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Ramsay/Nights of Storytelling

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Introduction

THE PROJECT OF OUR CULTURAL HISTORY OF NEW CALEDONIA is to cross old imperial boundaries and open up an important location of decolonisation in the French Pacific to Anglophone readers by translating its relatively little-known literatures. Through a selection of founding texts presented for the first time in English, *Nights of Storytelling* seeks to bring the stories and histories of an unfamiliar group of French-speaking islands into the living rooms and libraries of the English-speaking world, close to their original, vibrant form. For many readers, the Oceanian country has largely remained an exotic ‘French’ tourist destination. For others, Kanaky-New Caledonia is the home of indigenous peoples, other Pacific *tangata whenua* who are ‘cousins’ yet separated, at least in part, by their use of French language.

Nights of Storytelling opens its cultural history of New Caledonia with transcriptions and translations of the most widely circulating texts of Kanak oral tradition. Subsequent accounts of early eighteenth-century European exploration, the era of annexation, the penal colony, and then nineteenth-century settlement are followed by representative extracts from what we have called the modern period, or the ‘new literatures’. These are the texts emerging from the dramatic political events in the contemporary period and the 1988 Matignon and 1998 Nouméa Agreements with France that have opened up the option of independence in 2014 by majority vote. The translated stories in all four parts are accompanied by a commentary that explicates the changing historical contexts that gave the texts birth, explores the explanatory power of various postcolonial readings, and weaves its own interactive story. This is a tale of the exile of Kanak in their own land, of European and other diasporas, and of ‘return’. It is also a story of cultural encounter,

of the intertwining of bodies and of literary texts, of transfer and the creation of interfaces, and of the increasingly mixed, or ‘hybrid’, character of the life of this changing Pacific country.

This anthology of texts translated into English serves, then, as a mirror of multiple, sometimes antagonistic but inevitably interconnected histories from different periods and ethnic groups and from oral or written traditions. They are organised in four parts to showcase their distinctive character and relation to colonialism and its aftermath. A rediscovered and recentred indigenous (Kanak) culture is placed where, we believe, it truly belongs: at the beginning, and then again as a significant component of the final ‘contemporary’ section, despite the fact that the body of published Kanak texts remains quite small. The formative accounts of a Pacific New Caledonia, ‘discovered’ for Europe by Cook in his daring search for a southern continent and for scientific knowledge, or of D’Entrecasteaux in his search for the lost ‘explorer’ and sea captain, La Pérouse, follow and contrast starkly with the initiatory presentation of the histories of Kanak oral tradition. Subsequently, the literary writing produced by nineteenth-century colonisation bears first-person witness to the transitions from penal colony to colony of settlement to Overseas Territory in 1946. This includes the accounts of lives of settlers in the work of late ‘colonial’ writers such as Georges Baudoux and Jean Mariotti, but also the texts of the “Red Virgin”, the revolutionary Louise Michel, deported to New Caledonia after the uprising of the Paris Commune in 1870. The final group of texts, emerging during the period of political and social conflict and change to a new status as French Overseas Country and most recently as a unique *collectivité sui generis*, looks at contemporary European and Kanak production and reflects the emergence of the often silenced (hi)stories of other groups. These include those inflected by descent from indentured labourers (Vietnamese, Indonesian), Japanese migrants, or by more recent economic arrivals (Wallisian/Polynesian, or ‘French’, workers from other French overseas departments, territories, countries, and former colonies). The different texts speak in their own voices and tell of their own pathways.

The focus in our commentary in the modern section, on the degrees of cultural transfer and kinds of mixing in the literary productions of identities, responds to the recognition that all of these very different stories are feeding into the present political construction of a national identity distinct from France. The discourses of the eighteenth century on the noble or ignoble savage, the *naturels* as ‘civilised’

Europe's Other (or barbaric self), for example, which, in fact, reflected European mentalities rather than any Melanesian ways of thinking and being, continue to influence modern Kanak textual self-assertion and cultural reconstruction, if only through their critique and the attempt to actively recover and claim a lost history and a tradition. The Kanak histories, epic poems, and stories, glossed and termed myths by missionaries and ethnographers, have in their turn been recovered as texts of oral tradition by European and, increasingly, by Kanak researchers. Christian stories, for their part, have taken on indigenous forms to be reappropriated and incorporated inextricably into the fabric of contemporary Kanak identity. As is the case in many Pacific islands, the stories of the arrival of the first Polynesian *natas*, or teachers of the Marist missions, and of the altering of Kanak consciousness with the partial demise of the old gods and the new values of godliness that sometimes derived less from essential Christianity than from nineteenth-century European prudery find a place among the stories of an emerging Kanak literature. At the least they constitute the object of contestation, an unsettling by notions of *mana* or other returning figures of power, possession, and, as in the first Kanak novel, written by Déwé Gorodé (*L'Epave* 2005), sexual domination or sorcery from a more ancient past.

The representations of the legacy of colonisation, the deep scars that still mark almost all of these reconstructions of history and resistance to it constitute a major terrain of the present political struggle in New Caledonia. History is written backwards out of a present where different groups seek to claim control over the past they rewrite. Histories/stories also represent a coming to consciousness of both singular and hybrid, essential and changing identities, thus pointing towards possible new 'common' futures. If the effects of colonial history in respect to the destructuring of Kanak traditional values and personality can be seen to be still influencing the present, so, too, can the emancipatory effects of new relations of power and the attempt to recover/create the 'old' harmonies. Kanak texts move between the notion of a lost past/essence/communal spirit and a dynamic history of struggle but use both to enhance their political claims.

The collected histories/stories are both irrevocably mixed and irreducibly different. The notions of time, space, person, and community that they carry, like the historical itineraries of the different cultures represented, are interconnected, often syncretic, and yet also distinctly different and making different political claims. The texts of 'oral' tradition we present figure as written histories, but they, too, are clearly dis-

tinct. Despite the common attempts at knowing oneself through one's origins or tracing the history of one's community, there is as yet no celebration in New Caledonia of what Patrick Chamoiseau, writing of the French Caribbean, has called *diversalité* (diversity and difference), at least not without a corresponding affirmation of a particular singular and local tradition and historical itinerary.

We have sought to allow the power of the individual stories to take centre stage—to provide the space for the texts to speak, as much as possible, in their own unique voice, bringing the drama and the colours of different histories of cultural encounter to complex life, in both antagonistic and complementary voices and for both a general and specialist readership. Our reflections and conclusions are informed by the most recent theoretical work on French Pacific and postcolonial Francophone literature, predominantly published in French, although explicit discussion of theory has been kept to a minimum.

In what sense, then, have we used the term 'hybrid' to characterise the interactions between the texts in our book? Why choose a term that still carries the negative connotations that nineteenth-century colonialism gave to the mixing of races and of cultures? That could seem counter to a Kanak writing seeking to recover and affirm the value of a nonassimilated resistant tradition and difference. Or to a settler writer, resisting what he calls the temptation of the chameleon, adopting the discourse/colour in current fashion. Or again, a term drawn from biology that suggests the grafting of a young stem onto a more-established rootstock and thus asymmetry and imbalance of power.

In fact, like the once pejorative term 'Kanak' recuperated by the independence movement to give it new positive and revolutionary meaning, the word 'hybridity' has been used in postcolonial theory to overwrite the negative connotations of mixing, envisioning a new 'third', or hybrid, space that would reconstruct the power relations between former coloniser and colonised.

Hybridity or mixing in our book resides most simply and immediately in the circulation and interpenetration of texts from the disciplines of ethnography, history, literature, and what has often been labeled 'folklore' in which both history and fiction, political and imaginative writing, are present. Our own critical narrative that runs alongside the translated texts, making them more comprehensible to the nonspecialist by creating the links between what are necessarily selected fragments, is perhaps also a factor of the book's hybridity. However, we wish it to stand alongside, not stand instead of or interfere with oth-

ers' voices. The category of 'storytelling' has been stretched to include what are clearly also written texts. These texts do convey something of the impact of the spoken word, in particular the powerful performance rhythms of Kanak oral tradition.

Hybridity is also the history in Kanak storytelling and the story in European settler histories. Most particularly, however, it is the omnipresent cultural mixing, the recognition or otherwise influence of the Others' texts on one's own, of European cultural domination on Kanak texts and Kanak influence on New Caledonian writers of European and other origins. Yet it is also the case that the individual writers represent their particular groups as victims of colonialism, and few Kanak writers are prepared in the present contexts to envisage the impact of European cultural contact as anything but destructive for their land. Tjibaou does enumerate both the gifts bestowed on their white guests by their Kanak hosts and the gifts of European technology. However, it is loss, humiliation, and dark wanderings that follow the welcoming of the first ships. There is, then, a *parti pris* of the value of Kanak tradition, a will to reverse colonial relations of domination, and engagement with the commitment to 'Christian' conciliation or a common future in some form of association with France/Europe in a number of Kanak texts, but no explicit exploration of 'hybridity' as there exists, for example, in the portraits of the lives of small bush farmers or of the possibilities for mixed relationships in the work of Claudine Jacques. And yet the political and historical forces that dominate the lives of the Kanak characters that alone interest Kanak writers are those generated by the arrival of the white world.

The texts selected are inclusive to the extent that we have tried to represent most of the communities in place in New Caledonia who have given an archaeological and human depth to the political present by writing their stories and recounting their genealogies. Preference has been given to texts that have circulated and been re-inscribed or contested in others' stories or in political texts, such as the 1998 decolonizing Nouméa Agreements. In particular, we have considered the interactions between the writing of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Déwé Gorodé, and Pierre Gope representing Kanak production and of Nicolas Kurtovitch, Frédéric Ohlen, and Claudine Jacques, all New Caledonians of European origin. Their treatment of shared themes, such as the land, French cultural dominance, Kanak alienation and historical responsibility, male dominance of (and violence against) women, or the role(s) of the invisible world and the other forces (the figure of the sorcerer-

seducer/healer), are contrasted. Finally, although it was not possible to be exhaustive, both literature that carries sociopolitical messages that have marked or may mark New Caledonia's history and thinking and extracts from literary fictions whose aesthetics most subtly reflect a changing society and engage with the proposal of a *destin commun* or *avenir ensemble* (a future commonality articulated officially by the Nouméa Agreement) have been included.

Authorship of Commentaries

The commentary accompanying the texts in each of the four parts is principally the work of a single researcher: Emma Sinclair accompanies the texts from Kanak oral tradition in Part I, Diane Walton writes on the accounts of the European explorers in Part II, Liliane Mary McKendrick writes much of the commentary in Part III, and Raylene Ramsay presents commentary in Part IV. Note that these researchers are also the principal translators of their respective parts, unless otherwise indicated.

Synopsis

PART I. KANAK (HI)STORIES

Major texts from Kanak oral tradition are presented in this first part. Our history traces the way these texts are currently being revived, given value, and reinvented to constitute a modern Kanak literature. Although it is inevitably 'hybridized', this indigenous literature tells history from its own perspectives.

Kanak voices are inserted into the narrative to give it authority and to intimate the different kinds of oral textual rhythm our own written analytical text would like to capture.

PART 2. EXPLORATION AND FIRST CONTACT

Here, eighteenth-century texts of first encounters and observation weave a primary introduction to European history in this part of the Pacific.

By means of a close reading of the rhetorical functioning of extracts from the texts of Cook and D'Entrecasteaux and their sailing companions, our story attempts to account for the major discrepancies

between early representations of a new land during this period of ‘scientific discovery’. It seeks to tease out what derives from observation of a culture unknown to Europe and what reflects aspects of the European mind (do the Europeans discover [noble or ignoble] savages or only themselves?). The texts of a number of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century observers, including the early anthropological accounts of ship doctors Vieillard and Deplanche and the colonialist writing of Jules Garnier, complete this general overview of the major representations of early ‘exploration’, in particular those that reappear in contemporary studies and anthologies.

PART 3. EARLY TEXTS: MISSIONARIES, SETTLERS, CONVICTS, AND KANAK

The early writers in the emerging colony of free settlers, prospectors, and adventurers, rapidly supplemented by large numbers of *déportés* or convicts and later by political *transportés* after the fall of the Paris Commune in 1871, spoke mainly to metropolitan readers back ‘home’. Each description of the developing colony again carries the marks of the text’s European origins or destination but also of its transformation through encounter with an Other—land, people, and culture. By the turn of the nineteenth century, particularly in the texts of Jean Mariotti, the Kanak begin to look back at the European who has been inscribing their exotic ‘primitivism’ from without and, somewhat later, more sympathetically, from ‘within’. The grand colonial discourse of the civilising mission for a sacred Mother France and the pioneer aesthetic of endurance and toughness underpins all the literatures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Colonial writers, however, are themselves sometimes also unwilling colonisers or critical observers (Baudoux, Laubreaux, the Nervats). They both capture and are captured by the hierarchical structures and the problems of the new colonial society out of which they write—Kanak uprisings, agricultural crises, the taint of the presence of the convicts. Women write personal accounts of their lives as prisoners in a penal colony or as wives of settlers. Letters written home by Kanak chiefs deported to French Indochina, for their part, speak of life in the Kanak *tribus* from which they have been exiled. This study of the texts of the colonial period concludes by considering the extent to which colonial mentalities are increasingly contested from within during the period that ends in 1946, with Kanak acceding to full citizenship.

PART 4. THE MODERN PERIOD: FROM COLONIAL NEW CALEDONIA TO
THE KANAKY-NEW CALEDONIA OF THE NOUMÉA AGREEMENT (1998)

The final and most extensive section of the book looks at the emergence in the latter part of the twentieth century of the many literatures of New Caledonia as they recover distinctive and often silenced histories of what has been called the land of the *non-dit* (unsaid) and make claims for a role in the future nation.

It includes the examination of the texts and the cultural politics of the first published Kanak poets and short-story writers (Déwé Gorodé, Pierre Gope, Weniko Ihage, Jean-Marie Tjibaou), as well as the search for understanding of the Other and a shared universal in the work of Nicolas Kurtovitch, a New Caledonian writer of settler origin who has become a spokesperson for the recognition of Kanak founding status. Representations of the world of hard work and deprivation, but also the joys of the small bush settlers isolated from the capital of Nouméa and the mixed cultures of the shantytown that surround the capital, emerge dramatically from the short stories and novels of Claudine Jacques to similarly interrogate the possibilities of shared spaces and ‘common destiny’. Reconstructions of the pioneer period, with its prejudices and exclusions (of the class of liberated convicts, of indentured labour, of the Kanak) and its heroism—the battle to develop land against plague, drought, cyclone, isolation, and insurrection and create a new ‘home’—are traced in the fictions of Jacqueline Sénès and Catherine Régent. Extracts from the novels of Jean Vanmai speak for the first time of the stories of another group of New Caledonian citizens, presently part of the Vietnamese diaspora, whose history in New Caledonia is rooted in the regimes of indentured immigrant labour. The centrality of the theme of cultural and biological mixing, sometimes materialized in the figure of the *métis*, is staged in the texts of a number of writers of both European and non-European origin. The figure of the *métisse* also embodies a further recurring preoccupation of the new literatures: the status of women.

Finally, we consider the very different degrees of cultural mixing, or ‘hybridity’, in the work of two young poets of the next generation: the rap-poetry of Paul Wamo, the ‘cry of rage’ against the urbanisation and globalisation that signify his loss of contact with his Kanak roots and that paradoxically inform his French verse forms, and the recovery of foundation myths and resistance heroes in the work of Denis Pourawa.

Our commentary follows the ways in which the new literatures of

Kanaky-New Caledonia speak to the urgent cultural and political issues in this group of islands and speak of other texts. It considers their identifications with the communities of the Pacific and/or with France and their constructions or refusals of cultural hybridity. For, constituting their country's collective memory in written form and interrogating its present sociopolitical structures, these texts can be seen to be creating the interconnecting pathways to its future.

Authorship and Translation

The critical narratives are the result of the efforts of a team of researchers. The team includes Emma Sinclair-Reynolds (Part 1, oral tradition), Diane Walton (Part 2, European explorers), Mary McKendrick (Part 3, colonisation), and Raylene Ramsay (Part 4, modern period). Deborah Walker-Morrison has had overall responsibility for the translations included in the cultural history. Where the translations are the work of an outside individual, that person's name has been indicated.

Karishma Kripalani assisted with researching the images and helped Emma Sinclair-Reynolds with formatting the book. Credit is also due to a number of postgraduate students who participated in Professor Ramsay's seminar on postcolonial translation at the University of Auckland, contributing a number of first-draft translations. These students included, notably, Jamie Anderson, Patrick Delhaye, Andrea King, Melissa Massey, Andrew McCully, Damien McVeigh, Fiona Moodie, Bhuddika Rajapakse, Don Rochette, and Amanda Wilson.

Translators' Notes

As translators (as in the commentary) our twin objective has been respect for our authors and for our readers. We have aimed to speak *with* rather than stand for the original voices of our texts, seeking to render their unique tone, register, and cultural and historical specificity. We have sought to provide our readers with an experience of the texts and their contexts that puts them into the shoes of the original audience while also signalling essential elements of cultural difference.

In many cases we have kept culturally specific terms in the original French or Kanak language, including pronunciation notes for non-French speakers. Such terms have been italicized (excluding proper names to respect editorial policy). In other cases we have used English equivalents. Thus the centrally important term *la case* (traditional

Kanak dwelling) is sometimes retained, sometimes rendered descriptively as ‘thatch-house’, or more communicatively translated as ‘house’ or ‘home’.

Our unspoken question was often, If the original writer or speaker were writing in English, or addressing our readers, what would (s)he have said/written? In some cases we were able to approach the authors directly. Their comments were precious and led us to rethink our general approach to certain texts and specific choices in translating particular terms.

Our aim was always to respect the integrity of the source text while providing our readers with an experience that is at once aesthetically satisfying and both semantically and culturally authentic.

■ Nights of Storytelling—DVD

LA NUIT DES CONTES: MISE EN IMAGES DE TEXTES CALEDONIENS

The book is accompanied by a DVD produced by Deborah Walker-Morrison and Neil Morrison, through the support of the Centre for Academic Development of the University of Auckland.

The DVD contains approximately three hours of recorded material and includes

- twenty translated texts in the ‘original’ French with English subtitles. A number of indigenous texts are also subtitled in Maori.
- readings set against a montage of archival stills, contemporary artwork, and video footage shot in New Caledonia.
- the founding text, *Teâ Kanaké*, read by Déwé Gorodé, in both French and Paicî interviews with contemporary writers.

Texts included in the DVD are indicated within *Nights of Storytelling* by the following symbol: ■