Introduction
The Challenge of Writing about Jean-Marie Tjibaou

You walked into my home as if it were your home. How, then, could I make you welcome?

Writing any book is invariably an intense personal experience, no matter how detached one is from the subject matter. It absorbs, even possesses the author, from the moment the first sentences are formulated until the final polishing of the manuscript. Writing biography is even more emotionally charged because it involves entering the life of another human being and establishing an intimate relationship with that person, be it real or simply through the mediation of the spoken or written word. My thoughts on this account are drawn spontaneously to David Marr’s biography of Patrick White (Marr 1991). Although no more than a simple admirer of White’s writing, I wept when I arrived at the last few pages, both at the thought of a dying man, the finished manuscript in his hands, tearfully reading the painful story of his own life, and at his biographer’s fear that the portrait he had drawn may have accelerated his subject’s departure, in 1990, from this world.

The second time I wept over biography was in 1993. The evening before, in the context of the institution’s Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Lecture Series, I had given a public lecture at the University of the South Pacific entitled “Jean-Marie Tjibaou: Kanak Witness to the World.” Tjibaou was the deceased leader of the Melanesian independence movement in neighboring New Caledonia. I had been very nervous in the preceding weeks, and I don’t think I have ever spent so much time fine-tuning a presentation, essentially because I had chosen to reveal a Melanesian person and mind to a Pacific Island audience. In addition, that person’s words and thoughts were already of inestimable importance to me, a palagi, who, on and off over several
decades, had traveled, lived, and worked in Oceania, in other words who had been materially and, above all, spiritually nourished by the region.

There was no question of my filtering the man through academic discourse, constructing and deconstructing him, or clothing him in alien theory. I was aware that my audience knew little about him, but that his name was, for reasons unclear to me at the time, of great significance to them. I felt I was adventuring into a potential minefield. So, in preparing the lecture, reading about Jean-Marie, delving into his writings and speeches, listening to interviews, and meeting people who had known him, I had come to the most natural of decisions: I would let the man speak for himself, in his own words, simply assuming the responsibility of translating them, giving them a semblance of order, with a view to sharing them with my Suva audience.

I received numerous messages from island friends, scholars, and students following my talk, one in particular coming from a Solomon Islands colleague:

I sat up late last night, thinking about the man within me. A man who has lived for thousands of years. He adopted me when I was given birth by a mother he adopted before me. He inherited me as I inherited him and he lived in me as I in him. . . . Since the end of the sixteenth century he has become subjugated, marginalised and may even have been obliterated by strangers he accepted as visitors to his home. For years he remained dormant, dying in silence and in indifference on my part. I whom he nourished and fed for years with the word of his wisdom and the experience of living in this land for centuries.

I do not know how to say thankyou to you, white man, who has resurrected the man within me. It is because the man within me does not have a word for “thankyou.” Not because he is unappreciative but rather because appreciation is so deep that no word could express it. Also it is because the man within me understands that what is given will come back one day. Giving is reciprocal. Maybe it won’t come back tomorrow, but it will one day. Not in your lifetime maybe, but in your grandchildren’s. This is because, for the man in me, human relationships and human values have no time limits.

From the man within me there are words that come in bits and pieces. My grandpa used to tell me: “When I die, throw the soil into my grave, but do not throw away my words.” I guess he is right. The man within me is the word that lives on. He is what anthropologists and other scholars call “The Melanesian Society.” But he is part of me and I am part of him.

I am proud he exists and I respect him as he respects me. Through him and the experiences I gather elsewhere, we can build a better society for all. We have always existed, two persons in one, but sometimes forgetting. (Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, 7 October 1993)

Such spontaneous responses confirmed in my own mind what I had already grasped in the context of my experience teaching at several Pacific
Island universities: that island students do not recognize themselves in the vast majority of social science writing on Oceania that they are required to read, assimilate, and reproduce in the course of their studies. It is not simply a question of Western scholarly obsession with footnoting, or with academic language, but more fundamentally, of the actual subject matter that characterizes much of the writing of metropolitan scholars, for they are largely driven by theoretical and ideological debates in vogue in their home countries and institutions. Their writings are frequently colored by arbitrary distinctions between tradition and modernity, and between the village (tribe or bush) and the town. They tend to celebrate distance and isolation. In other words they are too often concerned with the differences between the authors as Westerners (real, or assimilated by education) and Islanders—the normal and the norm versus the strange and the exotic. Precious little attention is given to what is shared, by virtue of belonging to a single “family of man” and to the fast emerging global community. Their writings reveal what Margaret Jolly described in a 2003 workshop, “Learning Oceania,” held at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies, University of Hawai‘i, as “the desperate inadequacy of anthropology.”

As another Pacific Island colleague and friend said to me a few years ago:

Nothing has changed. With a few notable exceptions, the Pacific Islands world is a world of property—intellectual property, “my people”—which is traded on the global academic stock exchange, often for high stakes. Local knowledge, intellectual debate, great theory: it is all so disembodied, and yet eminently marketable.

I eavesdrop on their conversations on electronic bulletin boards. It is a world of ethereal, mesmerising and oft-times incomprehensible chit-chat which finds its ultimate expression in academic conferences, articles and disciplines; conferences Pacific Islanders don’t attend, articles they don’t read and disciplines they don’t study.

Most of these dealers in Pacific Islands knowledge are certainly good people, kind and generous. They all have friends down there in their little communities, but they don’t participate in the larger fabric of Oceanian society. One can’t expect them to. Theirs is another culture, another place, where they are born, marry, raise children and die.

The drama lies in the fact that it is they who accumulate the knowledge on the Pacific, translate it into their languages, their forms, their media, their preoccupations. And it is the educational institutions of the region who work hard at erasing, or at least belittling, what remains behind.

In the new forms of cultural transmission it is largely this scholarly Western version which trickles back, the language filtered by the Church and the substance interpreted by the University. No wonder there is shame and confusion. And also anger. No wonder, too, figures like Jean-Marie Tjibaou emerge from
this cultural and intellectual war zone to deliver their message to their world, if not indeed to the world as a whole. (3 August 2002)

Of course, anthropology is not alone in its disembodied regard and its culturally determined introspection.

Despite the parachuted theories, and despite being inundated by data generated within the region to nourish those theories, Oceania has, as Pacific Islands scholars constantly stress, always produced its people of ideas and its philosophers. It is just that they have passed largely unnoticed and unrecognized, their thoughts having rarely been committed to paper.

On that memorable evening the words and dreams of Jean-Marie Tjibaou had clearly bridged the gap between the observer and the observed, as another Solomon Island colleague was to tell a couple of years later. For George Saumane, Jean-Marie’s evocation of a distinctive “Melanesian Way,” in terms of engagement in the modern world, was much more meaningful than that of Bernard Narakobi, the New Guinean who was the first to formulate the expression (1983). Particularly with respect to the spoken word, or parole, and to his references to land and to the ancestors, Tjibaou’s vision offered sense and meaning because it was, in his case, clearly lived and experienced. It evoked and legitimized a specifically Melanesian way of navigating the living world. For George, the strength of the message resided in its assertion that the spoken word belongs to everybody and nobody, that it flows through people and is shared, that it creates and cements relationships, thereby giving sense to an individual as a member of a group; it encapsulates a place, a point in time in a long trajectory, a rank, a sense of meaning and of purpose. What a contrast it was with the daily drama of Melanesian students at the University of the South Pacific, confronted by a Western academic discourse where the word is considered to be individual property, to be claimed and recognized, its parentage to be inscribed in “sources.” For island students, to ignore this essential, scholarly fact is to risk reproach, even sanctions, and perhaps failure for not having summarized and transmitted knowledge in a responsible, transparent, and even honest manner!

In the days following my lecture I also learned, to my absolute astonishment, that the thoughts and loyalties of several of my Oceanian colleagues lay with Djubelly Wéa, the man immediately responsible for Jean-Marie’s death on Ouvéa, in the Loyalty Islands, some four years earlier. Two or three of them had spontaneously written poems in memory of him. While they had known Djubelly well, Jean-Marie was an obscure and unfathomable personality, a few recalling a solitary experience in Sydney where he had refused their invitation to publicly take a position against Sitiveni Rabuka as perpetrator of the 1987 coups in Fiji.

Such sentiments and revelations were largely at the origin of my decision to delve further into the life, thoughts, and actions of Jean-Marie
Tjibaou, and also of my decision to present the results in as direct as possible a manner, where I would purposely avoid theoretical constructs and searching critical analysis. For me, it was an avenue fraught with risk, since I had never met Jean-Marie and was absent from and, to all intents and purposes, out of touch with the Pacific during the 1980s, the period when he had been projected by history onto the public scene. I also knew little or nothing of New Caledonia, apart from having briefly set foot in the capital, Nouméa, in 1967, in the course of a journey from Port Vila to Sydney on a Messageries Maritimes *paquebot mixte* (mixed passenger-cargo steamship), the *Tahitien*.

It was not the Pacific as an object of study that had initially drawn me to the man, but the sum of my own adult life experiences, and of my personal values. The Pacific was a part of both, but my spontaneous response to the words and actions of Jean-Marie Tjibaou was above all inscribed in the preoccupations of the postwar generation to which I belonged. In 1991 I had been asked by *The Contemporary Pacific* to review a special issue of the journal *Ethnies* entitled *Renaissance in the Pacific* (Chapman and Dupon 1989a). One of the two editors, Murray Chapman, was a long-standing friend and colleague, and he was no doubt at the origin of the invitation. Some twenty papers, written for the most part by Islanders, addressed the question of cultural identity among the peoples of the region. The publication had been trapped in the turbulent events of New Caledonia in the 1980s, a colony and a country hovering on the verge of civil war. The *événements* (events), as the dramatic situation is still euphemistically referred to in the territory, had led to the canceling of the Fourth Pacific Festival of Arts, which was to have taken place in Nouméa in 1984, and to the planned appearance of the collection. It took five years to find another publisher. One contribution in particular struck me—an interview the second editor had conducted with Jean-Marie Tjibaou, about which I wrote:

[He] speaks of the parallel “search for identity and the acquisition of elements from other cultures” (78), the need to fully grasp the configuration of self in order to handle the confrontation with other. He reflects on the revalorization of “Custom” as a strategy for self-recognition and dignity: “It is in its totality that tradition must give a sense to the life of a Melanesian” (76). But at the same time he sees this reappropriation of the past not as an end in itself but as providing “models for the integration of the traditional and the modern” (76). . . . Tjibaou makes a plea for reconciliation, not only between Kanaks and non-Kanaks, but also between the town and the country, the state and the tribe. . . . he invokes themes which . . . he alone has the capacity to translate into one broad and fundamentally generous vision of the world. Now that he has gone we can only hope that we will have more time to linger on his words. (Waddell 1992, 216–218)

Jean-Marie’s death had occurred at the very moment of *Renaissance in the Pacific* going to press, allowing just enough time for the editors to insert
a brief statement on the opening page. In dedicating the issue to him they quoted a reflection made by a man whose personality, dignity, and stature had clearly inspired them: “In our view of life, the important thing is always to share, to give what one has, all that one is. It may be a smile, a word of wisdom, or a custom, with the words that give it meaning. If a person has been able to live thus, on the day of his death, customary rites will be held over his tomb. He will be remembered as someone who knew how to give; and when he dies it will be like a music vibrating gently into silence. This is what, in our eyes, defines the greatness of a man” (Tjibaou, quoted in Chapman and Dupon 1989a, 3).

My immediate reaction was that such words were addressed to me too, and to my world, to all possible worlds, and I decided forthwith that I must go to New Caledonia in search of Jean-Marie Tjibaou. It was 1993. Jean-François Dupon, a geographer working at the French government’s Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD, formerly ORSTOM) in Nouméa, took me straight to the Agence de développement de la culture kanak (ADCK) and introduced me to the director, Octave Togna, and to Lêdji Bellow, their public relations (information and communication) officer at the time. Mme Bellow, a journalist originally from West Africa, immediately opened up doors, archives, and her heart to me. Although she had only met Jean-Marie toward the end of his life, she was an inconditionnelle (ardent supporter), describing him as “one of the most lively and warmest beings she had ever met” (Bellow 1989b, 28). This spontaneous expression of enthusiasm at having had the privilege of knowing Jean-Marie Tjibaou was to be repeated, with one solitary exception, by everyone I met in the course of my research over the following years, invariably by recourse to such epithets as “simple,” “down to earth,” “totally honest,” “warm,” “a true humanist,” “profoundly moral.” All were eager to meet with me, to share their knowledge and their emotions with respect to someone they were convinced was a remarkable man. They were also invariably keen to know what had drawn me to him and to learn of my intentions. In other words, there was a concern to share what was for everyone a transforming encounter.

Given the forceful and moving nature of so many of these observations and of the repeated expressions of generosity on the part of all the people I met over the years, I quickly came to the conclusion that my unique responsibility in writing about Jean-Marie Tjibaou must be to present, as faithfully as possible, the man, his ideas, and his itinerary, and to avoid engaging in what may be described as a critical analysis or study. In so doing I prefer essentially to leave to the reader the task of judging and interpreting his view of Kanak civilization, both in the immediate New Caledonian context and in the larger contexts of Oceania and the modern world. While I run the risk of being taxed as naive and idealistic in proceeding in this manner, I am convinced that it is the most appropriate way of opening Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s vision of his people, and of the world into which they were pro-
jected, to a Pacific Island audience. It is also the best way of demonstrating to a Western scholarly audience the manner in which a Pacific Island life embraces the present and prepares to engage the future. In other words, in opting for this approach, Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s life, knowledge, values, and vision reveal themselves to be simultaneously traditional and modern—or to be neither, because they are constantly evolving from firmly grounded Melanesian roots into the rapidly changing global community, thereby transcending all boundaries, real or imagined.

The focus of the book being the word, and in particular the spoken word, rather than the man, little or no attention is given to the very considerable literature on “writing biography” or to delving into Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s personal life. There is no plot, but simply periods in a man’s life, that life being a brief moment in the trajectory of a civilization, which civilization is but a speck in the modern world. It is the voice of a man who spoke on behalf of “a people so few in number that it runs the risk at any moment of disappearing,” as Jean-Marie repeatedly took pains to explain, whether in Nouméa, Paris, Geneva, or New York.

If what follows is biography at all, it is what I prefer to call intellectual biography, that is, an attempt to highlight the complex web of one man’s experiences, and of the ideas and knowledge gained from them, with a view to establishing the foundations of his political philosophy, of his conception of culture and identity, and of his commitments and worldview. This approach will demonstrate, I believe, that his vision—“the whole”—is the fruit of a lifetime’s journey that was embarked on and articulated around a firm and, above all, confident and extremely articulate Melanesian base. Jean-Marie’s itinerary, from his tribal home, crossed many intellectual and geographical territories, territories that, in his view, were largely complementary and not conflictual, and that he succeeded in blending into a seemingly creative and coherent whole. In the story of his life the terms roots and routes take on all their meaning, for Jean-Marie was a traveler who never lost sight of home, a passeur, a crosser of frontiers, who sought both to nourish his own world with the wealth of experience gained elsewhere and to nourish the larger world with the accumulated experience of his own people.

In principle, an essentially descriptive exercise should be conducted relatively rapidly, and yet this study of Jean-Marie has taken the best part of fifteen years to complete. I can offer many reasons for this, the most banal being my administrative responsibilities within academia, changing jobs and continents, and the difficulties of writing on the Pacific in a Québec that is too distant from the region to be even mildly interested in its destiny. In addition, there was the very considerable task of retracing Jean-Marie’s journey, from his village in the hills behind Hienghène to Nouméa and then on to Lyon, Paris, and the Larzac; or of meeting the many people who crossed his path—in Fiji, France, Switzerland, and Australia. There were so many routes to follow in the search for information and understanding. At the
same time, far more important considerations account for the slow maturation of the book, considerations grounded in the realities of Melanesian history and of life in New Caledonia.

First among them was the sentiment, attributed to Marie-Claude Tjibaou, Jean-Marie’s wife, that it was important to produce biographies of his spiritual and intellectual predecessors, or ancestors—Chief Ataï, Roch Pijdjot, Eloi Machoro—before writing one on Jean-Marie. It may have been a simple question of humility and of respect on her part, but it was perhaps also a way of expressing how the spoken word moves through people and generations, with Jean-Marie being the temporary depository of the knowledge and wisdom of an ancestral civilization. The essential fluidity of this \textit{parole} ensures that it can adapt and respond to changing realities, while its inherent mobility means that it can never be identified with any one person.

Second, very early in my research I met Father Rock Apikaoua, the Kanak priest who had officiated at Jean-Marie’s burial ceremony. He told me that he had read nothing on Jean-Marie since his death five years earlier because he felt that there was something indecent about it all. To illustrate his point, he recounted a visit to a bookshop that he had made with one of Jean-Marie’s sons, then an adolescent. The boy’s eyes were drawn to a book on his father, with his face on the front cover. He was both attracted to and troubled by what he saw, and it prompted Father Apikaoua to assure him there would come a time and a place for him to read it, but it was not yet.

The third and, perhaps for me, the most important cautionary note was expressed by Gérald Cortot, who had been \textit{chef de cabinet} (principal secretary) for Jean-Marie at the time of his death. M. Cortot, a métis from Nouméa, had spent fifteen years working closely with him, preparing his speeches and becoming a close family friend. When I met him in the late nineties he was director of a company investing in the tourist industry and was also associated with the Société Minière du Sud Pacifique (SMSP), which was committed to the development of a majority Kanak-owned nickel mining and processing initiative in the Province Nord. M. Cortot was quite obviously eager to meet me. A man who was both open and discreet at the same time, concerned to protect a close friend for whom he had an immense respect—“I don’t want to reveal the man in all his intimacy. There are things I will probably never say”—he was nevertheless keen to talk about Jean-Marie. He also wanted to listen to me, so that I might both reveal my intentions and disclose my perspective on the man. When I had made them known, he proceeded to share his thoughts as to the shortcomings of many outsider observers of Melanesian society:

This tendency [on the part of foreign researchers] to make mistakes, to conduct an analysis on the basis of Western thought, and hence to impose a perspective which is more their own—their analytical and theoretical framework, their intellectual preoccupations—and hence never arrive at the essential, never really
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listen. They ignore the Melanesian roots of Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s reasoning and actions. They impose another framework on his words, thereby deforming them and ignoring their essence. In addition they skim over the events in which the words are inscribed, ignoring the fundamental link that exists between the word and the act. (Gérald Cortot, 7 May 1997)

For me, it was a powerful observation and it concluded with Gérald Cortot’s advice to me to proceed slowly, thereby allowing me to assimilate the reasoning of Jean-Marie and the broad cultural context in which it was articulated.

Needless to say, I was moved by the counsel I received. I thought about it for a long time as I crisscrossed New Caledonia, visited the terre and case kanak (Kanak land and house) on the Larzac in southern France, discussed with close friends of Jean-Marie, and sat with his assassin’s brother at Goosana. And I took note. Indeed it was only in late 2002 that I gained sufficient confidence to set foot on Ouvéa, an island that was, at the time, still an open wound in the body of Kanaky. My patience was rewarded. Some at least of the intense pain and suffering of the 1980s has now receded, as has the sense of loss and tragedy. A new generation has largely displaced the one that occupied the center stage during the événements. The light breeze in the valleys of the Central Chain and the breaking surf along the East Coast have replaced the sounds of gunshot and the cries of pain. Important and deeply moving acts of reconciliation have been completed. While the time of mourning has passed, and some of the suffering fades into distant memory, the spoken word remains. The time is now opportune for the thoughts of an exceptional man, who dedicated his life to his people, to be freely shared with a generation and with peoples and nations of the Island Pacific that did not have the privilege of knowing him.

My own long journey has been motivated by another, more personal conviction regarding the essential wisdom of what the West calls indigenous peoples. I share, with the likes of Jean Malaurie, the conviction that those “first” communities and civilizations that still survive on their ancestral lands are, in a very real sense, “the sentinels of our planet”:

We must pay attention to rooted peoples, these first-comers, in order to learn that the truth comes not only from above, from the Heavens, but also, humbly, from below, from that which is at the origin of the universe, from that which constitutes the texture of the earth, from its water, and from the air which gives us life. *Nolens volens*, we are moving towards a merging of thought, that of the sacred books and that of pantheistic peoples. . . .

Michelet wrote, “To see what no one sees, that is second sight.” To see what one senses is to come, what will be born, that is prophecy. They are two things which astonish the masses, attract the mockery of the wise, and which are typically a spontaneous gift of simplicity. This gift, rare among “civilized” people
is, as we know, widespread among first nations, regardless of whether they are called “savages” or “barbarians.” (Malaurie 1999, 28)

Let me be clear: I’m not suggesting that indigenous peoples are intrinsically nobler or purer than later comers, that there is something ethnic or, indeed, genetic, about their superiority. They too have feet of clay, know cruelty and violence, pain and oppression. They are responsible for major biological extinctions, and they are in the process of being shattered by alcohol, violence, the rape of the environment, urbanization, self-interest, and the cynical manipulation of customary practice. However, in today’s world there are still survivors of such peoples, who remind us of the vital significance of having an uninterrupted experience of a particular place, of being able to conceive a local world in terms of long (or deep) time, of possessing a warm and intimate knowledge of the land, and of transmitting that knowledge through the entire fabric of society, such that it is universally shared and possessed. Memory and dignity are of inestimable importance to these communities, the former being constantly nourished by the natural world and the latter fused with a great sense of humility in relation to it.

Such a grounded and fast-disappearing indigenous world stands in stark contrast to, and defiance of, a largely atomized and narcissistic urban-industrial world, where its individual members are locked into the present and the immediate future, are isolated from and largely ignorant of the natural world, and are totally committed, with their political leadership, to a logic of unlimited accumulation of material wealth and unconstrained economic growth. One has only to juxtapose, in this respect, the words of Ralph Klein, until recently premier of Alberta, Canada, with those of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, to appreciate the gulf between two fundamentally different ways of inhabiting the earth. Klein, expressing his opposition to the Canadian government’s intention to sign the Kyoto Protocol, announced, “I’m not going to be here in thirty years’ time and neither are most of the people around me. I don’t care a fuck.” A few weeks before his assassination, Jean-Marie affirmed, with regard to the natural world in general and to his responsibility to others:

Me? I’m only momentarily here. But I must do everything in my power to ensure that the country I will leave to my sons is the most beautiful possible. For it to be rich in thought, in wisdom, in flowers and in food. (Quoted in Bellow 1989a, 39)

One is accountable, in time and in space, from the day when one first appears before the sun to the day on which one disappears. Regardless of the place one finds oneself in, one has the same responsibility with regard to present and future generations. (Quoted in Bellow 1989b, 29)

This tragic confrontation of small communities that are bearers of an intimate, generous, aesthetically pleasing, and ritualized knowledge of their
local geographies by an all-conquering industrial civilization of planetary dimensions is what makes the message of Jean-Marie so important in my mind. It is not nostalgia that motivates me but a sense of tragedy and crisis, of an inability to engage in any real form of intercultural communication, one that once again he so eloquently expressed when speaking of the particular challenge facing New Caledonia in the 1980s:

If today I can share with a non-Kanak of this country that which I possess of French culture, it is impossible for him to share with me the universal element of my culture. (1989a, 78)

Jean-Marie’s knowledge, intrinsic simplicity, and intelligence set him resolutely apart. He was much more than a big man (or tribal chief), from Hienghène, an articulate interpreter and promoter of Melanesian culture and identity, or the president of the Provisional Government of Kanaky. He was a great man. His disarming eloquence and his total honesty constituted the outward expressions of this unique status.

The spoken and written word—language: therein lay another of my hesitations with respect to writing about Jean-Marie. Which language should I express it in, French or English? The dilemma was not simply a function of being fluent in and writing easily in both. Language is the linchpin of culture, essentially the medium through which that culture is diffused within a group and transmitted from generation to generation. At least twenty-eight Melanesian languages are spoken in New Caledonia, none of them dominant. For the Kanak, French is the common language, just as Bislama is the acknowledged lingua franca of Vanuatu and English of Fiji. Many speak French extremely well, and in this sense Jean-Marie was simply a primus inter pares. His command of French was remarkable, and in public he infused it with Melanesian metaphors and symbols and graced it with a Melanesian rhythm. He often paused before he spoke and left his sentences suspended, as if relaying a parole that reached far back into the past and would pursue its course unbroken into the future. In these circumstances, my natural response was to seek to respect the integrity of his essentially spoken word rather than to deprive it, through translation, of much of its intrinsic force and beauty.

Yet another consideration accounted for my lengthy hesitations. Strange as it may seem, in the broad regional context of a now dominantly anglophone Pacific, all things “French”—a term broadly and indiscriminately used to cover language, culture, politics, a metropolitan state, and anything associated with the French, Frenchness, and the French presence in the region—are even today often considered to be a source of some irritation, if not inherently retrograde. Everything perceived as French is seen as a reality that makes little sense and runs counter to the great forces of history. The roots of this ambivalence plunge far down into the Pacific Ocean, embracing competing imperial designs in the late eighteenth and nineteenth cen-
turies, deep-seated rivalry between the Protestant and Catholic Churches, the Pritchard affair in Tahiti, and, in recent decades, metropolitan France’s resistance to powerful independence movements in its Pacific territories, the absurdity of nuclear testing on Moruroa and, linked with it, the sinking in 1985 of the admiral ship of the Greenpeace fleet, *Rainbow Warrior*, in Auckland harbor. Australia and New Zealand, first as British colonies and then dominions, not to mention the merchants of Sydney, have played a crucial role in this continuing drama. Responsibilities as regional gendarmes, and interests as trading and themselves colonizing nations, have served to nourish this animosity for more than a hundred and fifty years.

In such a context, the boundaries between rationality and irrationality, empirical knowledge and particular interests, reason and emotion, are all too easily blurred. Even in a scholarly world it can easily become a situation where, to quote Wittgenstein, “The limits of my discourse are those of my universe” and the writings of a tiny minority of reactionary French academics are characterized as being the voice of French scholarship as a whole. The outcomes can be quite absurd, as I discovered on joining the University of the South Pacific in 1990 and being cautioned by several colleagues about the dangers of speaking French in the corridors of the institution! As if English were not also an imperial language, and as if French speakers from Canada were condemned to the same regional dialectic! If the tide has turned somewhat in recent years and a new understanding has been reached between France, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as with the historically ambivalent independent Melanesian states, it is essentially by virtue of a convergence of strategic preoccupations, notably the concern to buttress “failed” island states and the need to protect the region from what are perceived as destabilizing forces originating in Asia.

More seriously, such partiality becomes problematic in any attempt to understand and appreciate Jean-Marie Tjibaou, not to mention other intellectuals and thinkers from the French-speaking Pacific. Their references, networks, and friends extend to and pass through France, on to Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the francophone world. They are marked by events, struggles, and debates taking place within that universe, and many of their references and values are drawn from it. Jean-Marie Tjibaou was not allergic to France, and he was not alone in that respect. There was much he liked about French civilization, as there was much that angered and frustrated him. In the final analysis, France and the French language were part of his identity, his window on the world, and he had no wish or reason to reject them. Because this was the larger world that nourished him and within which he navigated, he remained relatively unfamiliar with the anglophone Pacific and the Anglo-American realm at large. At the same time his anchor was unequivocally Kanak, and this ensured an intuitive understanding of and complicity with other Oceanians.

In a context where, in regional terms, any specific group is disadvan-
taged with respect to power relations and to something that can broadly be described as “understanding,” it is a natural tendency for its members to withdraw into their familiar cultural and intellectual space, where they are more likely to be intuitively understood. Fortunately the growing number of publications in French on Jean-Marie Tjibaou, beginning with the moving portrait drawn by the journalist Alain Rollat in the months immediately after his death (Rollat 1989b), followed by the important collection of interviews with and writings by him prepared by Alban Bensa and Éric Wittersheim (Tjibaou 1996, 2005), and most recently Hamid Mokaddem’s scholarly study of his political philosophy (Mokaddem 2005) all deterred me from gravitating toward such shelter. An invitation to join the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies as a visiting scholar in 2005 settled the matter. I could finally write the book and thereby fulfill a debt to my friends and former colleagues of the University of the South Pacific who responded with such enthusiasm back in 1993 to my first lecture on Jean-Marie. They encouraged me to delve further, even though their hearts lay with the man who was immediately responsible for his descent into what he described as “the big black hole.” Therein lies my decision to offer his words, his thoughts, and his life “in translation,” in the belief that they will thereby transcend those barriers that are mere artifacts of imperial design.