulois* state grew under Charlemagne and then contracted back to Île de France under Hugh Capet, who was elected king in 987 and anointed by the Church as a symbolic heir to the monarchy of ancient Israel. By the twelfth century, after gradual dynastic expansion, Paris was said to have been named after the seducer of Helen of Troy. New layers of myth included Joan of Arc’s sainted martyrdom in the Hundred Years’ War against England; religious civil wars that were ended by Huguenot King Henry IV’s conversion to Catholicism because “Paris is well worth a mass”; and King Louis XIV’s claim at Versailles that he was the cultural “sun” (Apollo) of Europe. René Descartes, having witnessed the bloodshed of the religious Thirty Years’ War, promoted a rational, secular modernity based on mathematics and science, as did Enlightenment philosophers who followed. But the bloody storming of the Bastille in 1789 and the Terror’s guillotine tainted the myth of democratic revolution, as did the contradictory Napoleonic twins of liberation and imperial glory. French historians debated the relative contributions of the Celtic Gauls or Germanic Franks to their national identity (especially in times of German threats), but popular culture celebrated the little Gallic cartoon hero Asterix, who would drink a Druid’s magic potion to defend his home village (Gross 2005; Asterix 2011).

Both France and Kanaky thus have a complex array of identity mythologies. Rival Kanak and French ideologists have tried to synthesize their own national origins and collective characters for greater legitimacy. Kanak indigeneity located its founding myths in Oceania, but French national mythologies, while expansionist, began on an island in a river in Europe, leaving the colonial settler standing somewhere between far-off Asterix and nearby Bumé. Perhaps he is partly represented by Tonton Marcel, the little *brousard* (bush settler) depicted in Bernard Berger’s cartoon series *La Brousse en Folie* (La Brousse en Folie 2011), who is described as loving hunting, fishing, drinking, and being feisty. In a popular panel, Marcel’s son asks his mission schoolteacher if God is white, Kanak, Asian, or Polynesian? The teacher replies, “A mixture of all that,” so the son runs home to tell his father that God is *caldoche!* Marcel scratches himself, saying he already knows that. *Caldoche* is often seen as a pejorative term for white settlers, but convict descendant Berger has played with it from his own “common destiny” viewpoint since 1983, idealizing bush life in order to “reappropriate our history” (NC, 13 July 2009).

French-Kanak interaction has not occurred in a historical vacuum, given the long imperial competition between France and a third island country, England. In fact, the national identities of both France and England developed at least partly in opposition to each other, from the Norman invasion of 1066 to their rivalry in the south Pacific, where the British established a convict colony in Australia in 1788 and another settler colony in New Zealand in 1840. France lost the race for the latter, but it soon seized Tahiti,
which had been under British influence, and in 1853 it annexed New Caledonia just before the British tried to raise the Union Jack. If the British had succeeded, New Caledonia might be independent today, as four neighboring Melanesian states are. But the French in the Pacific have felt surrounded by anglophone colonizing powers, from the United States in the north to Britain, Australia, and New Zealand in the south: “France appeared, and was made to appear, like a troublemaker in the Anglo-Saxon family backyard” (Perez 2004, 97). If that sounds a bit nostalgic or even paranoid, we should remember that in 1949, when General Douglas MacArthur ruled US-occupied Japan, he said that US bases in east Asia had made the Pacific into an “anglo-saxon lake” (Takamae 2002, 513). French activist José Bové struck an Asterixian blow for national pride (and slow food) in 1999, when he trashed a McDonald’s restaurant in France (Le Figaro, 7 April 2001, 42).

Could Bumé ever meet Asterix? In the 1980s, an intriguing relationship developed between Tjibaou and Larzac, a rebellious peasant community in southwestern France that protested against the expropriation of a hundred small farms by an expanding Gaullist military base in the early 1970s. Their struggle attracted activists inspired by the May 1968 student-worker uprising in France, including Socialist Michel Rocard, who later negotiated the Matignon Accord. When Socialist François Mitterrand became president in 1981, he stopped the base expansion. Larzac human-rights lawyers helped to defend anticolonial protesters in New Caledonia and Tahiti, and in 1985 they invited the Kanak liberation movement to send a delegation, which received a warm welcome. Both movements sought sovereignty over their land against outsider capitalists and militarists who violated their communal values. On his visits to France, Tjibaou found refuge in the “bush” of Larzac, which he regarded as “indigenous Europe.” People there still worked the soil, which he said “breathed” as it did in his home village. Moreover, they had won their long battle against French state power and globalization. When his hosts in Larzac erected a plaque honoring their link to Kanaky in 1988, Tjibaou planted a tree on a small symbolic plot dedicated to the Kanak people, joking, “I take possession of France” (Waddell 2008, 160).

A Transnational Crossroads

New Caledonia is a zone of overlapping transnations that have cultural and political links to both Europe and the Pacific region. Precolonial indigenous mappings of Oceania suggest complex webs of identities that call into question colonial partitions by “modern” states with rigid cadastral boundaries. New Caledonia, like Roman Gaul, is an artificial creation. Its territorial borders, even its name, are arbitrary relics of the scramble for real estate by European powers overseas. Epeli Hau’ofa of Tonga proposed
a more holistic vision of Oceania that focused on long-term networks of memorized voyaging routes between landfalls in a “sea of islands” that is several times larger than the United States (1994). In Solomon Islands, for example, marine tenure rights are traced not by property maps but by family stories about markers of ancestral paths across lagoons to islets, reefs, and beyond (Hviding 1996). In New Caledonia, spiritual beliefs linked the sea and the land, and customary tenure applied to the land, fresh water, lagoons, reefs, and maritime zones (Teulières-Preston 2000; H Colombani 1997). In the Fiji-Tonga-Sāmoa triangle, distinctive “national” identities arose through exchanges and wars with each other over centuries. In Fiji, vulagi (migrant guests) gained acceptance through gift exchanges and service to taukei (landowning, indigenous hosts) (Ravuvu 1991). In a gesture that transcended colonial borders, a Samoan brought ashore the flame of the 2011 Pacific Games in New Caledonia. He landed on Ouvea in the Loyalty Islands and was welcomed by a local village whose genealogy included ancestors from Sāmoa, Tonga, and Wallis (Uvea) and Futuna (NC, 18 July 2011). Oceanian identities are based on relationships (Leenhardt 1979).

Pacific Islander diasporas have continued to seek new opportunities. Aloisio Sako of Wallis and Futuna leads an “Oceanian” political party in New Caledonia that joined the Kanak independence movement. He told me he believed that God had made his people hardy voyagers so they would always find the resources they needed to survive, and he hoped that immigrant Polynesians, if they show proper respect to the first inhabitants, may find a place around the Kanak “kava bowl” (1994). Anthropologist Alban Bensa said of New Caledonia, “Precolonial society was not composed of tiny enclaves isolated from each other. Quite to the contrary...one observes at the same time rootedness in a territory and the extension of familial and political ties far into the distance.” Kanak oral traditions and sacred sites marked “paths of alliance” along ancestral itineraries across the main island of Grande Terre and the outer islands (Bensa 1995, 34). Interclan exchanges of shell valuables, crafts, spouses, or foodstuffs built social networks, and visitors had to use the proper entry path into the community through lesser lineages in order to see the chief. As on other islands, strangers who needed land to survive might be granted some to use (not own) if they followed protocol and respected the primacy of the masters of the land. They could intermarry with their hosts and perhaps become chiefly diplomats toward other outsiders, but they earned acceptance through service. In 1946 when Kanak clans were once again allowed to travel freely outside their colonial tribal reserves, many retraced ancestral itineraries to reestablish old connections (Thompson and Adloff 1971, 284).

Roots as well as routes thus played roles in indigenous Oceanian identity. As in the Bumé story, Kanak clans linked their ancestry to founding spirit-ancestors who first shaped the land and cleared the bush for cultivation. A conical chiefly house was built on a sacred mound of earth whose
center post was carved with totemic images. Around it were the homes of relatives and client clans, ancestral burials, gardens of male-gendered yams, and irrigated terraces of female-gendered taro. Kanak land was originally personal property because the clan founder established title and his senior descendants acted as elder brothers and land masters when distributing land for use to junior lineages or later arrivals. Family estates varied in scale and quality within a hierarchy of relatives, and as communities became more heterogeneous through migration and exchange, ceremonial protocols reenacted or adjusted the ranked status of their members. Even when chiefs were chosen from new arrivals because of a conquest, the founding clan usually retained the role of land masters. Dense, fluctuating webs of social relations developed over time, but each useful tree or spring or plot of ground had a particular owner whose claim depended on inheritance or alliances. French colonial administrators would later assign larger-scale native reserves to “tribes” and appoint chiefs to rule the new realms, which were defined as communally owned and inalienable (Saussol 1979; Dauphiné 1989).

The concept of indigeneity is not uncontested in New Caledonia because it implies a moral high ground compared to latecomers. During the high tide of European expansion overseas in the late nineteenth century, amateur treasure hunters often regarded ancient artwork or monuments in white-ruled colonies as evidence that a lost tribe of Israel or other light-skinned outsiders had preceded indigenous subjects (Garlake 1990; Kennedy 1996). The latter thus needed to be “civilized” or, after Social Darwinist theories arose, were doomed to extinction or servitude. Melanesia, where dark-skinned peoples with fluctuating leadership purportedly waged endless wars and ate people, was contrasted with Polynesia, with its more recognizable aristocratic hierarchies and, to white men, its more appealing women (Howe 1984). British legal scholar Sir Henry Maine voiced a common Eurocentric idea that primitive tribes possessed only occupancy rights to land based on kinship, whereas modern states were built on territorial sovereignty and individual property ownership (1861). In French colonial thinking, archeological deep time reinforced beliefs in universal stages of human progress from the stone age to modern industry: “Inferior races, the product of earlier times that remained in isolated spots of the globe, would be conquered by the superior European races just as Neanderthal man had been conquered by prehistoric invasions” (Bullard 2000a, 20).

In Oceania, as in the Americas, indigenous peoples were epidemiologically vulnerable to introduced epidemic diseases and often suffered severe population decline after early European contact (Stannard 1989). In New Caledonia, the steady decline in numbers of the indigenous people confirmed the opinions of visitors like Jules Garnier that Kanak were racially inferior and should be replaced by two million European migrants (Garnier 1868, 196, 215). To legitimize colonization, amateur archeologists claimed
that New Caledonian petroglyphs, earthen mounds, stone structures, and irrigation terraces had not been created by the Melanesians but rather by earlier light-skinned inhabitants whose civilization had been destroyed by darker invaders (Sand 1995, 38–39). This myth remains popular among some settlers who seek to undermine Kanak claims to aboriginality.

An artificial distinction between “autochthonous” and “indigenous” became a favorite theme of the Société des Études Historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (SEHNC), which was founded by settler historians in 1968. SEHNC President Bernard Brou suggested that Lapita pottery—which was first found in 1952 in northern Grande Terre and whose archeological-site dates have been used to trace a west-to-east migration of Austronesian speakers from New Guinea to Tonga—was similar to ceramics produced in the ancient Mediterranean, China, and Jomon-era Japan. He was inclined to think that its creators were the Ainu, “once masters of all Japan, who are the true Oceanians” (Brou 1970, 86). But their civilization was supposedly lost after the “Ainoids” were absorbed by later Melanesian migrants. In the 1980s, an opponent of Kanak nationalism claimed in a letter to the editor of the local newspaper that ancient Melanesians were starving hunters who knew nothing of pottery or irrigated farming and had wrecked a more advanced way of life (NC, 5 Oct 1982). By 1988, however, an SEHNC publication criticized this politicization of archeology, as 130 petroglyph sites and motifs suggested migration routes that coincided with recorded Kanak oral traditions (Buchalski and Pierron 1988; Guiart 1953).

Anthropology once explained change in supposedly static Pacific Island societies with a “wave theory” of serial migrations, but a more recent scientific approach examines the differences found in layers of local settlement over time. New Caledonian archeologist Christophe Sand has pointed out that it is unrealistic to assign ethnic faces to the makers of ancient artifacts without skeletal evidence. The intensive taro irrigation systems in New Caledonia, such as the terraced slopes of Col de la Pirogue, emerged only in the late first millennium AD as populations grew, over two thousand years after the Lapita potters had arrived (Sand 1995, 260–262). Patrick Kirch said that Lapita pottery’s distinctive geometric, dentated decoration was linked to elite burials and trade, not to large-scale population movements; it also transmuted into plain ware styles in Fiji and New Caledonia rather than simply stopping (2000). The earliest Austronesian-speaking migrants in Island Melanesia lived in small hamlets built on stilt houses on reefs or lagoon shores and relied on fishing, hunting, gathering, and shifting (not irrigated) horticulture. The oldest known sites of Lapita pottery occur on islands near New Guinea where Melanesians lived as early as 20,000 years ago, and Polynesian genetic data contains some Melanesian DNA due to “significant interbreeding” between Austronesian-speakers and Papuan-speakers: “All present Austronesian groups, whether in Melanesia or Polynesia, also share a heritage derived from a Non-Austronesian Melanesian origin, whether it
be in the food crops they cultivate, aspects of their material culture and art, certain genetic markers, or in aspects of the structure and lexicon of their languages” (Spriggs 1995, 127). At Teouma, a Lapita potter burial site in Vanuatu, genetic studies of skeletons defy simplistic categorization according to “modern” ethnic stereotypes (Matisoo-Smith and others 2007).

Austronesian is a linguistic classification, not a racial one, and the Kanak languages of New Caledonia belong to it. A hypothesis emerges of small groups voyaging back and forth through archipelagoes where craft production and long-distance trading systems already existed, notably in obsidian for tool making. Precolonial New Caledonia received migrants by at least 1200 BC and continued to attract not only Melanesians but also, later on, Polynesians. The result was a “supple system of integration” as societies continued to evolve (Sand 1995, 272–274). Given the myriad small-scale population movements over millennia, a distinction between autochthonous and indigenous is rather arbitrary. Yet Kanak indigeneity is based on over three thousand years of Oceanian presence before French annexation and a century of colonial segregation after that. Some settlers say that because local clans were not a unified people before colonialism, Kanak cannot claim to have lost their collective sovereignty under French rule: “People gradually became Kanak, to affirm their existence and thus an emerging identity vis-à-vis the immigrant communities” (Angleviel 1999, 36). It is true that ancient migrants to the islands of New Caledonia spoke thirty indigenous languages and were divided into many self-governing clans, but is the absence of a single polity sufficient to erase a claim to sovereignty? So-called “stateless” societies were not as “defective” as colonizers argued, and they often resisted hierarchical statehood by organizing systems of customary rules without rulers (Gledhill 1994). In fact, like other countries in Oceania, precolonial New Caledonia had growing chiefly polities as populations and resource use expanded.

Christophe Sand and his Kanak colleagues Jacques Bole and André Ouetcho have argued that social evolution in New Caledonia produced “complex chiefdoms controlling large territories,” with impressive irrigation systems that were “the most complex of Oceania” (2007, 314, 315). But post-European contact epidemics likely destabilized some polities. The precontact indigenous population was likely many times larger than the conventional estimate of 50,000 (Sand, Bole, and Ouetcho 2007). Based on cultural dynamics and historical data, Bronwen Douglas detected a trend toward “state formation” by 1840 in the Loyalty Islands, the Isle of Pines, and northeastern Grande Terre, as political leaders shifted emphasis from generalized nature worship toward reverence for their own lineage ancestors (1982). European traders who introduced firearms and prestige items into exchange networks further stimulated structural evolution: “Chiefdoms expanded, contracted and altered in composition on the basis of political and military considerations and the success or otherwise of their leaders.
During the first half of the 19th century a tendency to political consolidation emerged in several areas” (Douglas 1980, 27). Missionaries also helped to consolidate political centralization through chiefly coalitions, although “change was predicated upon the internal logic and style of a stable, yet dynamic culture” (Douglas 1982, 403). Nevertheless, in Pouebo, half the population died from epidemics brought by foreign ships on the eve of French annexation (Dauphiné 1992, 12). Studies of Kanak societies need to consider not only depopulation but also their confinement in colonially created, poor quality “tribal” reserves; wars of resistance; land confiscations; and the crowding together of both refugees and earlier inhabitants under administratively appointed chiefs patrolled by French gendarmes (Bensa 2000; Naepels 1998; Sand 1995).

Behind politicized debates about indigeneity in New Caledonia lurks a subtext of how to define “civilization.” European expansionists claimed that they were bringing it to the peoples they colonized, yet the word “civilization” did not enter the English or French languages until the mid-eighteenth century. The Latin root *civis* refers to citizenship in a political order, but Enlightenment philosophers distinguished themselves not only from so-called “barbarians” (who at least formed empires) and “savages” overseas but also from their own lower classes, who lacked proper “civility” (Chappell 2000). They struggled to reconcile their newfound faith in universal human nature with the cultural diversity of the world (Vyverberg 1989). Propagandist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu later called colonization a duty, a right, even an art: “The merit of a colonizing people is to place the young society it has created in the conditions most appropriate for the development of its natural abilities” (1891, xvi). His view implied that the only way an indigenous society could evolve was under colonial rule rather than through mutual exchange and indigenous appropriation. Yet colonialism is an unequal relationship between peoples. In overseas territories, especially in Melanesia, it often enforced racial segregation, negated indigenous self-determination, and arrested political evolution. Jean Guiart once likened Noumea to an ancient Greek colony on a foreign shore because of its hubris (1984, 335). Today, indigenous identities are defined by descent from the first occupants, a distinctive cultural heritage, a spiritual relationship with ancestral lands, and oppression by a state (Niezen 2003). After annexation in 1853, the islands of Bumé encountered a different kind of migration, not simply another voyaging canoe. But which version of France would arrive in New Caledonia, the revolutionary or the imperial?

**Indivisible Republic?**

Modern France has emerged from a long process of nation building that is ongoing (Birnbaum 2001). The expansion and consolidation of the old
national monarchy promoted a broad sense of familial loyalty to the ruler of one’s native land, *la patrie*. The revolutionaries of 1789 sought to transform that monarchy into a nation-state founded on the people’s democratic will and on universal principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, not on a particular culture or religion (Bell 2001). The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen combined individual rights with national sovereignty. In 1792, the anthem “*Le Marseillaise*” called on patriotic “children of the country” to defend it from attack by foreign monarchies. That same year, the radical republic declared itself “indivisible,” based on unity and equal rights among its citizens. But Napoleon Bonaparte’s imperial conquests across Europe generated anti-French nationalism embodied in the German idea of *Volksgeist* (national spirit). Two complementary but sometimes contradictory aspects of nationhood thus arose, one juridical (universal individual rights shared equally) and the other cultural (unique collective identity based on heritage and territory). This duality found its most graphic expression on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, which was completed in 1836. A bas-relief portrays two images of Marianne, the female symbol of France: one is warlike, winged, and angry with patriotic fighting spirit, while the other is serene and motherly, spreading the seeds of civilization and freedom from her apron (Rudorff 1970).

Another contradiction arose because Enlightenment thinkers regarded liberty as a right to individual autonomy, which the modern state was supposed to guarantee (Hunt 2000). That idea had a double-sided aspect because it emerged during the rise of urban business leaders (bourgeoisie) to political power in England and France. John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that government should be a contract among individual voters, whose consent linked sovereignty to the “general will” of the people. But Karl Marx warned that the modern state still served the economic ruling class (Held 1989). Behind the human rights of individuals, then, lay the atomization of society into interchangeable, disunited pairs of working hands, thereby making the promise of personal freedom a potential obstacle to group solidarity. Under the old monarchies, rights had belonged to privileged groups, but the new state suppressed threats from the nobility, church, town guilds, urban proletariat, peasant communities, and local customs: “The nation-state as a form of polity is intimately bound up with the global expansion and development of capitalism,” such that a structural linkage exists between “capitalist economic practices and rhetoric, on the one hand, and the state-subject relationship of ‘citizenship,’ on the other” (Foster 1995, 7, 19). Modernity encouraged creative destruction: smashing traditions to free people for production, relentless innovations, and, eventually, mass consumption. Like Christianity, capitalism defined nature as a physical object to exploit, lacking in spirituality, in contrast to earlier holistic beliefs (Stewart-Harawira 2005). The modern state monopolized law and legitimate violence, while the citizen, whose body was legally divorced
from its web of community, became a pawn in the quest for profits and power. People are social animals, but state and business institutions would redefine proper patterns of association and enforce subservience through conformity (Foucault 1980). Western nation-states became resource-maximizing, war-making engines that harnessed industrial classes at home and cheap labor in colonies abroad, where natives living in “states of nature” were deemed unready for individual freedoms (Jackson 1990).

During this modernist transition, France endured repeated turmoil. Since 1789 it has had five republics, two Napoleons, and three constitutional monarchies. For a century after the revolution, the word “nationalism” was actually pejorative in French thinking in revulsion against Jacobin extremism. The Third Republic would finally domesticate the concept as less revolutionary and more chauvinistic because it was trying to legitimize itself and to convert rural peasants into French “citizens” (Girardet 1966; Furet 1992; E Weber 1976). As industrializing European states competed to mobilize patriotism, they enacted constitutions to forestall revolt and made overseas colonies into status symbols. Modern Europe and non-Europe would help to define each other. The West needed backward “others” in order to measure its own success, as overseas labor and resources helped it to grow (Fanon 1968). But as with Napoleon’s conquests in Europe, the “liberator” who stays becomes oppressive: imperialism overseas broke the bond between democracy and nationalism and inspired counter-nationalism in colonized peoples (Brunschwig 1960).

Isabelle Merle wrote that regarding citizenship, the nineteenth-century French republics struck a compromise between blood descent from at least one French parent (jus sanguini) and birth on French soil (jus solis) (2010). Yet the Code de l’Indigénat system developed in Algeria and extended to other colonies, including New Caledonia, created racialized French nationals without citizenship rights, thereby “externalizing” indigenous peoples in their own countries without access to civil law or political participation. The expansion of sovereignty overseas by the French republics in effect created an “imperial nation-state,” as France exported the tension between human rights and national cultural identity, or the “antinomy between universality and particularity” (Wilder 2005, 4). The homeland was pushing for assimilation into the nation-state, but colonial administrators overseas deployed a mix of economic development and racial alterity, proposing a phased transition so that individualism did not destroy indigenous social stability and undermine French-appointed chiefs. Political citizenship, when available, required subjects to adopt a European lifestyle and renounce indigenous custom. Yet educated local elites would criticize discriminatory colonial policies and propose a more egalitarian, multicultural federation. As in other contemporary empires, the “colonial contradiction” remained: “If the colonised acculturated too fully, this paradoxically posed a threat to the coloniser because it removed the justification for the exercise of power” (Nugent 2004, 11).
In 1853, France annexed New Caledonia by decree of Emperor Napoleon III. On the surface, then, it was obvious which France had arrived. French colonizers would often proclaim a “civilizing mission” based on assimilation, but how serious was that policy? Mass assimilation would have required major financial investment in education infrastructure and the granting of equal economic and political rights. Yet for a century after 1853, Kanak were not French citizens. Instead, their collective modern identity resulted from a colonial policy of racial exclusion under the Indigénat. Pushed onto reserves patrolled by police, they had to pay a special head tax and do forced labor for European settlers, who took over their best lands. Like the Marxian proletarians who became aware of their class identity while laboring together in factories, economically exploited Kanak tribes on reserves acquired a sense of ethnic unity. New Caledonia was similar to colonies in Africa, where, apart from the four communes of Senegal, France practiced cost-saving “association.” Military governors overseas practiced a kind of “indirect rule” usually ascribed to British colonies. In 1909, Joseph Chailley-Bert extolled such expediency because economic expansion into tropical regions made mass assimilation unrealistic:

This policy of association rests on the idea that the natives are, at least provisionally, inferior to the Europeans, or at least different, that they have their past, their customs, their institutions and a religion to which they adhere. Even with education their minds cannot understand and accept our concepts any more rapidly. But it is the duty of the stronger people to guide the weaker people, to aid them in the evolution of their own civilization . . . so that they may take from [ours] what they deem good. (Betts 1961, 152)

In addition, overseas France was intended to be a consolation for successive national humiliations, to restore the country repeatedly to the rank of a world power. Much of the first French colonial empire had fallen in the eighteenth century to that old nemesis, the “Anglo-Saxons” of Britain. The conquest of Algeria, beginning in 1830, marked the start of a second overseas empire. France regarded acquiring islands such as the Marquesas, Tahiti, and New Caledonia “as a first step in the slow reconquest of a global position” (Merle 1995, 35). It sought ports of call to support commercial, missionary, and naval interests, as well as places to send industrial-era convicts (Bullard 2000a; Barbançon 2003). Conquests in Africa were again psychological compensation after the defeat of Napoleon III in 1871 by unified Germany, the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, and the insulting coronation of the new kaiser at Versailles. Yet another defeat by Germany in 1940 and Nazi occupation would repeat the cycle, as Charles de Gaulle and the Free French government in exile sought support from the colonies. Post-war defeats in Indochina and Algeria would restore de Gaulle to power in 1958 and fuel his nostalgic drive for national glory through nuclear testing.
in the Tuamotu atolls and the control of nickel in New Caledonia. Over and over again, France has needed colonies in order to define itself as a world power, such that it still subsidizes an artificial standard of living in remnant “franconesia” (Chesneauaux 1987).

In the late nineteenth century, Leroy-Beaulieu called French expansion overseas “a question of life or death: either France will become a great power…or she will in a century or two be only a secondary European power” (1891, xiv). “New Caledonia,” he wrote, “can hope for a beautiful future.” It had convicts, free settlers, Asian indentured labor, indigenous people who obeyed the missionaries, a fine location on shipping routes, and rich resources such as farmland and minerals: “The mother country will not abandon New Caledonia.” It was right for a civilized power to intervene in countries that did not know how to develop their own resources, in order to tutor them, and thereby gain prestige as “a people who has imposed its leadership, its language, its habits, its tastes to extended territories” (Leroy-Beaulieu 1891, 846). He disagreed with Baron Turgot’s comment on US independence that colonies would free themselves once they were aware of their rights. Colonization could be permanent:

We are too used to the idea that colonies break off someday, like a ripe fruit, from the metropolis, or at least as adult beings, conscious of their strength, seeking independence, must one day live their own life and have no more than voluntary relations, based on equality, with the former mother country. It is a type of colony, the colonies of settlement, to whom this destiny is reserved. Ethnic groups analogous to the population of the mother country, absolutely comparable societies who have established themselves in climates where the European race can reproduce and develop itself, are, certainly, called to this complete emancipation. (Leroy-Beaulieu 1891, 844)

Yet he deemed the creation in 1885 of a settler General Council in New Caledonia “premature” and felt that its role or electorate should be reduced (Leroy-Beaulieu 1891, 577). Apparently, even settlers should expect association, not political rights. The council was merely consultative until 1957.

A “Common Destiny”?

The colonial clash of worldviews described above has made New Caledonia into a transnational frontier zone because the dialectic between Kanaky and France is linked to wider networks in Oceania and Europe. Yet the 1998 Noumea Accord proposed that the country work toward a “common destiny.” That idea implies negotiating, among other goals, a shared but contested history. In 1999, the accord was voted into the French national constitution by the Congress of Versailles, along with organic laws to imple-
ment it. That action set a legal precedent in the “indivisible” republic that has not been ignored by other French overseas territories that seek self-government. The accord’s preamble addresses key themes in collective memory. For example, it rejects the colonial myth of *terra nullius* (empty land) by recognizing the existence of the indigenous “civilization” and the traumatic results of French annexation. Yet it also acknowledges contributions by migrant groups to local development and the “double legitimacy” of Kanak and non-Kanak long-term residents as citizens of an autonomous nationality. To François Garde, the preamble “proposes a history, which has virtue only if New Caledonians recognize themselves in it. It does not pretend to monopolize historical thought, but calls for critique and research…. We can no longer think of the relationship between Kanak—or that of other Caledonians—and history without consulting the preamble” (2008, 86).

Jacques Le Goff once attributed the success of history in society to people’s “need to nourish their quest for identity; to feed on a real imaginary” (1992, 215). As a historian, I regard the seeming contradiction in those last two words as a call to action. I would like to offer a fresh perspective on some historical issues that I know remain sensitive by focusing on the genesis of the 1980s uprising in New Caledonia, particularly during the preceding two decades. Accounts of that episode rarely give adequate explanations of what led up to it, except by invoking long-term ethnic confrontations or else immediate tensions when the Socialists came to power in Paris in 1981. The life and ideas of Kanak martyr Jean-Marie Tjibaou have appropriately received the most attention because his rise to prominence and his tragic death helped to frame the 1980s, but the anticolonial movement first went public in 1969 and began to grow when he was still an autonomist emphasizing indigenous cultural identity. A syncretism of Kanak cultural nationalism and socialist liberation had arisen among a cohort of university students who became the Foulards Rouges. Their thoughts and actions remain foundational but were later overshadowed by the results of their own politics and are often hidden today in archives. The 1970s appear only briefly in scholarly writing on New Caledonia, usually in the broad framework of France in the Pacific (eg, Robie 1989; Henningham 1992; Aldrich 1993), except for Myriam Dornoy’s research in the latter part of that decade (1984). The 1988 Matignon-Oudinot Accords opened the door to new studies of local history by Ismet Kurtovitch, Louis-José Barbanson, Sylvette Boyer, Christiane Terrier, Frédéric Anglevel, Christophe Sand, Hamid Mokaddem, and Philippe Palombo, among others. After researching in private and public archives, interviewing participants, and reviewing the secondary literature in French and English, I hope that my own analytical narrative can suggest a genealogical bridge between Kurtovitch’s (2000a) and Le Borgne’s (2006) work on the rise of the multiracial, autonomist Union Calédonienne in the 1940s and 1950s and discussions of the 1980s Kanak liberation front. But further research and writing, of
course, should also be done by local scholars and teachers on the history of their now-self-governing country.

Professional historians hope that people can learn from the past to help guide them into shared futures, so we have a duty to add our voices to the discourse, as well as the voices we resurrect from the past. Jacques Barzun has argued, “In any kind of history only the facts of political life can provide the framework, the skeleton, because politics is the most continuous and striking human activity; it affects the whole society; and it is the most readily understood” (1989, 60). As an American with anticolonial sentiments, including published criticisms of US Pacific policies (Chappell 2000, 2003, 2004, 2011a), I have studied politics in New Caledonia for over a quarter century. I realize that powerful historical forces, from imperial rivalries to demography to mineral resources, have constrained the country’s development. But I examine local agency and contingency as well as structural violence and victimization (Chappell 1995a). I have also tried to avoid imposing theoretical jargon on participant voices, letting them speak for themselves as much as possible.

Although the primary focus of this study is the 1960s and 1970s, one background chapter and three follow-up chapters contextualize and reflect on that era of rising radicalism. Chapter 1 examines some key aspects of French colonization and postwar decolonization, when local self-determination seemed to be headed in a direction that was in advance of what was happening in the anglophone Pacific, only to be interrupted and reversed in the 1960s. Chapters 2 through 5 constitute the core analysis, beginning with a close look at the intellectual influences on the small cohort of Caledonian and Kanak students who attended universities in France and experienced the May 1968 student-worker uprising. Chapter 3 follows their vanguard home again, where they formed anticolonial protest groups in what became known as the Kanak Awakening of 1969. Chapter 4 portrays debates among radicals over paths to sovereignty and the growing polarization between loyalists and supporters of restored autonomy or full independence, and chapter 5 traces the formation of two major political blocs that articulated rival multiethnic visions of the nation. Chapter 6 briefly revisits the growing violence and missed opportunities of the 1980s, to which no one wants to return but whose legacy nobody can escape. Chapter 7 assesses the negotiated accords of 1988 and 1998 and efforts at nation building in a globalizing world, and chapter 8 is a concluding reflection on the radicals’ legacy and future hopes.

Given the revocation of autonomy and new immigration during the nickel boom, just when the young students were coming home in 1969, it would perhaps have been surprising if the Kanak awakening had not happened when it did. But considering that post-1980s peace accords are now restoring autonomy, it is tempting to wonder whether articulations of a Kanak/Caledonian “nation” in the 1970s could have been addressed with
constructive dialogue and negotiation instead of repression. The forces of order and the media often regarded the protesters as a few hotheads who needed to grow up and accept their responsibilities. Yet efforts to suppress the activists only further radicalized and expanded the anticolonial movement. Emancipation of the indigenous majority through civil rights in 1946 had opened up a new era of political consciousness, and the experience of postwar autonomy could not simply be erased from memory by a flood of newcomers who lacked any sense of or interest in local history. Instead, the anticolonial movement would ultimately force its messages into the public discourse and institutions. A local nation was struggling to be born. Its content and future political status are still works in progress, but the clock can no longer be turned back again.