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The Chiefdoms within the Colonial Order

Organising the chiefdoms

1897–1903: Mèèjà Néjà and governor Feillet’s reforms

Over the second half of the 19th century, the undefined narrative use of the term ‘chief’, in both military accounts and administrative documents, became gradually more defined through the creation of a legislative framework that developed as colonisation progressed from simple military control to economic exploitation. As early as 1867, the tribe was constituted as a legal entity, with collective responsibility and collective ownership of the land, and represented by a chief. The latter, in exchange for a small stipend, served as an interface with the administrative authority (the *gendarmes*¹) and its economic demands: provision of labour from 1863, compulsory work days (service) from 1871 and head tax from 1894. The chiefs were also responsible for applying the disciplinary regulations of the *indigénat* (introduced in 1887).

At this point, I should like to consider in more detail the forms of political activity at work in the Houaïlou region in the early 20th century, following the radical reform of the legislative framework and land ownership in the

1 The *gendarmerie* is a division of the French military, and one of the two branches of policing in France. Its duties include policing in small towns and rural areas, security, and maintaining public order [trans.].

colony instituted by the governor Paul Feillet. This reform ushered in a period of increased control of local social life under a colonial government that was manifested principally through the institution of the chiefdoms. At this point the segregated and policed order that had gradually been introduced over the second half of the 19th century and which, I would argue, constitutes the model that is implicitly, yet paradoxically, evoked when reference is made to ‘custom’ in New Caledonia today, can clearly be seen in operation. This new colonial governmentality was also manifested through the restriction on freedom of movement and the disconnection and marginalisation of rural spaces that was made possible and organised by placing the Kanaks in reservations. Rather than approaching this situation from a purely juridical point of view, I propose to examine political moments and singular events, through the various concrete forms of mobilisation of individuals and management of conflicts, in which rationales of both physical violence and sorcery, as well as a considerable number of actors, were brought into action and, on this basis, to try to grasp the modalities, the stakes and the possibilities involved.

In the preceding two chapters I sought to expose the rationales underlying the development of a privileged relationship between French military power and the coastal chiefdoms of Houaïlou. The career of chief ‘Mindia’, Mèèjà Néjà, is closely linked with the government of Feillet who, between 1897 and 1903, oversaw the great colonial enclosures in New Caledonia,² and the reorganisation of the government of indigenous people via the restructuring of the Native Affairs Department and the toughening of the *indigénat* system,³ completion of the relocation of Kanaks onto reservations,⁴ and an active policy of land expropriation supported by the administrative chiefs. The aim of all of this was to advance an aggressive policy of free settlement by colonists. It was, quite logically, as the direct descendant of the auxiliary chiefs with whom the French were now in the habit of cooperating in the Houaïlou region, and after personally participating in a military operation in early 1897 at Hienghène,⁵ that Mèèjà was named high chief of all Houaïlou when the office of high chief with authority over a number of tribes was introduced into the organisation of the colony (under the ‘Decree on the subject of organisation of native tribes’ of 27 October 1897). He also took part in

2 Merle 1995.

3 Merle 2002 and 2004; Muckle 2010.

4 Saussol 1979; Dauphiné 1989; Merle 1998.

5 Dauphiné 1989.

the ‘Peace of Pamalé’ in 1901, during which Feillet ended protests against land seizures in the Poindimié region. Mèèjà Néjà became an efficient mediator of the demands of the Feillet administration with regard to land ownership in Houaïlou. It was at this point that the scene described in the previous chapter, outlining his role in the seizure of land in Dâô (applying the governor’s decree of 9 January 1899, which appropriated part of the Nindien reservation) took place; as we have seen, this episode also achieved Mèèjà Néjà’s personal objectives in his inter-clan relationships with his maternal uncles from the greater Houaïlou valley (see Chapter 2).

This privileged relationship, however, was not in any way a linear one. Structurally, it might be considered that this was due to the paradoxical position in which administrative chiefs were placed by the system of indirect government of the colony. The chief was responsible for both land expropriation and control of labour, but all variations were possible in the chiefs’ involvement with the French: they could amplify the demands of the authorities, relay them neutrally, or offer passive or active resistance to them. They could also use their position to work towards objectives other than those laid down by French law: fines, days of banishment, designation of providers of forced labour and those who were to pay tax could be used to resolve problems of authority or internal conflicts. These contradictions were quickly manifested in the case of Mèèjà Néjà, who was subject to a punishment of administrative detention in 1899. Here are the deliberations on this punishment in the minutes of the Privy Council:

Mindja – Chief of Houaïlou (7th district). Bad subject and drunkard; has several times disobeyed the administration and the gendarmerie. Abused his authority by preventing natives from buying goods from certain traders and working for certain settlers. Sentenced to exile in Maré under the decision of 21 July 1899. Although Mindja has behaved well in exile, the Native Affairs Department proposes that he continue to be held in Maré until 1st July 1900. This chief is an alcoholic who needs some time to acquire habits of intemperance [*sic*]. (Privy Council, 28 December 1899)⁶

This text seems to suggest that the chief’s influence was only acceptable to the colonial administration and the gendarmerie in charge of Native Affairs on condition that it satisfied the private interests of ‘certain traders’ and ‘certain settlers’. It may be surmised that it was a conflict with these interests – a reluctance to satisfy their demands – that was at the origin of the punishment to which Mèèjà Néjà was sentenced. Examination of

6 I am grateful to Adrian Muckle for alerting me to this reference.

the electoral registers for Houaïlou for the years 1903 and 1905, which list voters' occupation and are the closest in date to this administrative sanction of deportation, identifies two traders: Eugène Bozon-Verduraz and Alexandre Renevier. I shall have occasion to return to these individuals.

In the Protestant sources, Mèèjà Néjà's stay in Maré is initially presented as the result of his personal relationship with pastor Philadelphie Delord, and as a symbol of the vigour and even the resurgence of Protestantism, countering the deadly effects of colonial alcoholisation: it is represented as an episode that justifies the mission. It is within this discursive framework that Maurice Leenhardt recounts how he was received by Mèèjà Néjà when he arrived in Houaïlou, in one of the first letters he sent from his mission field:

A number of small boats approach the ship. The finest contains Mindia, the high chief, formerly a drunkard so hardened that the authorities were on the point of withdrawing his title and bestowing it on another, when Mr Delord, who was in New Caledonia at that time, asked if he could take him to Maré. He returned completely transformed, and now polices his tribes to prevent them from drinking. (Leenhardt 1903, p. 132)

The account given by Delord two years earlier presents a more complex picture: it could be considered that Mèèjà Néjà's alliance with the Protestants came to substitute for, or at least augment, a failing alliance with the colony's administrative authorities:

You know high chief Mindia of Houaïlou. Here is a letter from him that I received yesterday: 'You brought me to know my Saviour. I had become an inveterate drunkard, to the point where I was put in prison, in Houaïlou, on 23 June 1899, me the high chief of all the tribes of Houaïlou, and two days later sent to Nouméa, where I was in the orphanage (prison for natives)⁷ for three months, mad and sick ... You had pity on me, you obtained permission from the Governor to take me with you to Maré where, thanks to your good and constant care, I am returned to health in body and mind. In Maré I promised, for one year, to cease drinking completely. The year has passed, and thanks be to God, I have been able to keep this promise – a promise that I have just renewed for two years, on 1st January 1901, in my Church, in the presence of the nata [Protestant evangelist] Weimith and my Christian subjects. I pray God to give me the strength to fulfil this promise. Signed Mindia.' (Delord 1901a, pp. 329–30)⁸

7 The Native Detention Centre, Baie de l'orphelinat (Orphanage Bay), in Nouméa.

8 See also Delord 1901b.

Nevertheless, his conflict with ‘certain traders’ did not end there: on 5 July 1912 *La France australe*⁹ noted that the lawyer representing ‘Mindhia of Houaïlou’, ‘charged with assaulting two of his subjects’, had condemned the machinations of the Houaïlou ‘taverns’, in other words the managers of bars, at a time when the ‘the six-stripe high chief’ wanted to avoid ‘the degradation of his subjects through alcohol’. Mèèjà Néjà was eventually acquitted by the court.

The fact that the administration continued to recognise him also allowed him to assert himself within his clan:

Néouéo. – Tribe of high chief of Houaïlou, Mindia. Poor order and discipline, because it is split between the authority of Mindia and that of his heathen brother. (Leenhardt 1907, p. 270)

This ‘brother’ appears in a number of other early 20th-century sources under the name ‘Mindail’ or ‘Mandai’ [Mâdai]. His position in the family of high chief Mèèjà can be determined by reference to the genealogy presented in Chapter 1 (Figure 2); Mâdai Néjà appears here as the grandson of ‘chief’ Wanga (mentioned in 1856), and Mèèjà Néjà as the son of ‘chief’ Ai (mentioned particularly in the repressive operations conducted between 1863 and 1868). Thus Mâdai is the son of the son of the brother of Mèèjà’s father’s father: they are indeed, in the classificatory terminology of kinship in the Houaïlou region, ‘brothers’ and potential rivals for the position of chief. Some years later Mâdai in his turn was subject to a sanction of administrative detention and deportation: Lucas Mindail of Néouyo (Houaïlou), who called himself a ‘war chief’ ‘under the sway of old customs’ was sentenced to two years internment on the Île des Pins ‘for indulging in all sorts of abuse of the natives in his district’ (*Journal officiel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 15 April 1912).¹⁰

1912: Establishing high chiefdoms in Houaïlou

The ambivalent figure of high chief Mèèjà is all the more interesting because it offers us a valuable window into the changes in colonial governance in Houaïlou in the early 20th century. Let us start with the division of the territory of Houaïlou into administrative districts enacted by decree no. 353 of 3 April 1912:

9 *Southern Hemisphere France*, daily newspaper published in Nouméa from 1889 to 1979 [trans.].

10 I am grateful to Adrian Muckle for alerting me to this reference.

Article 1. The whole of the tribal lands known as Houaïlou shall be divided into four districts as follows:

1st District of Neouyo, high chief Mindia, comprising the coastal tribes located on the right bank of the Houaïlou or 'Boa-Ma' river, those located in the valleys of the Kamoui river and the Méré river.

2nd District of Waraï, high chief Mandaoué, comprising the coastal tribes located on the left bank of the Houaïlou or 'Boa-Ma' river, the tribes of Lebris Bay up to and including those of Moné, and the tribe living in the valley of the river La Thu.

3rd District of Nindien, high chief Notouo, comprising the tribes in the settlements of Mé, Nindieu, Nessakouya up to and including the tribe of Gondé.

4th District of Boréaré, high chief Paul, comprising the tribes of Boréaré, Koula, Karagreu and Nérin.

Article 2. Mandaoué of Waraï, Notouo of Nindien and Paul of Boréaré shall have the right to wear four gold stripes.

High chief Mindia of Neouyo will retain the six gold stripes he is already entitled to wear, with the understanding that he is chief only of his district and has no authority of any kind over the high chiefs and the natives of the other districts. (*Journal officiel de la Nouvelle Calédonie*, 15 April 1912)

This 'division of the tribal lands known as Houaïlou into four districts', to quote the exact title of the decree, is pre-eminently a limitation on the authority of high chief 'Mindia', the first 'high chief' of Houaïlou: this limitation is the actual subject of the second paragraph of Article 2 of the decree. The division should not be read only as a measure to frustrate Mèèjà Néjà; it was also a result of the administrative reform carried out in 1912 when, under the decree of 2 March 1912, the Native Affairs Department was separated from the Immigration Department and made directly accountable to the governor's office.

We have no information on the details of the process that led to the appointment of the three new high chiefs, 'Mandaoué' [Mwâdêwé], also known by the name of 'Métou' [Métu], of the Népörö clan; 'Notouo' [Nötuö], also known by the name of Casimir, of the Bwéwa clan; and 'Paul', of the Wéma Nirikani clan. Paul was certainly not unknown to the administration since, as tribal chief of Boréaré, he had been awarded

one stripe on 31 July 1906.¹¹ A ‘report No. 20 of 19 February 1912, by the Administrator of Houailou, communicating the results of agreements concluded between the councils of the tribes in the Houailou region’, cited in the preamble to the decree of 3 April 1912, makes reference to prior discussions, but I was unable to find this document. Most visible among the reactions to this decree are inevitably the more negative or critical responses. The most vociferous on this matter is undoubtedly Leenhardt: in his letters to his parents, he regularly takes issue with Paul, ‘the governor’s great poodle’ (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 20 November 1912) and with Nötuö: ‘As he has installed the Catholic mission in his home, upon which he became, just like that, a four-stripe high chief’ (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 26 May 1914). I shall come back to the persistent conflicts between Leenhardt and Mwâdewé. This hostility stemmed from the fact that, from Leenhardt’s mission-focused point of view, these appointments were primarily an attack by the colonial administration against the influence of Protestantism in Houailou, which had hitherto been protected by the goodwill of high chief Mèèjà Néjà.

[The constable of Houailou] has completely won over the Houailou chiefs, that is, he has created new ones who owe him everything, while at the same time crushing Mindia. With these tame chiefs, and Mindia crushed, he turned generously to the latter, raising him up, guiding him, giving him authority, and by this wily strategy winning full authority over him. All the natives who do not understand are being sent to Nouméa, the Administration applauds the excellent reports it receives, and it’s all wonderful. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 13 October 1912)

It is possible that there were also local Kanak reactions. For example, in a notebook belonging to Mèèjà Néjà we find the following (anonymous) remark, which perhaps constitutes the draft of a letter of protest: ‘We want high chief Mindia to resume his title of high chief of Houailou as before’ (*Papiers Mindia n.d.*, p. 187).¹²

This notebook also offers invaluable insight into the struggles of the new chiefs to assert their authority. For example, it contains two drafts of letters relating to a conflict between the new high chief of Nindiah, Nötuö Bwéwa, the tribal chief of Öroibâö, ‘Beudimin’ [Bëdimwâ Bwéwa], and their families, on the one hand, and the inhabitants of Nérhëxakwéa and Gôdè, on the other. The first, dated 13 January 1915, is signed by the

11 Archives of New Caledonia, 97W18.

12 The family of Maurice Leenhardt holds a microfiche copy of Mèèjà Néjà’s notebook.

chiefs 'Goaké' [Gwâkê Ęribwa] and 'Arou Péruche' [Arhu Kaviyöibanu] of Nérhëxakwéaa, and 'Baptiste' [Cibëi] of Gôdè (Papiers Mindia n.d., p. 140); the second, dated 17 January, is signed by Mèèjà Néjà himself. We do not know if these letters were sent to the governor, to whom they are addressed; in any case the matter was adjudicated at a simple police court in April 1915. The most significant point, I would argue, is that the letters were drafted in a notebook belonging to Mèèjà Néjà, suggesting a coordinated opposition by the tribal chiefs of the middle Houaïlou valley and the high chief on the coast against the new high chief of the lower valley:

Houaïlou, 17 January 1915

To the Governor of New Caledonia and Dependencies

Dear Sir

I have long experience of your generosity and your goodness the services you have been so good as to render me are indelibly engraved in my memory I am turning to you once again to beg for your favour on the present occasion. I turn to you in trust to tell you Mr Governor that since 6 January chiefs Notouo and chief Beudimin gather their men and are summoning them to declare to fight against the natives of chiefs Goake and Arou Peruche tribe of Nésakoéa and Baptiste of Gondé. Everyones fight among themselves. The others hurt and injure the natives Setèi and Poïba of the tribe of Nésakoéa. The pore men suffering day and nights because of the injuries of Notouo and Beudimin and compatriots.

I pray you Mr Governor to receive my protest and my complaint and the idea of having added one happy man more. Mr Governor I humbly beg you to believe me your abslutely devoted servant.

High Chief of the district of Houaïlou.

Mindia. (Papiers Mindia n.d., p. 153)

This affair brings into play Pöiba Kaviyöibanu and Yetèi Ęrijiyi, one of Leenhardt's students at Dö Nèvâ who was at that time attempting to seduce the daughter of tribal chief Bëdimwâ Bwéwa of the Öröibâo tribe:

Sétei to secure the beautiful and serious Kouento sought to seduce her. Battle between the Nindiah and the Nessakoéa reciprocal complaints to the gendarmes. (Leenhardt, Journal, 14 January 1915)

We have no detailed information on the issues at stake in this dispute between neighbouring villages over a young woman. But it is striking that tribal and high chiefs drew on their relationship with the gendarmerie in this conflict, using the administrative resources available to them to the best advantage.

The 1912 reform integrated the high chiefs deeply into the colonial order, turning them into officials of the administration. The role of the chief subsumed multiple functions: supervision (of all), internment (of lepers), and mobilisation of economic resources through tax and requisitioning.

The high chiefs and the tribal chiefs both have a duty to inform the authorities of events that arise in the territory entrusted to their supervision. The former are also responsible for isolating lepers in the places reserved for them. Under Article 41, they are also responsible, on pain of disciplinary sanction, for the payment of fines imposed on natives living in the territory under their authority. As regards fiscal duties, they are responsible for collecting taxes, of which they may use up to one twentieth (5%). They also receive a deduction at the same rate from the wages allocated to those natives of their tribes who are requisitioned or placed under immigration regulations. The sums received under these two heads constitute the entirety of their official remuneration. (Pégourier 1919, p. 20)

1915–17: Mobilisation for war

The new system of administration through the medium of high chiefs, set up in 1912, was quickly put to use in mobilising the young men of Houaïlou for war; they were called on first to enlist as volunteers in the First World War (in 1915 and 1916), and then as auxiliaries in the north of Grande Terre (in 1917). The two recruitment campaigns for the First World War were conducted primarily through the newly appointed administrative high chiefs. A table of mobilisation by district, based on names recorded in the census of tribes carried out by Maurice Leenhardt in 1917–19, gives an indication of this:

Table 2. Mobilisation for the First World War, by district

	Troops	Male population	Mobilisation rate
Boréaré district (Paul Wéma)	8	105	7.6%
Nindien district (Nötuö Bwéwa)	29	303	9.6%
Néwèö district (Mèèjà Néjà)	18	318	5.7%
Warai district (Mwâdewé Népörö)	26	261	10%
Houaïlou	81	987	8.2%

Source: Leenhardt n.d. [c.1917–19].

Thus it was in the districts governed by Mwâdewé Népörö and Nötuö Bwéwa, the two chiefs then least known to the administration, that mobilisation was highest, while it was moderate in that of Paul Wéma, a tribal chief who had been awarded stripes in 1906, and much lower in the district of Mèèjà Néjà. Clearly, any suggestion as to the motives for this participation would be purely speculative, particularly as regards how much derived from each individual's personal commitment and how much was owed to influence or obligations imposed by the chiefs – which itself only reflected pressure from above.

Our Military Commander must certainly have recognised that he was wrong to ... treat the chiefs of Houaïlou rather too harshly when he made his recruitment tour of the East coast. (*Bulletin du commerce*, 30 June 1917, p. 8)

Leenhardt, for his part, offered three explanations for enlistment in a letter to his parents: the promises of equal citizenship (to which I shall return), attachment to France as the source of the Gospel (Leenhardt is clearly projecting his own feelings here), and love of war. This exposition at least has the merit of pointing out to the diversity of possible motives:

The decree opening up freedom to enlist for the war in Africa has been extended to all the colonies ... They said to the Kanaks: you will be like the Whites. In my sermons I tell them: 'You will have participated in the victory and will thereby have gained a new degree of dignity that will enhance your standing in the eyes of France.' This is more vague than what the Whites are telling them; it is also more accurate. They understand it and they accept it. But they come to ask for specific detail about what the Whites are promising: 'Will we be like them? What do they mean? They are defending their territory, but what territory are we defending? Our lands are State property, will they give them to us?' I let them hope that this will be the case; but do not imagine that the majority of Kanaks talk in this way. Most of them are enlisting for two reasons: either out of love for France, the country the Mishers [missionaries] champion, which brought them the light (the Gospel), or in order to see war. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 31 January 1916)

Following the two phases of recruitment for the First World War, the inhabitants of Houaïlou were called upon once again during the year 1917, through their high chiefs, to participate in a wide-ranging operation of colonial repression. More and more information is coming to light about the sequence of events in the north of Grande Terre in 1917 known as the Kanak 'rebellion', and the repressive operations it triggered in the

regions of Koné and Hienghène, thanks to the work of Adrian Muckle.¹³ Here I should like to focus on what can be understood of the participation of warriors from Houaïlou in the two phases of repression, in July–August 1917 (in the Koné region), and in December 1917 – January 1918 (in the Hienghène region). One of my present-day interlocutors emphasised the responsibility of the chiefs:

He participated in a pretty much fascist war, the war over there all the brothers in Hienghène ... We've been criticised for that, recently, the brothers [from Hienghène] when I was at school with them, things almost turned nasty, they asked me the question ... Because at that time it was the high chiefdoms that decided everything, it wasn't us, you can't accuse us ... They were led there, you know, when they got there they were astonished. At that time it was the high chief who made the decisions, it was colonisation that pushed from behind. (Charles Pûkiu, extract from interview, July 2006)

Coming nearly 40 years after they had played their part as auxiliaries in the repression of 1878, but in the immediate continuation of their military support for the French in the First World War, Kanaks were involved in the repression from the early stages, and on a large scale:¹⁴ as early as 27 May, a few days after the first disturbances in the Koné region, the people of Houaïlou offered their support to the French army. The men responsible for coordinating the repression, the surveyors Bernier, Antoine Martin-Garnaud and Nicolas Ratzel, organised mass recruitment of men from Houaïlou in response to the following statement, relayed by Eugène Bozon-Verduraz, the chairman of the municipal committee. In my view, mayor Bozon-Verduraz' intervention was crucial in determining in the form taken by the operation. Here is the text of the telegram he sent to the governor on 20 June:

Have the honour of reporting that high chiefs Mindia Mandaoué Casimir and Paul whose devotion to France assured came spontaneously to ask us to communicate to you following: they request the honour of participating expedition against rebels in north assuring will immediately put end to insurrection. (Bozon-Verduraz 1978a, p. 71).¹⁵

13 Muckle 2006, 2008 and 2012.

14 Guiart 1970.

15 This message is signed 'David Bozon-Verduraz'. In the four electoral lists for Houaïlou between 1903 and 1919, there is only one Bozon-Verduraz, with the forename Eugène. This must therefore necessarily be the chairman of the municipal committee; David was most probably the forename by which he was usually known.

This statement prompted an initial article in the *Bulletin du commerce*, on 23 June 1917:

The tribes of Houaïlou, including that of Boréaré, are universally known for their loyalty and patriotism which they have always shown, on every occasion: these tribes supplied a large number of volunteers for the Pacific infantry battalion. In 1878, the same tribes showed themselves admirably well disposed towards us. It is therefore no surprise that high chief Mindia and chief Paul have recently offered the Governor the support of their warriors in the campaign against the natives of the Koné region: we estimate that they can probably supply between 100 and 150 guns. We offer our warm congratulations to chiefs Mindia and Paul for their affection for France and the devotion they show to the cause of civilisation. (*Bulletin du commerce*, 23 June 1917, pp. 8–9)

This article in its turn prompted a response from Bozon-Verduraz:

As of now the chiefs of Houaïlou alone have 140 men ready, distributed as follows: François chief Monéo 15 Mandaoué chief Nékoué 40 Paul chief Boréaré 12 Casimir chief Nindhia 40 Mindia chief Néouyo 33 ... We have to inform you that chiefs Mandaoué and Casimir were deeply wounded at not seeing their name appear relative congratulations in bulletin of 23 inst. beg you to rectify. (Bozon-Verduraz and Satorek 1978, p. 76)

Through this intervention, Bozon-Verduraz appears to constitute an interest group that binds him with Mwâdewé Népörö and Casimir Nötuö Bwéwa; we do not know to what extent this alliance pre-existed the 1917 mobilisation, but we can perhaps take it as an indication of the role the chairman of the municipal committee may have played in the appointment of the high chiefs in 1912 (let us recall that Mèèjà Néjà had been interned in Nouméa, and then deported to Maré, in 1899, and in 1912 was once again charged in relation to a conflict of interest with a trader in Houaïlou, who might well have been Bozon-Verduraz himself). The following issue of the *Bulletin du commerce* confirms this ‘influence’:

The traditional preparatory palavers are proliferating among the natives, suggesting that our brave natives will not be long in ‘joining the campaign’. Alongside chiefs Mindia and Paul, we must mention, among the most ardent and most devoted to our cause, other chiefs from Houaïlou: Mandaoué, Casimir and François of Monéo. We should also mention that the influence of Mr Bozon-Verduraz, the Chairman of the Municipal Committee, was very happily exerted to encourage all of these valiant

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chiefs in their manly resolution. A shrewd trader, he even went as far as offering a number of small gifts to the chiefs, encouraging them to fire the zeal of their warriors. (*Bulletin du commerce*, 30 June 1917, p. 8)

The telegram of 28 June is another source that helps us to estimate the capacities of the four high chiefs to mobilise men; it can be compared with other quantitative evidence – including the partial list below, provided in the account by surveyor Nicolas Ratzel:

The number of men who came to place themselves under my authority totals 347, as follows:

Néouïo, under the command of chief Mindia 34
 Nékoué Ouaraye, under the command of chief Mandaoué 43
 Mindieu, under the command of chief Notouo 63
 Boréaré, under the command of chief Paul 15
 Monéo, under the command of chief François 18.

(Ratzel 2006 vol. 1, p. 353, 12 July 1917)

and that of Maurice Leenhardt:

2½ hours to embark 195 men, including 163 Houaïlou. Mindia, poor Mindia, in his desire to always be the one with the biggest number, gave 65 men. (Leenhardt, Lettre à son épouse Jeanne, 27 June 1917)

Taken together, these data form the basis for drawing up a new table of the mobilisation capacities (MC) of the high chiefs of Houaïlou.

Table 3. Mobilisation for the colonial war in Koné and Hienghène

	Boréaré district (Paul)	Nindien district (Nötuö Casimir)	Néwéo district (Mindia)	Warai district (Mandaoué)	Houaïlou
Bozon (28/06)	12	40	33	40	125
Ratzel (12/07)	15	63	34	43	155
Leenhardt (27/06)			65		163
Male population (c. 1917–19)	105	303	318	261	987
MC Bozon	11.4%	13.2%	10.4%	15.3%	12.7%
MC Ratzel	14.3%	20.8%	10.7%	16.5%	15.7%
MC Leenhardt			20.4%		16.5%
MC infantry	7.6%	9.6%	5.7%	10%	8.2%

Source: After Bozon-Verduraz and Satorek (1978), Ratzel (2006) and Leenhardt (Lettre à son épouse Jeanne, 27 June 1917).

Notable once again is the low mobilisation capacity of Mèèjà Néjà (unless we accept Leenhardt's estimate). Be that as it may, Leenhardt's assessment is broadly confirmed: 'And no one is left ... The young men are in France, the old men are in Koné, only the women are left' (Leenhardt, *Lettre à son épouse Jeanne*, 27 June 1917). In fact, nearly a quarter of the male population of Houaïlou (all ages combined) was involved in the successive mobilisations between 1915 and 1917.

Accounts of the methods of colonial war used by the Houaïlou auxiliaries in 1917 refer to tactics that are by now familiar, and which I described in Chapter 1: the use of mobile columns as tested in New Caledonia in 1878, and total war via the destruction of dwellings and means of production:

I strongly insisted, to the loyal chiefs who rallied to our cause, on the absolute necessity of burning all the villages without exception and laying waste, of totally destroying crops and irrigation channels to the taro fields. I was convinced that the Kanak, thus deprived of his native foodstuff and of his shelter that protects him from cold and bad weather, would not long resist being harried every day, every moment. (Ratzel 2006 vol. 1, p. 362)

The descriptions of the 1917 operation stand out from those of the wars conducted between 1856 and 1878 (see Chapter 1) in their emphasis on the material interests of those participating, in terms of exemption from taxes, bounties, loot and capture of women. This may be due to the appearance of new sources, given that the missionaries certainly took a different view from the military in their evaluation of methods of war; but it may also be due to developments in the evolution of these methods. This is Leenhardt's account of the looting during the two phases of the repression (July–August 1917; December 1917 – January 1918):

We left the Houaïlous, Bayes with words of encouragement aimed at arousing their atavistic instincts, they set on these savages, and massacre without mercy. Some have already returned here, bringing a huge booty of cooking pots and tools ... Our Houaïlous are scouring the bush conscientiously, and paid as they are in booty, indiscriminately loot those loyal to us as well as the rebels. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 3 August 1917 and 19 January 1918)

While far removed from this moral reading, the emphasis on the material aspect of the war is equally explicit in Ratzel's account of the rules of war he instituted at the start of the operation, which constituted a direct and powerful incitement to violence:

You shall make war on the rebels in accordance with your ancient customs; we surveyors will decide the places and times when you should act. Each man who enlists under my leadership shall be exempted from the head tax for 15 years.¹⁶ For each prisoner taken, the bounty shall be 25 francs. It will be double that sum for each rebel killed ...

I had promised the chiefs that for each prisoner taken by the men, they would receive a bounty of 25 francs, and that any auxiliary who killed a rebel would receive an allowance of 50 francs. It was easy to count the men who surrendered and were made prisoners, likewise the women, but those who were killed were a different matter. He who had killed an enemy on a steep slope or in the depth of a forest could not bring the body with him: the Houailous and the men of Bourail quickly found a solution to the problem. When the enemy was down, they cut off his head; they tied the hair, which all wore very long, to a flexible liana stem one or two metres in length, and brought the head to the camp by pulling it behind them. It followed behind, now rolling, now bouncing over the rough ground, roots and stones, giving off hollow yet muffled sounds that aroused no emotion of any kind in the victor ... I saw sixteen heads brought back this way on 16 December, despite the fact that I wished to avoid a sight that could not but disgust me. I had to harden myself to it, given the insistence of the chiefs and the remonstrances of Martin, who assured me that this visitation from the fallen was a privilege accorded only to the high chief among the Kanaks. (Ratzel 2006 vol. 1, p. 349, and vol. 2, pp. 16–17)

In the new institutional landscape, with its four high chiefdoms, there is little doubt that the administrative chiefs were encouraged to pass on the French incitement to violence, in what can be seen as a competition for prestige – as indicated by the statements of Mèèjà Néjà, reported to Leenhardt by Bwêÿöü Ęrijji:

Boesou has picked up a rumour that Mindia turned on his people: ‘Why didn’t you kill rebels, cut off their heads like the others? Don’t you know that you are paid per head?’ And his brother, the heathen Madai, replied: ‘You called us here to come and speak to the men of this place, not to kill them, why have they changed what they said?’ And clever Boesou adds that Madai is the war chief of Nêwéo (with higher authority than Mindia). (Leenhardt, *Lettre à son épouse Jeanne*, 5 August 1917)

16 I found no trace of such an exemption, which was also promised to those who volunteered for the First World War: if it had been applied, a majority of the heads of family in Houailou would have been exempt between the First and Second World Wars.

This text also points to the competitive relationship between Mèèjà Néjà and his cousin Mâdai, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, and the heterogeneity of moral frames of reference, where personal interests (material or political), traditional systems of reference (the status given to a 'war chief'), the influence of the administration and the work of the missionaries constitute distinct bases for the most widely varying individual positions. I shall return to this point later, when I consider how the capture of women and children proved a crucial issue in the local colonial field of Houaïlou, and in the colony as a whole.

Once the repressive operation was over, governor Jules Repiquet made a trip to Houaïlou, from 15 to 20 April 1918, during which he visited the administrative centre, the main centres of European settlement, the tribes of the high chiefs and the two competing missions. This can be seen as the material manifestation of the colonial alliance between the high chiefdoms and the administration, the high point of which was the ceremony at which colonial decorations were awarded to the Houaïlou auxiliaries:

It was on the 17th, at 3.00 pm, that rewards were conferred on the auxiliaries of Houaïlou and Monéo. An impressive ceremony.

At the appointed hour, the Head of the Colony arrived at the great plain, where he was awaited by the Chairman of the Municipal Committee and the local dignitaries. All the natives of the high chiefs Mindia, Notouo, Paul, Mandaoué and François were gathered there. He was welcomed with a rendition of the 'Marseillaise', sung by choirs from the tribes. Mr Repiquet, who has a strong speaking voice, thanked the chiefs and the natives for responding to his appeals in 1915 and 1916, giving many Infantrymen to France without hesitation, he congratulated them warmly on the part they played in repressing the rebellion, and he praised them for their consistent demonstrations of loyalty to the Government. He reminded them of the benefits they could expect from civilisation; he counted on their loyalty and assured them of the Administration's full concern for them.

The Governor then proceeded to the distribution of rewards:

High-chiefs: Mindia, of Néouyo, Nichan Iftikar. Paul, of Boréaré, Nichan Iftikar. Mandaou [*sic*], of Warai, Silver-Gilt Medal. Casimir Notouo, of Nindien, Silver Medal. François, of Monéo, Black Star of Benin. Douba, junior chief of Boréaré, Silver Medal.¹⁷

17 Nichan Iftikhar [Order of Glory]: originally a Tunisian decoration that could be awarded to French nationals, cities and foreigners with a connection to Tunisia. Bronze, Silver-Gilt and Silver Medals for various periods of service: decorations historically awarded to civilians working for the French military. Order of the Black Star: decoration historically awarded to individuals working for the development of French influence in West Africa [trans.].

Natives: Paul, of Nindien, Silver-Gilt Medal. Lucien Mérindieu, of Boréaré, Silver Medal. Kaiba, of Kouaoua, Bronze Medal. Victor, of Warai, Silver Medal.

This last native having passed away on his return from the expedition to Tipindjé-Hienghène, the Governor, to the applause of those present, pinned the Medal awarded to him to the breast of his mother, Savioba, of Thù. Various tribal chiefs and natives were awarded Declarations of Satisfaction.¹⁸ (*La France australe*, 26 April 1918)

The decorations awarded – Nichan Iftikar and Black Star of Benin – are among the colonial orders that reward services rendered to colonisation by civilians or military personnel throughout the French empire. Ratzel's description of this event is very close to the article in *La France australe*. However, it allows us to add a few more details. Firstly, he sets the auxiliaries' career in the context of an additional history:

The decorations awarded to the chiefs of the tribes, to Mindia, Mandaoué, Paul and a number of natives, were bestowed on them by Mr Repiquet in the afternoon of 17th April, on the plain, on the right bank of the Houailou river, opposite Ouani and close to the shark hole where the Houailous, who embraced our cause in 1878, threw the bodies of the rebels they had killed. (Ratzel 2006 vol. 2, p. 140)

Ratzel goes on to emphasise the large number of Kanaks who attended the awards ceremony as spectators:

During the morning I had a proper stage erected in this place, by Mindia's and Mandaoué's men, where the entire population of Houailou, dressed in their Sunday best, had gathered round the Governor to watch the award ceremony. [There follows a list of those receiving awards, identical to that in *La France australe*.] The natives danced a frenzied *pilou*,¹⁹ with each man awarded being celebrated by the applause of the crowd and an explosion of fearsome cries, as if sounded by one voice, let out by hundreds of Kanaks. (Ratzel 2006 vol. 2, pp. 140–41)

18 *Témoignage de satisfaction*: a certificate recognising contribution to military action [trans.].

19 Traditional dance telling clan stories [trans.].



Figure 4. Award of decorations in April 1918: 'The stage'

Source: Ratzel 2006 vol. 2, p. 245; © Archives of New Caledonia (Nouméa), fonds photographique Nicolas Ratzel, 2Ph15.



Figure 5. Award of decorations in April 1918: 'The frenzied *pilou*'

Source: Ratzel 2006 vol. 2, p. 244; © Archives of New Caledonia (Nouméa), fonds photographique Nicolas Ratzel, 2Ph15.

The ceremony staged a privileged alliance between the Kanaks of Houaïlou and the colonial authorities, and its choreographed character was heightened by Eugène Bozon-Verduraz's translation of the governor's speech into the language of Houaïlou, 'so that all, young and old, may understand and appreciate our gratitude'. Other Europeans present would have been capable of making this translation, notably Antoine Martin-Garnaud, one of the surveyors who had directed the repressive operation, who was also a Houaïlou voter resident in Nékwé. Bozon-Verduraz thus appears here in the dual role of one of those responsible for the event and a recipient of one of the awards. Finally, I should like to cite one last passage in Ratzel's text, which can be related to my analysis of the collection of weapons of war by Europeans in Chapter 2:

Following this ceremony, we went to pay a visit to Mindia at his house. He gave the Governor a club in the form of a bird's bill, magnificent and very old, which had been passed down from father to son in the High Chief's family. The wood was blood-red, and the part that was shaped into a bird's beak was very long, longer even than the handle. I noted the following day, when we set off on the path to Boréaré, that the point of the beak of this weapon, which was being carried by a native on horseback, over his shoulder, almost came down to his mount's saddle. It was a valuable gift, and I am sure that it will take pride of place among all the exotic souvenirs that Mr Repiquet, like all high officials, has collected during his time here and in other colonies. (Ratzel 2006 vol. 2, p. 141)

I have so far been unable to identify this bird's-beak club in the European collections.

I should like to add a few remarks on the Kanaks who were decorated on that day.²⁰ In addition to the high chiefs, they included Duba, the tribal chief of Karaxërë (district of Boréaré),²¹ and three ordinary native subjects. Their awards demonstrate that they were picked out for their military skills from the start of the operations, as indicated by the various materials collected in the file *Récompenses accordées aux Auxiliaires Indigènes. Troubles dans les Tribus* (1917) (*Rewards Granted to Native Auxiliaries: Trouble in the Tribes* (1917)).²² Thus, in the draft of decision No. 666 of 21 September 1917, the following are proposed: a silver medal for the 'Native Lucien

20 Cross-referencing the information that follows, in terms of tribal affiliation and age, with the census carried out by Leenhardt, identifies them as Duba Nėwau of Karaxërë, Lucien Kaadè of Kula, Paul Tėvėyù of Nėrhėxakwėaa, and Victor Baöci of Tù.

21 On Duba, see Ratzel 2006 vol. 2, pp. 23–24.

22 See *Récompenses ... 1917*. I am grateful to Adrian Muckle for alerting me to this information.

Nimindieu', from the district of Boréaré ('Always in front, pursued rebels into the most difficult terrain'), a silver-gilt medal for 'Paul of Mindieu', i.e. the district of Nindien ('Volunteer veteran of 1878, more than 70 years of age – armed with a small axe and spears fought hand-to-hand; wounded ...'), and for 'Victor', district of Warai ('who pursued rebels even while himself seriously wounded').²³ The 'Report of bonuses awarded to native auxiliaries from 11/10/17 to 27/1/18' identifies Paul more precisely (tribe of Nérhëxakwéaa).²⁴ This report reveals that 'Lucien Minrindieu', 'Douba (junior chief)' and 'Paul Mégonda' were all among the (many) auxiliaries rewarded for the murder of an enemy during the second phase of the operation. The letter of 26 February 1918 from the 'high chiefs who led the auxiliaries of Houailou in the second expedition' allows us to identify 'Lucien Maradie'²⁵ (tribe of Kula). This letter also shows that it was the 'high chiefs' who proposed the bestowal of awards or Declarations of Satisfaction on the 'junior chiefs' who took part in the operation, and in the second part of the list, to those natives who had performed particularly well in the military operations. Thus we can read here the trace of the network that the Feillet administration had put in place, the high chiefs' internalisation of their role and of the colonial hierarchies.

The network of tribal chiefs

This network took the very concrete material form of an instrument of state administration, the *Registre des tribus et des chefs* (*Register of Tribes and Chiefs*) that was used by the Department of Native Affairs to organise its system of indirect government through chiefdoms.

This pamphlet can thus effectively be read as a colonial roll of honour, in which the Third Republic enrolled its good subjects onto a trajectory of excellence. For example, Casimir Nötuö Bwéwa, high chief of the district of Nindien, received a Declaration of Satisfaction in 1916, a silver-gilt medal in 1918, a fifth stripe in 1922, and a further Declaration of Satisfaction in 1925. Paul Wéma Nirikani, high chief of the district of Boréaré, was awarded a silver-gilt medal in 1913, a Declaration of Satisfaction in 1916, a fifth stripe in 1922; he was made a Knight of the Royal Order of Cambodia in 1926, received a further Declaration

23 On Victor, see Bernier 1917b; for the date of 31 July, Ratzel 2006 vol. 1, pp. 366–67 and vol. 2, p. 53.

24 On Paul, see Bernier 1917a; for the date of 23 July, Ratzel 2006 vol. 1, p. 361.

25 On Lucien, see Bernier 1917b; for the date of 4 August, Ratzel 2006 vol. 1, p. 367.

of Satisfaction in 1927, succeeded Nötuö as high chief of the district of Nindien in 1926, following the latter's death, and was made a Knight of the Order of the Black Star in 1932. Mwâdewé Népörö received Declarations of Satisfaction in 1914 and 1916, a fifth stripe in 1922, the Cross of Nichan El Anouar in 1926, the silver-gilt medal with a further Declaration of Satisfaction in 1927, before succeeding Paul as the head of the district of Bas-Nindien in 1940. Mèèjà Néjà's career ended with the Nichan Iftikar awarded by governor Jules Repiquet; on his death, he was succeeded in 1921 by his elder son Apupia, who received a third stripe in 1923. A similarly precise list could be given for the tribal chiefs, although they were less copiously rewarded.²⁶

The corollary of this roll of honour was the capacity to exercise violence, or indirectly to have the gendarmerie apply sanctions in the case of internal conflicts. This point is made in the recent work of Adrian Muckle and Isabelle Merle, and I have given a few examples elsewhere.²⁷ However, I should like to add a few testimonies relating to the local situation in Houaïlou. Firstly, Maurice Leenhardt's evaluation of this situation:

The Administration requisitions services, but at the moment requisition has become a *lettre de cachet*.²⁸ Any Kanak who is out of favour receives one. (Leenhardt, Lettre à ses parents, 22 August 1913)

There is one example in Mèèjà Néjà's notebook, which I have already cited. The notebook contains a draft letter from the chief of Ba asking the administration to intervene with three members of his tribe:

Houaïlou 18 January 1913

Chief Piénéba Asawa of the tribe of Bah (Houaïlou)

To the Governor of New Caledonia and Dependencies in Nouméa

Mr Governor,

By this present I beg you to be good enough to ridd me of three natives here are the names. Mandine and Betouo and Edit of m'y tribe by diclaring prepetual exile in a place as far away as possible. Three natives and of m'y family. That is why I did not ask for their exile earlier. I have try to bring them better sentiments I have not been able to (Papiers Mindia n.d., p. 104).

26 See *Registre* ..., n.d.

27 Muckle 2010; Merle 2002 and 2004; Naepels 1998, pp. 274–76.

28 Royal decree imposing varying decrees of restriction on liberty [trans.].

We do not know whether this letter was sent to the governor, nor whether it produced any result. But we do know that at the time when the letter was drafted Piénéba Ayawa was a young man in his 20s and, following the death of his father, the latter was replaced by a 'Diemba' until Piénéba came of age.²⁹ According to Leenhardt's 1919 census, the three individuals named in the letter were all heads of family more than 10 years older than the new chief, and also belonged to the families of founding ancestors who were involved in long-standing conflicts with the Ayawa chiefdom. We do know that the sanction of perpetual exile was not applied: chief Piénéba and his recalcitrant subject Bétuö left together for France during the First World War, where Piénéba died in battle on 29 October 1918.

The colonial field in Houaïlou: settlers, gendarmes, missionaries and chiefs

How strange it is, lay heathens. They are only contained by chiefs sold to the gendarmes. Caledonia is not a uniform laboratory. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 11 August 1916)

The modes of action and range of political freedom of the Houaïlou Kanaks in the second decade of the 20th century were radically different from what we know of the 1850s, for example (see Chapter 1). The landscape of local mobility and incorporation of some actors in social networks of importance (Caledonian, Oceanian, global) was profoundly altered by colonial action, particularly under governor Paul Feillet. This action then included the differential categorisation, identification and spatialisation that contributed to an intense localisation of the local, for Kanaks in particular, accompanied by multiple forms of segregation, through the differentiation of rights and spaces superimposed on this. This change did not, however, eliminate Kanak political actors' capacities for action, but did shift the places and forms of expression of conflicts. Military operations such as that of 1917, as well as the introduction of indirect powers of government granted to chiefs, or the spaces opened by the competition between Catholic and Protestant missionaries, constituted sites of initiative and confrontation between actors whose resources were in part determined by their place in European categorisations. Let us consider the example of the 1911 census.

29 Archives of New Caledonia, 97W18, 9 January 1906.

Census analysis has been a central tool in understanding the state's regulation of colonial spaces. Before examining the picture it gives of a population and its development, or reflecting on its limits, it is vital to emphasise the categorisation it operates.³⁰ Here, in order, are the categories (which offer a crucial key to the approach to the colony during the first half of the 20th century) and the descriptive variables of the 1911 census, for Houaïlou:

Table 4. Principal categories and results of 1911 census in Houaïlou

Free individuals (men, women, children M and children F)	384
French born in France	85
French born in the colony	187
Foreigners	112
Individuals under penal sentence (men, women)	215
Freed	108
Transported individuals	79
Transported groups	23
Sentenced	5
Regulated immigrants (men, women, children)	130
Tonkinese	27
Indians	7
Javanese	5
New Hebrideans	9
Loyalty Islanders	59
New Caledonians	23
Natives of the tribes (men, women, children)	2042
Natives of the tribes	2042
TOTAL	2771

Source: 'Recensement général de la population, 5 mars 1911', Archives de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 441W3.

In her exposition of the interwoven construction of the categories of subject and citizen, Emmanuelle Saada writes: 'Gradually, in the space of Empire, the key distinction is no longer that between nationals and foreigners, as in metropolitan France, but the split between 'French and

30 See Mamdani 1996 and 2001; Appadurai 1996; Saada 2003 and 2012.

assimilated' and 'natives and assimilated' (Saada 2003, p. 17).³¹ This remark illuminates the New Caledonian case, which incontestably confirms the pertinence of this division. It is worth adding that the quantitatively largest category, the 'natives of the tribes' is also the least differentiated. It is also worth noting that the sharpest division within the population of 'French and assimilated' is between 'free individuals' and 'individuals under penal sentence' (the latter could, in fact, sometimes have lost their status as citizens) – a more administrative distinction than that between 'French born in France', 'French born in the colony' and 'foreigners' (by implication, Europeans and Japanese). The 'natives and assimilated' also brings together nationals (both the 'natives of the tribes'; that is, those living in the reservation assigned to their tribe, and New Caledonians and Loyalty Islanders; that is Kanaks not originating from Houaïlou who were there under contract or requisition to perform some task, as well as Tonkinese and New Hebrideans from other French colonies) with foreign subjects (Indians and Javanese). Thus the organising principle of the state's perception – and no doubt of the subjective perception of those concerned – of the New Caledonian social space has nothing to do with nationality. We may note finally that this categorisation corresponds to a more or less pronounced spatialisation: regulated immigrants are required to live on the premises of their employer, natives of the tribes in their reservations; place of residence is restricted for those under penal sentence, and free for the free individuals. In Houaïlou in particular, regulated immigrants (primarily Loyalty Islanders and Tonkinese) and those under penal sentence seem to have been employed almost exclusively in the mines. Although contact with 'French and assimilated citizens' was not impossible, the restrictions on freedom of residence and movement for 'natives and assimilated' testify to a segregational system where place of residence determines socialisation, and hence legal status.

This differentiation reaches its apogee in the disparity between the results of this census of 1911 (2,771 inhabitants) and the electoral register drawn up for the elections to the municipal committee in 1911, on which only 90 men were listed: 34 miners, 25 settlers, 11 employees, four traders, four missionaries, two day labourers, one cowherd, one baker, one skilled tradesman, one road-mender, one carpenter, one blacksmith, one painter and decorator, one member of the post and telegraph company, one telegraph supervisor and one accountant. The exclusion of women, children, a proportion of those under penal sentence, foreigners, regulated

31 See also her analysis in Saada 2012, Chapter 4.

immigrants and natives combined to make citizenship a rare privilege, reserved for 3 per cent of the population of Houaïlou (this ratio decreased even further between the wars: there were 58 individuals listed on the electoral register of 1919, and 50 on that of 1932).

The second striking aspect of these census results is the gender imbalance that can be read in them: the proportion of male individuals was 99 per cent for those under penal sentence, 90 per cent among regulated immigrants, 80 per cent for free individuals, 59 per cent among the natives of the tribes (this percentage being calculated for the adult population, as the gender of children was not specified in this category – the censuses of the tribes carried out by Leenhardt between 1917 and 1919 indicate a comparable masculinity ratio of 56 per cent). One consequence of this was the reiterated assignation of women to the space of the tribes and to the authority ‘of husband, parents or chief’, since the colonial authorities judged that, in this matter, their role was to keep women in the domestic space:

In the light of the results of the census of 1911, which show that in the tribes, the proportion of native women continues to fall and that numbers are already much lower than for men ... decree:

Article 1. Native women and girls of New Caledonia and Dependencies are forbidden to leave their tribe.

Article 2. They may be employed by local settlers, but without specification as to the period of work, and must always, even in this case, return to their tribe if they are summoned by their husband, parents or chief.

Article 3. The current employment of native women and girls shall be terminated but will not be renewed.

Article 4. Free residence permits will no longer be issued to native women and girls. (‘Decree forbidding native women and children of New Caledonia and Dependencies from leaving their tribe’, 12 February 1912, *Journal officiel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*)

The quality of the results of this census and, more generally, of the first censuses carried out in New Caledonia, has been the subject of much discussion.³² In particular, the data concerning natives of the tribes (2,042 individuals counted in 1911) are debatable, according to inspector of colonies Paul Pégourier:

32 See Shineberg 1983.

A general census was conducted in 1911. The fundamental flaw in the organisation of this census was the disruption it occasioned for the natives, since some tribes lived 30 kilometres or more from the office of the Administrator. Under these conditions, it is no wonder that the results recorded in the Civil Register were uncertain, as the Administrator of Houaïlou rightly remarked in his report on the subject in 1918. (Pégourier 1919, p. 25)

Pégourier put forward an estimate of the 'population of the districts' of Houaïlou of 1,878 individuals (without any indication as to how he arrived at this number).³³ On his prophylactic tour in 1912, Dr Lebœuf counted 1,983 inhabitants.³⁴ The census of named individuals conducted by Leenhardt between 1917 and 1919 counted 1,762 Kanaks in the tribes of Houaïlou.

These general outlines can serve as a basis for understanding the shape of the colonial field in Houaïlou during the early 20th century. The first thing to note is the separation between the world of the mines and everything related to the administration of the tribes: while the Kanaks were not excluded from the economic activity of the colony (as providers of labour, particularly for the construction of public facilities, and as employees of the settlers in order to earn money to pay the head tax), their absence from employment in the mines is striking. Secondly, within the social space stratified by colonial categorisation, the intense competition between a number of European actors for influence and control over the Kanak population is clearly evident: the administration, in the person of Administrator, particularly when it was implementing a 'new native policy' during the 1930s; the mayor (who in the person of Eugène Bozon-Verduraz was both trader and landowner); and the missionaries (Catholics and Protestants had been in vehement competition with one another since they arrived).³⁵ In this local play of forces, the 'colonisers' were no more united than the 'colonised', and the group of chiefs (the tribal chiefs but, still more, the high chiefs) formed the locus of maximum tension in the interface between these divided worlds. The division of Houaïlou into four districts therefore not only represented a performative moment in the colonial evaluation of the relative prestige and power of the various chiefs involved, but also reflected the conflicts between Europeans embodying

33 Pégourier 1919, p. 24.

34 Lebœuf 1912b.

35 See Naepels 1998, Dauphiné 1990b.

the diverse poles of colonisation. I should like to offer a few examples of these struggles to establish zones of colonial influence through interaction with the high chiefs.

My first example is the conflict between Eugène Bozon-Verduraz, chairman of the municipal committee of Houaïlou, and the Protestant missionary Maurice Leenhardt:³⁶ as the corps of auxiliaries departed in 1917, Bozon-Verduraz relied on Mwâdêwé to limit Leenhardt's influence, through an exchange of telegrams with the governor:

Chief Metou [Mwâdêwé Népörö] informs me that Leenhardt asked to appoint a teacher [a Kanak Protestant evangelist] and participate expedition. The warriors decided to refuse these two men who could only be encumbrance. Believe necessary inform you of this. (Bozon-Verduraz 1978b, p. 77)

The governor's response indicates that this initiative succeeded:

I shall not of course permit the presence among the native volunteers of persons foreign to their tribes, particularly against the will of the natives themselves. (Repiquet 1978, p. 77)

The dispute between the two men was not new:

Our mayor is Bozon, who comes from the aristocracy of penal servitude, the supreme example that world can provide of a cold-blooded, intelligent scoundrel. (Leenhardt, Lettre à ses parents, 6 April 1916)

But the sources suggest that the conflict between the two men around the departure of the auxiliaries was heightened by the fact that Mwâdêwé held Leenhardt responsible for the first article in the *Bulletin du commerce* on 23 June 1917, cited above, in which only chiefs Mèèjà Néjà and Paul Wéma Nirikani were named:

Mandêwé is angry, he thinks I wrote to Nouméa that only Mindia is offering to assist the Government, etc. (Leenhardt, Lettre à ses parents, 27–29 June 1917)

Through the conflict between Leenhardt and Bozon-Verduraz, a rivalry between Mèèjà Néjà and Mwâdêwé Népörö was being carried on; this was open in 1912, but had much older roots (see chapters 1 and 2). For his part, Leenhardt did indeed lean heavily on Mèèjà Néjà, while at

36 See Vasseur 1985.

the same time condemning his ambivalence and his excessive respect for the colonial administration. The welcome Mèèjà Néjà organised when Leenhardt arrived in Houailou in 1902, in an extension of his relationship with Philadelphie Delord, was particularly spectacular:

You would not believe the welcome we received from the natives when we arrived in Houailou. High chief Mindia had summoned all his chiefs; the natas [Protestant evangelists] of the east coast had gathered, members of several neighbouring tribes had come to welcome the 'misher' [missionary]. And they welcomed him with the traditional ceremony, which consists in offering gifts in kind (yams, taro, chickens, pokas [pigs]) and coming to shake the hand of the guest while at the same time dropping a silver coin on a cloth spread at his feet. In Neoueo, the tribe of Mindia in Houailou, this salutation lasted a whole morning, and the personal greetings generated 115 francs 60 centimes. (Leenhardt 1903, p. 278)

This charmed relationship subsequently proved a source of disappointment for Leenhardt, who refused to understand Mèèjà Néjà's political interests in offending neither his matrimonial allies nor the administration. The first sticking point was Mèèjà's polygamy: he had four wives. This made it impossible for him to convert.

On Tuesday I went to see Mindia to speak to him once more about his wives. Poor Mindia ... Always two faces, the one he approves of, which speaks to us, and the one he berates and that he shows to the Whites and the heathens. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 11 August 1916)

The administrative recognition of the high chiefs did not in any way presume that they conformed to French civil law: this was indeed a system of indirect rule, where high chief Mwâdewé Népörö could have three wives, and high chief Paul Wéma two (according to the information in Leenhardt's census).

It would have been very sweet to see Mindia a Christian, but I believe that if he does not change he will become more and more savage, rooted into his double life of heathen-Protestant, closed to matters of the spirit ... These native chiefs live in such fear of the local gendarme that their wits, always restricted, eventually fall into atrophy. They only give themselves to God with one eye on the Administrator, to see whether they are noticed. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 11 September 1916)

Some details drawn from the gendarmerie archives for the late 1930s offer evidence that this opposition between the administration and the missions influenced the structure of the local field, independently of the individuals occupying the offices of missionary, chief or Administrator. For example, the gendarmerie's monthly reports include reference to a conflict between a high chief and (in this case) a Catholic missionary:

No religious conflict among the tribes, with the exception of the dispute between High Chief Paul and Reverend Father Robert. (Houailou Regional Squad, 1 October 1939)

This conflict was merely the visible manifestation of a broader struggle, more significant perhaps even than the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, of which there is evidence in these police reports from the late 1930s:

[The natives] maintain good relations with the Administration and its Agents, towards whom they behave respectfully. Always show themselves willing to perform their services and meet the various requirements for labour. High Chiefs Mandaoué, Paul and Apoupia are a great support in this respect. No conflict between tribes and families. The sectarian conflict although more or less maintained unspokenly does not succeed in alienating the natives from their High Chiefs or from the Administration. To be noted that when the occasion arises the missionaries of the various denominations demonstrate their discontent with Mandaoué and Paul, who have remained completely independent and entirely won over to the Administration. Nor do we underestimate the efforts of the Administrator, who does his best to maintain their prestige, guiding them to exert healthy authority over their subjects. (Houailou Regional Squad, 1 September 1939)

There was real competition for control of the natives, and establishment of some authority:

However the pernicious activity of the catechists and natas [Protestant evangelists], attempting to usurp the authority of the tribal chiefs, must be noted. They often organise tribal gatherings, with the support of the Missionaries, without informing the High Chiefs and Administrators in advance. The natives for their part do not recognise the authority of the High Chief and sometimes leave the tribe for several days without informing him. (Houailou Regional Squad, 2 December 1939)

Thus from this perspective, conversion can be seen as the enlistment of the convert into a group that enjoys a privileged relationship with certain European interlocutors in the local colonial field (the missionaries), and by this token distinguishes itself from other networks (gendarmes, traders, settlers). Let us consider the way in which Leenhardt describes a conversion he was particularly pleased about around the turn of the year in 1910–11:

Something had been brewing for a month. Mindia [Mèèjà Néjà] was aware of it ... Tomorrow, 1st of January, Louis [Népörö Yéé] and his family are to go to the church in Warai to declare their new-found faith. After Louis, there is still Mandéwé [Mwádéwé Népörö], who allows us to hope that he will follow later, and paganism in Houaïlou will have run its course as a Society. Louis was the principal heathen chief, and a very skilled administrator, highly regarded by the Administration. He maintained his paganism, having sworn the great oath that four tribes swore in the past never to become Christian. The conversion of Louis, the leader of all these heathens, represents the breaking of this oath, and is one of the most significant events since I have been in Houaïlou ... Mandéwé came to see me under the mango tree, and gave me some hope for the future. In the meantime, he promised to send two children from his family to our school. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 31 December 1910)

I have been unable to find direct evidence, or any other trace, of this alleged ‘oath’ to refuse conversion to Christianity referred to by Leenhardt. My interest here is rather in understanding the local political stakes involved in this process of conversion, leaving aside the question of faith. The actors mentioned in this letter are all clearly identifiable: high chief Mèèjà Néjà, here playing the role of intermediary, Louis Népörö Yéé and Mwádéwé Népörö. Louis, ‘held in high regard by the Administration’, was a chief who had indeed been recognised by France since decree no. 725 of 1 February 1905, and was awarded further stripes in 1918 and 1932. From my perspective the most important point in this text is that the ‘chiefs’ referred to, of the tribes of Nékwé and Warai, belong to the same clan, Népörö, and were therefore rivals for a recognition that had already proved problematic during the course of the 19th century (see Chapter 1). Moreover, there was at that time a conflict between Louis and Mwádéwé, as Louis’ wife had become Mwádéwé’s partner. In this context, where Louis was gradually losing his recognition from the authorities to Mwádéwé, his decision to make contact with Mèèjà Néjà in order to draw closer to Leenhardt can clearly be seen as an attempt to find new support among the Europeans who were at that time promoting

his young rival. In this context the description of Mwâdêwé's visit to Leenhardt can thus be interpreted as a way of maintaining some hold over the missionary, or at least of pre-empting his hostility. This wait-and-see attitude would, however, largely break down over the succeeding years.

Leenhardt was perforce blind to the social issues bound up in conversion since he would, and could, see only the progress of the gospel message he was bringing and the decline of 'paganism', and his missionary politics drew him into the local social field, and probably through this, resulted in the entrenchment of the conflicts between rival families. It is therefore no surprise that the end of his mission posting was marked by an extremely tense stand-off with high chief Mwâdêwé Népörö, centred on two issues: a question of land (situated in Wâni) and the issue of women captured by the Houaïlou auxiliaries during the repressive operation in the north in 1917.

Concern with the material establishment of the Dö Nêvâ mission is a constant in the messages Leenhardt sent back to France, both to his parents and to the Mission Society in Paris. In addition to the physical extension of the dormitories and classrooms, he particularly needed land for cultivation in order to feed the students.

The question of food is at the heart of any material extension ... Large expenditure would now only be justified for an invaluable property like ... the fertile half of Do Néva, Ouani, which I shall purchase at any price, up to 10 or 20,000, as soon as we can, I hope for less ... I have been waiting ten years for Ouani, and I shall perhaps have to wait another ten. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 28 August 1916)

Misher Leenhardt asks me one day to give him land to cultivate to feed everybody who will build the new house. I accepted and we gave them Nesu, Moagu, Peu, Boede. The oxen ploughed there, we planted potatoes, cassava, maize, taros, yams, vegetables etc. I supervised the work until it was finished when Misher Laffay arrived [in December 1912]. (Nérhon 1969, p. 53)

Thus a customary and administrative conflict arose between Mwâdêwé Népörö, high chief of the district concerned, and some members of the Nérhô family who had offered their customary lands for the mission's use. On the whole, the identity of the owner of a given piece of land is often far from universally agreed, given that additional and competing claims, based on the various ways of recounting the history of a place, can be

adduced in relation to the same piece of land;³⁷ the plots in question in this case were no exception. The situation was all the more complex for Leenhardt to manage because the man who had made the land over to him, Acöömwâ Nérhò was absent at the point when the conflict arose: he had enlisted in the infantry, and served as the nurse for the Kanak contingent during the First World War.

In November, in Nouméa I received a letter from the Administration informing me that chief Mandéwé had lodged a complaint that in his absence pupils at Do Néva had enclosed a plot of land that belonged to him, without his knowledge, and that he wished to protest as he needed this land. I replied that we had enclosed this land over ten years ago and were growing crops there by agreement with the owners, the Nérhon family, and that the chief, who was fairly new, had in fact long known about this situation, since he had asked the Nérhons to give him this land, and they had wanted to keep it ... Since this land belonged to the Nérhons, I told them to stand firm and continue cultivating this land. They feared reprisals, and it was Acoma's wife who led them there, standing up to the chief alone, chasing away the animals he had sent there to graze. For three months, members of the Church, various chiefs, etc. went to speak with Mandéwé to ask him to cease his attacks. But he had the authorities on his side and that was enough for him. Three weeks ago the administrator arrived ... The administrator gathered everyone together and began by declaring: 'The chief alone is master of the land.' Then there was a discussion, and he threatened the landowners with punishment if they persisted in claiming their rights, and in the evening, in view of their insistence and the intervention of one of them, a nata in Voh who had returned for this meeting and had declared himself to the Administrator on this occasion, the land was left with its owner ... And since then chief Mandéwé, in whose favour he could not rule in fact, though he did so in word, has been seeking revenge against the Nérhons ... But this has been a little revolution in the Warai tribe, and it has raised the question: can the Christians help Do Néva with their farming, with land or not? And the whole issue was provoked by that man Bozon and the gendarmerie he runs, as another sottish official said: 'I've got them by the throat.' The principle was acknowledged. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 23 March 1919)

37 Naepels 1998.

One of the sons of high chief Mwâdêwé summed up this conflict in conversation with me:

I heard that they argued over Mèènèkô's land, because Leenhardt took Mèènèkô's land, but they did not give it to him, so he insisted a bit ... and then my father [Mwâdêwé] talked about it with Leenhardt, and that's how it was, I don't know what happened between them, they quarrelled, and then it's since that time that Leenhardt doesn't want to see the old man any longer, and the old man doesn't want to see Leenhardt any longer, but I don't really know what's at the bottom of the story. (Pierre Mandaoué, extract from interview, July 2006)

At the same time, Leenhardt was engaged in a campaign for the release of women and children captured during the repressive operations of 1917, and held by the families of the high chiefs in Houaïlou. Following several exchanges of letters, the governor initiated an inquiry and drew up a 'List of wives of rebels provisionally entrusted to the Chiefs of Bourail and Houaïlou'.³⁸ This notes the presence of five women and nine children under the responsibility of high chief Paul Wéma Nirikani, five women and five children held by high chief Mwâdêwé Népörö, three women and one child held by high chief Casimir Nötuö Bwéwa, and two women and one child under the responsibility of high chief Mèèjà Néjà, and goes on to demand that the captives be released. The response was a request for compensation in return, from three of the four high chiefs concerned, in January 1920:

Sir

We high chiefs Paul of Boréaré, Mandaoué of Ouarail, Notouo of Nindia, wish respectfully to inform you that in confirmity of the orders we received from the Respected Administrator of Houaïlou we have sent back the rebel women and children who were entrusted to us. Here are the numbers we had respectively: chief Paul of Boréaré, 16 persons, chief Mandaoué of Ouarail, 8 persons, chief Notouo of Nindia, 4 persons. Our task being complete we beg you to reimburse us for what we have spent on these rebels in both food and cloth. These expenses can be evaluated at 30 francs per month per person for two years. Hoping that you will render us justice, Mr Governor, we remain devotedly yours

Mandaoué, Paul, Notouo. (Mandaoué, Paul and Notouo 1978, p. 91)

38 Archives of New Caledonia, 1W1.

As far as I have been able to find out, this bold initiative was not crowned with success. There is little doubt, however, that in taking action against the surveyors' tolerance of the auxiliaries' booty of captives (women and children), Maurice Leenhardt earned himself a degree of resentment among the high chiefs concerned.

The increasing complexity of the play of colonial alliances, the ever more tangled interweaving of the stakes defined at various levels, and above all the hardening of the rules of native government at this time meant that the chiefs were losing some of the freedom they had previously enjoyed in the intermediary position they occupied. The inter-war years undoubtedly constituted a period of localisation, enclosure and disappointment for many of them. The policy of appointing chiefs thus aroused bitter reactions that Leenhardt observed. Here are two examples:

Baptiste [Cibëi, tribal chief of Gôdè], the chief, sick, easily managed by the gendarmerie, and beloved by his men, is sending his brother to the war. He told me: 'The Whites do not recognise anything. They are trying to bring me down from my position as chief, and are asking for men for the war. This is the third time I have helped them. The first time, it was my father, in the rebellion in 1878, he helps them a lot on the other coast. The second time it was me, in the Poyes war. I went myself, ready to do anything to help them. The third time, we have to go to France [for the First World War], I cannot any longer and what's more I am old and sick, but see, I am sending my brother and others with him. But the Whites do not understand that I am helping them and are trying to bring me down.' (Leenhardt, *Journal*, 10 February 1916)

Bitter farewell with Mindia [Mèèjà Néjà]: 'I've done what I could for France, if there's anything good in Houaïlou, it comes from us. And the result? The drinkers and the bastards have the government's trust. OK, but I don't want anything more to do with them.' (Leenhardt, *Lettre à son épouse Jeanne*, 19 July 1918)

At the same time, the demobilisation of the First World War troops was the occasion for severe disappointment, despite the law of 4 February 1919 that allowed some Kanaks to request French citizenship (for example, those who had been awarded the Légion d'Honneur or the Croix de Guerre, non-commissioned officers, or Kanaks who had married a French woman). In fact it appears that this law was applied only in rare cases.

The preceding considerations of themselves preclude the extension of voting rights to natives, despite the fact that some of them enlisted in the service of France in hopes of this. The following extract from a report by

Mr Martin-Garnaud, surveyor, dated 28 February 1916, may be cited in this respect: 'It seems that Djouma enlisted with the conviction that he and his comrades would have citizen's rights on their return and that they would rise above the chiefs who would then no longer have authority in the tribes because they had participated in the War and thus would have the same rights as Whites.' The current social condition of the Kanaks is barely compatible with the use of the vote, and moreover overall the native population is not so demanding. (Pégourier 1919, pp. 79–80)

Pégourier's remarks, which are nevertheless highly critical of the functioning of the Native Affairs Department, show the breadth of the gap between the colonial administration's perception of the situation and that of the Kanaks who sought to increase their spaces of freedom. Thus, on his return from France, Acöömwâ Nérhò wrote a letter to the governor on behalf of the troops from the Houaïlou districts, dated 28 December 1919:

We ask you, Mr Governor, to make us naturalised French citizens, or to tell us what law you give us so that we are not obliged to remain always under the same barbarian leadership as in some tribes. (Nérhon 1969, pp. 66–67)

It is clear here how the demand for civil rights, which for the soldiers was a reward for their service to France (which cost the lives of one third of the Houaïlou volunteers), was also linked to the desire to no longer be subject to the indirect rule represented by the high chiefdoms – 'the same barbarian leadership'. In the case of Acöömwâ Nérhò, this demand went alongside a conflict over land which brought Nérhò and the Protestant mission into contention with the high chief of his district.

The thinking that evaluated chiefdoms on the basis of their capacity for mobilising men, including for military purposes, was the dominant factor in the appointment of chiefs for over half a century. The approach to the Second World War was one of the last occasions on which the situation was assessed in these terms; the positioning of the high chiefs in the local colonial field was then the occasion for renewed affirmation of their alliance with the administration, in a historical continuity underlined by the indirect allusion to the old conflicts between Mwâdêwé and Leenhardt:

At the recent monthly meeting of the high chiefs of the districts, the chiefs asked if the Administration was planning to recruit volunteers for the War from among the natives. These worthies offered apologies for the difficulties encountered during the last war, which according to them

were due to the pernicious influence of a missionary who had almost managed to prevent the departure of the volunteer troops, and declared in essence: 'Despite the baneful and occult part played by this adversary, we were still there, we the Chiefs.' High Chief Mandaoué made a point of adding: 'We shall still be here, if necessary, when I give my word has still more weight despite everything that of those who would like to see the high chiefs divested of their authority among the natives.' (Houailou Regional Squad, 31 October 1939)

Thus, in Houailou the interaction between the chiefdoms and the colonial power continued to centre on war for more than a century, as the needs of the administration interwove with the local social issues pursued by the chiefs. But their capacity to mobilise men was also increasingly deployed toward ever tighter and more consistent control of the segregated spaces of Kanak co-residence.

Public health and Kanak war

The network of tribal and high chiefs during the first half of the 20th century was a way of managing the colonial order that entrusted the chiefs with most of the work of supervision and maintaining order. This was, however, not only a policing system and was not limited to the capacity for mobilisation of warriors that that entailed. It was also a public health regime.³⁹ The policy of demolishing straw huts and replacing them with wattle and daub houses, first introduced in the late 19th century and imposed still more vigorously between the wars, is well known: 'There is a very pronounced trend to move from huts made of niaouli bark, which are dark, dirty and poorly ventilated, to large square huts with verandahs, with whitewashed earth walls, both light and well ventilated' (Leboeuf 1912a, p. 134). This policy was based on an entirely fallacious analysis of the fall in population. The terrible irony of the policy in the Houailou region is that it led to the whitewashing of the new wattle and daub houses with a locally available white clay, tremolite, a form of asbestos that leads to pleural cancer rates among the highest in the world.⁴⁰ The decree of 20 September 1911, on protection of public health, stated: 'Isolation is compulsory for all patients suffering from one of the following: Cholera. Plague. Yellow fever. Smallpox. Leprosy. Recurrent fever' (Article 6).

39 See Thomas 1990.

40 Luce et al. 1994 and 2000; Goldberg et al. 1995. On the effects of colonial policies on indigenous mortality, see Davis 2001.

The chiefs were also involved in managing major epidemics, particularly of leprosy. The arrival of these new diseases was interpreted locally in the terms of a Kanak war. This is particularly striking in relation to the epidemic of plague that hit Houaïlou in 1912.

1912–13: Plague

Analysis of the epidemic of plague that arrived in New Caledonia in the latter part of 1912 was extremely limited, and very few general data are available. It broke out in Nouméa in September–October 1912, prompting the issue of decree no. 991 of 22 October 1912, ‘setting out the measures to be taken against individuals suspected of suffering from plague’. It arrived in the upper Houaïlou valley in December 1912, specifically affecting the Nérâ tribe:

Alas, the plague is at our door. It has just broken out in Nérin, in the upper part of the valley, and in Gondé. An old couple were the first to die in Nérin, a remote village close by an abandoned pass, with no communication with Nouméa or with the outside ... The doctor is up there and in Nouméa Dr Leboeuf has succeeded in making a good serum that gives protection for five months. (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 20 December 1912)

[In December 1912, Paul Laffay arrived in Houaïlou.] Two days later, the Christians of the region came to welcome him. Those from outside, alas, had been prevented from coming by the prohibition on travel that struck the island’s natives when plague was declared in Nouméa. This did not prevent the disease moving in one bound to break out in the upper Houaïlou valley, in a remote location, where its appearance remains a great mystery. The natas [Kanak Protestant evangelists] from the mountain, who were in Do-Néva at that moment, hastened back to their churches, in order to be with their flocks in these solemn times of abandonment to God. Dr Béros worked tirelessly to halt the evil, and signalled the end of the epidemic while being himself very seriously ill, in the tribe of Boréaré. (Leenhardt 1913)

The epidemic claimed seven victims in Nérâ and two in Gôdè;⁴¹ it was halted by a vaccination campaign.⁴² The experience of this epidemic is today interpreted locally as the manifestation of a Kanak war, within a discursive framework that analyses it in terms of sorcery, with the deaths from the plague representing the resolution of prior conflicts:

It's not a war here, but it's, how can I put it? Plague ... It's war, in a way, but it's medicine [the action of sorcery]. People died, it's incredible ... But when the sickness, the plague came, it cleansed the tribe. (Lévi Cibëï, extract from interview, October 1991)

On 28 August 1913 Dûré Bwérhéxéu was appointed tribal chief of Nérin, even though he was living in Gôdé.⁴³ This appointment was interpreted by several of my interlocutors as a mark of the role he played in protecting the inhabitants of Nérâ from the threat of the plague.

Leprosy

While Houaïlou saw only one episode of plague, the role of the high chiefs was much more marked in the control of lepers, for this disease required permanent isolation of those affected. In 1889 four leper colonies were created in New Caledonia, in Nouméa, Maré, Canala and Cap Bocage; that is, in Houaïlou.⁴⁴ The three colonies outside of Nouméa were abandoned when it was decided, in 1892, to consign the lepers to Art Island, in the Bélep archipelago (the obligation to do so was enshrined in the decree of 22 September 1893). Criticism of the Bélep leper colony led to the reopening of the other places of confinement.⁴⁵ Article 27 of the decision of 9 August 1898, on the organisation of the Native Affairs Department and, more generally, on the modalities of government of natives, which conferred on the high chiefs the responsibility for isolating lepers in the sites reserved for them, directly concerned Houaïlou, which was a one of the main sites of isolation of lepers.

41 Doucet 1913, p. 894; Béros and Bocquillon 1913, p. 927.

42 Leboeuf 1913, p. 909.

43 Archives of New Caledonia, 97W18.

44 Baré 1939.

45 For example Pierre 1898.

The visit of the medical officer of the colonial troops, Dr Lebœuf,⁴⁶ reveals how the chiefs approached this task:

Currently all of them together [here he is discussing Boréaré, Karaxèrè and Kula] have eight official lepers, efficiently isolated 8 kilometres from Boréaré. My inspection revealed a total of 11 lepers (8 official and 3 new ones) and 3 suspected cases. This represents approximately 4%. As regards the three new lepers, chief Paul could in no way be accused of negligence: if he could have confirmed the diagnosis of these three patients, he would certainly have isolated them straight away. But it should be noted that the Kanak resolves to accept a firm diagnosis, for himself or one of his fellows, only when the disease is blatantly evident to all, even the least experienced. (Lebœuf 1912a, pp. 133–34)

Lebœuf's visit also revealed that the Cap Bocage leper colony had been almost completely abandoned: the number of inhabitants had fallen from 53 in late 1901 to two in late 1911. Lebœuf therefore⁴⁶ proposed a reorganisation of the isolation facilities, and the establishment of four leper colonies in Houailou, one per district: in 'Kananon' [Kananu] for Néouyo district, in 'Kouareu' for Nindien district, in 'Néouin-Néoué' or 'Riga-Thù' in Warai district (and we may assume that the colony in Boréaré, referred to above, remained the fourth):

The high chiefs and tribal chiefs discussed these various sites at a meeting I called prior to my departure from Houailou, which was held at the office of the Administrator of Native Affairs. He informed them of the terms of the most recent circular from the Native Affairs Department relative to measures to be taken against leprosy: the various points of this document were explained to them in detail. They grasped the spirit of it perfectly. (Lebœuf 1912b, p. 351)

In his 1919 report, Pégourier included a table showing the 'segregation of native lepers in 31 leper colonies', as of 30 September 1918. Out of the total of 322 people interned in Grande Terre (293 from the Dependencies, Loyalty Islands and Isle of Pines), the largest number were in Houailou (62, not including the 36 in Koné and the 35 in Canala).⁴⁷ It is difficult to determine whether this situation was due to a real increase in the number of sufferers in Houailou, or whether it is accounted for by the high chiefs' improved capacity for identifying sufferers and forcing them to reside in leper colonies. Nor is it known whether the four colonies suggested

46 Lebœuf 1912a, 1912b and 1914.

47 Pégourier 1919, p. 37.

by Lebœuf were actually established. Decree no. 610 of 12 July 1921⁴⁸ set out a new organisational structure for isolation, with the creation of 'segregation villages':⁴⁹ Kananu was the one so designated for Houaïlou. But, by 1938, apart from the Ducos Sanatorium in Nouméa, there were effectively only two special agricultural villages on the east coast, in Hienghène and Houaïlou, and four on the Loyalty Islands. The village of Kananu 'in principle receives all the lepers from the South part of the East Coast' (Baré 1939, p. 186).

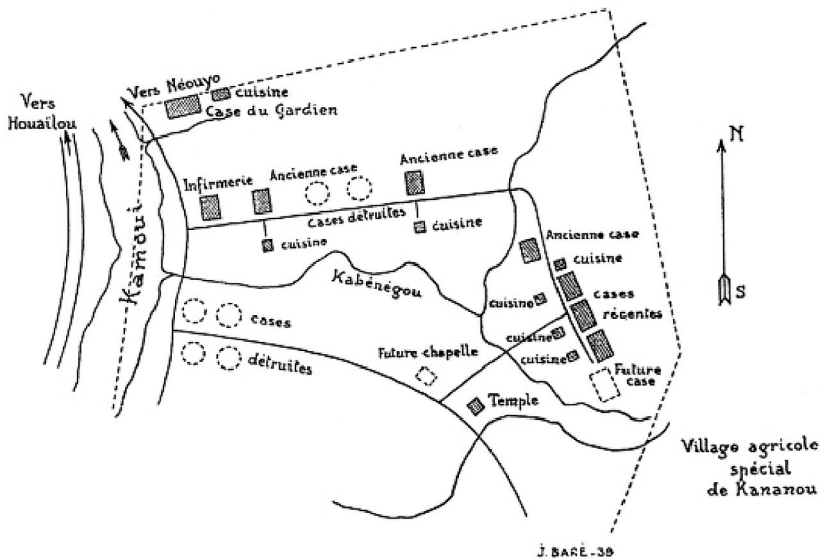


Figure 6. Plan of the partial leper colony of Kananu

Source: Baré 1939, p. 188; © Bibliothèque interuniversitaire de santé (Interuniversity Health Library) (Paris).

Christine Salomon has shown how the new diseases imported by the Europeans or through exchanges linked to colonisation became incorporated locally into Kanak medical knowledge, through a redefined aetiology.⁵⁰ Specialists in interpretation and healing were called upon, such as Kavimùrù Néröo, a seer (*mèrhî*) from Néawa:

48 Following on from decree no. 664 of 1 July 1913, which specified the conditions for internment of lepers.

49 See Genevray 1925, p. 173.

50 Salomon 2000a.

Kavimuru (who is wrong, is mistaken) from Néawawa is a *mèrsi* (spirit chaser, exorcists, seer etc.). A remedy for leprosy was revealed to him. He announced it, treated patients, and even went to the Mévégon [Cap Bocage] leper colony to treat those interned there. He received dollars, Caledonian money, a horse from Mindia's stable etc., and died a rich man while his patients wasted away. (Leenhardt, Journal, 20 March 1915)

I shall consider other modes of intervention by such specialists into local social relationships, also in the Néawa tribe, in the next chapter (see Chapter 4). For all it was segregated, the space of the leper colonies was none the less integrated in a social space characteristic of local social life. There is evidence of this in the conflict that broke out in the Kananu leper colony in 1937, which involved, in addition to a group of residents, the Catholic missionary of Nindia [Néajjē] and the gendarme, administrator of native affairs:

14 October 1937

re: influence of Father Robert on the state of mind of the natives.

I have the honour of reporting that on Monday 11th inst. the native Hmana, warden of the Kananu leper colony, presented himself at the office and made the following declaration:

Last Thursday seventh October, in the morning, Father Robert from the Catholic Mission in Nindia came to say Mass as usual. When the service was over, he went to the house of Poukou Diopéri [Jöpéri Pükui], an interned patient, and accosted him, forbidding him from smoking, then called him a thief because he had married a Catholic woman in the leper colony. Poukou, vexed by the priest's offensive attitude, replied that he was not a thief, etc ... The internees who were present at this scene egged Poukou on against the priest, but this patient, who was by nature calmer and older than the others, stopped short of assaulting Father Robert. Nevertheless, I have to inform you that the Catholic and Protestant patients are displeased.

I feel it is my duty to make you aware of this state of affairs, which could have disagreeable consequences for this priest, who is excessively abusive towards Protestants. Proceeding to an inquiry into the facts reported by the warden, yesterday 13th October, as I was passing through the leper colony I interrogated the native Poukou, who declared:

‘Thursday seventh October last Father Robert entered my dwelling. First he told me, in a cutting tone of voice, that if I smoked I would go to hell. Then, he said that I had stolen my wife Boisseba who belonged to

the Catholic faith before she married me. I pointed out to this priest that I was in no way a thief. He immediately objected that if I did not want to be called one, I should become a Catholic, or else I would go to hell like all Protestants. I admit that I was very angry at this attitude of Father Robert, as were my fellow-Protestants in the leper colony, who I did not want even to listen to, they wanted me to take revenge on the priest. When he left the leper colony Father Robert told me he was going to lodge a complaint with the gendarme and the doctor.’

... The patients in the leper colony wholeheartedly condemn Father Robert’s behaviour toward the patient Poukou, who moreover is the son of the late Mindia, High Chief of Houaïlou, who was respected and idolised by all his subjects, and the brother of Apoupia, the current High Chief of the district of Néouyo. (Houaïlou Regional Squad, 14 October 1937)

We do not know all the intricacies of the dispute over this marriage. But we shall see in the following chapter that another brother-in-law of chief Apupia was at the centre of the conflict aroused by the visit of seers to the tribe of Néawa in 1955 (see Chapter 4). I believe we might reasonably imagine a link between these successive conflicts, and hypothesise a historical density of disputes that we perceive here only through a few snapshots in time and some imprecise documents. In this context, the understanding the Kanak inhabitants of Houaïlou had of the diseases themselves as continuations of war by other means makes complete sense. Similarly, the intervention of chiefs in the control of patients takes on a certain polemical dimension whose importance was undoubtedly not perceived by the gendarmes and French colonial doctors.

The invention of the ‘council of elders’

As we saw, many auxiliary troops from Houaïlou participated in a major repressive operation in 1917, under the leadership of their chiefs. But the protest against the colonial presence in the north of Grande Terre in 1917, 40 years after the great colonial war of 1878, prompted a reflection focused on reform of this leadership throughout New Caledonia. While the network of indirect administration through high and tribal chiefdoms was established, the aim was to adapt colonial government more precisely to what was perceived of Kanak social realities, in order to refine it and render it more efficient.

The Pégourier report

In 1919 Pégourier, an inspector of colonies,⁵¹ proposed a reform of the Native Affairs Department. This expert in colonial affairs, author of a thesis on *The Political and Administrative Régime of the French Colonies under the Restoration and the July Monarchy*,⁵² ‘a Polytechnique graduate⁵³ enamoured of social ideas, anti-democratic, pro-oligarchic’ (Leenhardt, *Lettre à ses parents*, 3 December 1918), had been tasked with understanding the most recent crisis to shake the colony, the uprising in the north in 1917. His report ended with a draft decree on the status of natives; one of his most important proposals was that the structure of the high chiefdoms of districts and the tribal chiefdoms be reinforced through ‘tribal councils’. In this draft decree, which was to remain at that stage, Pégourier proposed the following articles: ‘The internal Administration of the tribe is entrusted, under the direction and supervision of the French authorities, to the chief, assisted by the Council of his tribe’ (Article 41); ‘The chief is appointed by the Governor on the basis of a recommendation from the Council of the tribe’ (Article 42) (Pégourier 1919, p. 64); ‘A Council, composed of tribal chiefs and members who may be appointed and dismissed by the Administration, and chaired by the high chief, shall be required to deliberate on the following matters’ (there follows a list: punishment, internal police, services, contracts) (Pégourier 1919, p. 65).

He then suggested that a concept from the colonial lexicon that had been present in New Caledonia since the first days of colonisation be incorporated into the laws relating to natives. His report cites two documents: a report by Antoine Martin-Garnaud – the same Houaïlou surveyor who led the Houaïlou auxiliaries, with Nicolas Ratzel, in 1917 – and a text by a colonial lawyer:

They [the tribal chiefs], together with a number of dignitaries, form the Council of the tribe, a very important body, which also serves as a court, and whose composition varies from one district to another (see note appended from Mr Martin Garnaud, Surveyor, dated 28 February 1916).

According to Mr Girault (*Principes de colonisation et de législation coloniale* [*Principles of Colonisation and Colonial Legislation*], vol. II, p. 138), since the tribes live in a state of continual hostility, there is no security for the

51 Peripatetic official tasked with monitoring French colonies [trans.].

52 Pégourier 1913.

53 Graduate of the École Polytechnique, elite engineering school in Paris [trans.].

individual outside of his tribe. Even within the tribe disputes end with a battle, when the council of elders is unable to reconcile the interested parties. (Pégourier 1919, pp. 20 and 40)

The Algerian model

In a classic study on Algeria, Philippe Lucas and Jean-Claude Vatin sought to examine and understand the language of description used by the first ‘ethnographers’ of colonial Algeria: soldiers who sought to identify and know their adversaries better, and subsequently the administrators in charge of governing them, or rather of establishing a system of indirect government – the infamous ‘Arab bureaux’ – based on local nobility, traditional aristocracy, the high chiefs (*khalifa*, *agha*) and the tribes (with their tribal chiefs, the *qaïd*). It was in part in opposition to this first model that what has been called the ‘Kabyle myth’,⁵⁴ which emphasised the local importance of village meetings and councils of dignitaries (*djemaa*), was constructed. According to Lucas and Vatin, the reason for this interest was the fact that, in the 1850s, Kabylia became the epicentre of Algerian conflicts; it ultimately resulted in one of the founding texts in the description of Kabyle social practices, Adolphe Hanoteau and Aristide Letourneux’s *La Kabylie et les coutumes kabyles (Kabylia and Kabyle Customs)*, which became the ‘Berber Napoleonic Code’.⁵⁵ Thus, the perception of Algerian political organisation was structured by a two-sided model that contrasted Arab despotism with Kabyle democracy. Let us consider an example cited by Lucas and Vatin:

Their political and social constitution is also very different from that of the Arab people ... Rather than the despotic patriarchy that crushes individual freedom, we find a democratic organisation that is its polar opposite. Each tribe constitutes a sort of large municipality, whose interests are managed by a council elected at meetings in which all adult men participate. A chief, a sort of mayor or president of the Djemmâ, also elected for a specified period of time, governs under the supervision of the council, polices the community, renders justice in accordance with customs, or with qanuns much more often than with the prescriptions of the Qur’an. (Pomel, *Des races indigènes de l’Algérie et du rôle que leur réservent leurs aptitudes (On the Native Races in Algeria and the Role Their Aptitudes Fit Them For)*, Oran, 1871, cited in Lucas and Vatin 1975 pp. 132–33)

54 Ageron 1991; see Mahé 2001.

55 Hanoteau and Letourneux 1872–73.

Lucas and Vatin's analysis is remarkably striking when compared to the New Caledonian case, since the same conceptual vocabulary was used in New Caledonia, and the same implicit models were drawn upon first to describe Kanak society, and then in the organisation of native government – in particular the opposition between the model of the chiefdom (despotic) and the language of the council of elders (democratic), the two articulated in a feudal synthesis (with the chief as *primus inter pares*, and the council made up of an 'aristocracy' of 'elders' or 'dignitaries', or constituting a 'Senate'). The council combined with the chiefdom appears in all the major descriptions of New Caledonia from the second half of the 19th century. This is Victor Rochas, naval surgeon, in 1862:

And as regards government, it should be known that in all important situations, the subaltern chiefs, who constitute the nation's aristocracy and enjoy privileges almost as extensive as those of the high chief himself over the little people, are called to council. The matter is discussed and decided collectively. In this barbarian senate, the sovereign certainly holds the greatest sway, but the principal lords, the war chief or chief general, and finally the old men, have great authority. Each tribe may be considered a little feudal state. (Rochas 1862, p. 244)

Here are Eugène Vieillard and Émile Deplanche, surgeons in the imperial navy, in 1863:

Nevertheless, a declaration of war must be submitted to the high council, which has the final decision ...

In certain circumstances all the chiefs and some individuals belonging to the noble caste, particularly the old men known for their bravery and their wisdom, form a sort of council at which questions of general interest are discussed, such as a declaration of war, a peace treaty, the appointment of a regent etc. Opinions are freely expressed, the matter is argued, and then dealt with in accordance with the majority opinion ...

Among the various chiefs, if there is one who is senior in terms of the length of his noble line, the spread of his tribe, his wealth, his courage, he dominates over the others, he commands in war, in the council. (Vieillard and Deplanche 1863, pp. 68, 70 and 71)

And this is Ulysse de la Haüitière in 1869:

Each Caledonian tribe has a sort of meeting that we shall call the council, for if the chief is sometimes obliged to hear its opinion – for example, when there is a question of declaring war – he nevertheless commands as he sees fit. (de la Haüitière 1869, pp. 76–78).

Writing in 1872, Jules Patouillet makes no reference to the ‘council of elders’, but does refer to the ‘feudal period’ (Patouillet 1872, p. 139) in which the Kanaks live. These descriptions are similar enough that, in 1894, the council appears in a compendium, *L’archipel de Nouvelle-Calédonie* (*The New Caledonia Archipelago*) written by Augustin Bernard, then a young teaching fellow at the École supérieure (college) in Algiers, who went on to become a renowned geographer and helped to circulate models of understanding of colonised people through the French Empire: ‘He [the chief] is supported by a council of elders which assists him’ (Bernard 1894, p. 291). Finally, this descriptive ambivalence is summed up perfectly by Jean-Baptiste-Maurice Vincent in his 1895 book *Les Canaques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie* (*The Kanaks of New Caledonia*), where he says: ‘Their chief is an autocrat whose tyranny is tempered by the council of elders’ (Vincent 1895, p. 26).

It is thus evident that the language of sociological description applied to local populations with which the French military and administrators arrived in the second half of the 19th century was – like the military techniques – the product of the circulation of colonial models largely forged in Algeria. It is of course impossible to judge the empirical pertinence of such a concept a century and a half later; all we can do is point out that it is a sign of the fact that the concept of despotism was inadequate, that the chiefs did discuss matters with other individuals, that they were not despots but political subjects who needed supporters and constructed relations of power. This does not, however, mean that a permanent institutional body, a ‘council’ or an ‘assembly’, sat alongside them. Moreover, one of the central elements of later anthropological descriptions of local political organisation, the balance between the chiefs and the ‘founding ancestors’ or ‘masters of the land’,⁵⁶ is entirely absent from these descriptions: the fact that these descriptions of a ‘council of elders’ date from long past is no guarantee that they are either apposite or accurate.

Evidence nowhere to be found

The most striking point is how little legal use was made of this concept in the organisation of native government, despite its omnipresence in the colonial lexicon. In the infamous decree of 24 December 1867, which

56 See Leenhardt 1937a, Guiart 1963, Bensa 1992, Naepels 1998.

instituted the legal existence of the native tribe (in the sense of a collective political unit led by a chief),⁵⁷ the existence of a council of elders is barely implied in the preamble, through a reference to ‘councillors’: ‘It is headed by a high chief, supported by village chiefs and councillors whom he chooses from among the most influential men.’

But, while lists of chiefs were progressively compiled over the next 50 years, to the point where they formed the comprehensive network of the Kanak population living on reservations that I described above, no further reference is made to any council of elders or old men in the legal texts. In the debates on the demarcation of Kanak lands in 1876 the wavering between chieftom and council of elders re-emerges, and is resolved by the unanswerable affirmation of the colonial usefulness of the chieftom:

The influence of the chiefs is not absolute, being tempered by the councils of elders. These councils are, admittedly, not yet organised as a regular administrative form, but nevertheless represent an authority and are always consulted. It is by organising these sorts of councils that any arbitrary elements will be removed from the power of the chief, who must imperatively remain the representative of the tribe he leads vis-à-vis the administration, the work of the latter being thus simplified, and its intervention facilitated and delegated. (Privy Council, 6 January 1876)

Finally, in the two principal texts by governor Paul Feillet – that of 24 October 1897 which instituted the high chiefs, and that of 9 August 1898, under which the Native Affairs Department was organised around high chiefs of districts and junior tribal chiefs – no reference is made to the council of elders. It therefore has to be concluded that while both tribal and high chiefs were central elements in the functioning of colonial administration, aspects of which I have sketched in this chapter, no ‘council’ was deemed necessary to colonial governance: the interface between the chief, who bore the burden of obligation and enjoyed the concomitant privilege of arbitrary colonial power, was sufficient for the administration. And Pégourier’s proposal for a more ‘democratic’ reform at local level bore no fruit.

⁵⁷ Rather than in the sense of a Kanak village implanted in a reservation, which was a later local (and extra-legal) development of the term.

This tension between a ‘council’, which appears in many descriptions but yet is absent from the legal structure, is apparent in law scholar Éric Rau’s very strange account of the council of elders, in a book where he attempts to codify Kanak customs. Firstly, he returns to Vieillard and Deplanche’s analyses, cited above, and that of Victor de Rochas, while at the same time referring to a work of fiction by Georges Baudoux. The result is a massive confusion as to how the council might have operated, and Rau’s consequent inability to codify the ‘customs’ he seeks to describe:

From time immemorial, Kanak chiefs have had, for their government, Councillors and Councils. But the choice of the former and the composition of the latter essentially varies with each tribe and each chief. ...

This High Council or Council of Elders comprised – both in former times [Rau refers to Vieillard and Deplanche 1869, p. 479, and Rochas 1862, p. 244] and today – all the chiefs of the vassal tribes, the ministers, old men belonging to the noble caste and reputed for their bravery and their wisdom. In a word, all the influential individuals of the tribe. But it also included – in former times especially – sorcerers [Rau refers to Baudoux 1928, p. 98] who were responsible for taking the auspices. In this sort of ‘barbarian Senate’ [the term is from Rochas], the matter was verbally introduced by the Chief, and was the subject of long debate; the decision, according to Vieillard and Deplanche, was taken by majority vote [note by Rau: Since the opinion of a great lord could equate to that of 4 or 5 lesser personages, this is a very particular kind of majority. Often, moreover, no decision is taken.] (Rau 1944, pp. 65 and 66)

Rau also states that the council was recognised by the colonial administration in a way that is doubly problematic. First, he describes the administrative organisation of the tribe: the chiefs, ‘assisted by the council of elders ... maintain order in the tribe – decision of 9 August 1898, Articles 22 and 24’ (Rau 1944, p. 71). In fact there is no mention of the council in this 1898 decree, either in the articles cited or elsewhere. Rau goes on to add: ‘In the recruitment of chiefs too, the Administration to some extent follows the traditional rules we have considered. Is a high chief to be appointed? It leaves the task of nominating the candidate for the office of chief to the council of elders’ (Rau 1944, p. 72). To back up this statement, for which there is no empirical evidence, he refers to another work of fiction, *À bord de l’Incertaine* (*Aboard the Incertain*), by Jean Mariotti. Thus Rau offers a perfect illustration, in the New Caledonian context, of Lucas and Vatin’s assessment of Algeria: ‘The colonial head still weighs heavy on knowledge about Algeria’ (Lucas and Vatin 1975, p. 7).

Taking the division of the high chiefdom of Houaïlou into four in 1912 as my starting point, I have attempted to grasp the contrasting perspectives of the various actors in the colonial field in Houaïlou, by following the interactions between one section of the Houaïlou chiefs with the colonial administration during the period from 1897 (when Paul Feillet formalised the institution of high chiefdoms) to 1917 (when the four high chiefs of Houaïlou mobilised men for the repressive operation conducted in Koné and Hienghène), and then in the inter-war period, drawing on colonial sources but also on the remarkably rich *Papiers Mindia*. This has helped to reveal the development of the forms of colonial war, and also to understand how the management of both leprosy and plague could appear locally as the continuation of war by other means. Finally, this line of research serves as an entry point for perceiving the ways in which the colonial field was constituted in a small rural community, and the construction of a form of government that then dispensed with the legal framework of the ‘council of elders’ despite the fact that this was conceptually available in the Algerian lexicon.

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