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The Subjectivity of Violent Action

In her analysis of the municipal elections of 13 March 1977, Myriam Dornoy writes: 'Due to the combination of the mining centre at Poro¹ and the influence over Melanesians of the conservative Protestant mission of Pastor Charlemagne, Houailou was the sole example of a region with a majority of Melanesians and a minority of autonomist votes' (Dornoy 1984, p. 247). And indeed, in 1977 (as in 1971), Auguste Parawi-Reybas, a leading figure in the Association des indigènes calédoniens et loyaltiens français (AICLF) and in Kanak 'loyalism', whose activity during the 1950s has already been noted (see Chapter 4), was elected mayor. The 'autonomist' list, the umbrella for candidates from the Union Calédonienne, the Union multiraciale de Nouvelle-Calédonie (New Caledonia Multiracial Union) and the Union progressiste mélanésienne (Melanesian Progressive Union), garnered only 38 per cent of the vote. The key elements contributing to the emergence of the independence movement in New Caledonia² included the activism of the Foulards Rouges and 1878 Group³ from 1969 onwards, the emergence of a land rights movement, the founding of the Parti de libération kanake (Kanak Liberation Party, Palika) in 1976 and, finally, the Union Calédonienne's congress in Bourail in December 1977, at which the organisation resolved to rally to the independence

1 Many mine employees – Europeans, Wallis and Futuna Islanders and Tahitians – were living in Poro in the 1970s; they tended to vote for conservative parties.

2 Barbançon 2008; Bensa 1995; Chappell 2003; Colombani 1985; Coulon 1985; Dommel 1993; Gabriel and Kermel 1985 and 1988; Leblic 1993; Mokaddem 2005.

3 The Foulards Rouges (Red Scarves), a student-led campaign group, and the 1878 Group, a more radical independence movement focused particularly on land reform, came together with other groups to form Palika in 1976 [trans.].

campaign. From this date on, the land rights movement took off in Houaïlou, with a succession of settlers' properties being claimed from December 1977 – starting with those that had been assigned in the second process of land demarcation conducted by governor Paul Feillet at the turn of the 20th century. In August 1979, it was in Gwârü, in Houaïlou, that the Autonomous Evangelical Church announced that its delegates were unanimously in favour of independence. On 24 September 1979 the commemoration of the French takeover of New Caledonia in Houaïlou village was disrupted by Palika demonstrators, in a scene far from the consensual atmosphere of the centenary celebrations in 1953 (see Chapter 4):

I remember in 79, when we had a demonstration in the village, on 24 September, to protest against the raising of the flag over the town hall, we don't want it there any longer. It was organised by the regional Palika branch at the time, people jeered at us, they insulted us in the village; it's because back then, people were still too far to the right, dug in on the right. (Raphaël Wéma Néèè, extract from interview, May 1991)

At this point I turn my focus to the forms of violent conflict that accompanied land rights claims and the Kanak independence movement in the Houaïlou region, ending more than a century of special relationship with French colonial power. The period known as the 'events', which began with the 'active boycott' of the territorial assembly elections stipulated by the 'Lemoine statute'⁴ (a campaign famously incarnated by the image of Éloi Machoro destroying a ballot box in Canala with an axe) on 18 November 1984, ended with the successive events, in spring 1988, of the Fayawé gendarmerie's murderous attack in Ouvéa, the massacre of hostage-takers in Gossanah, the signature of the Matignon-Oudinot agreements,⁵ and finally the murder of Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Yéwéné Yéwéné in May 1989. The land reform begun in 1978, on the other hand, is still under way today. My ethnographic research in Houaïlou began, in 1991, under the shadow of those years of tension, and the ongoing discussions about land rights. I had the opportunity to meet a number of those active during this time and I, therefore, focus here especially on their account of these 'events'. As far as the means at my disposal allow, I shall

4 Introduced on 4 September 1984, the statute strongly reinforced New Caledonian autonomy and provided for a referendum on independence within five years [trans.].

5 Agreement between New Caledonian separatists and loyalists in 1988, providing for a 10-year period of development and a new referendum on self-determination, while the Kanaks were a minority in the electorate [trans.].

try to understand the subjective implications of what was experienced, at least in part, as a war of independence. My microsociological and pragmatic description focuses on three moments of conflict: the events of 18 November 1984, the death of a man during a land rights meeting in 1987, and a family crisis around a padlock in 1991.

The ‘events’: Collective campaigns and individual initiatives

1984–88: Return to war in Houailou

18th November

The day of 18 November 1984 saw a large number of roadblocks erected in Houailou, and opened a period of struggle for the control of space (land) and movement (primarily on the roads). Roadblocks were set up on roads along the Houailou valley and the coast and, for four years, any passing vehicles were liable to be targeted by stone-throwers. The retrospective account of the ‘events’ often paints these as heroic actions. The interview extract below gives an idea both of the epic tone of such accounts – despite the fact that, in this case, the planned action did not take place – and the way the ‘events’ are inscribed in a history of war, rooted in the use of ancestral family powers of protection or propitiation (see chapters 2 and 4).

When I left for France [to do military service], grandfather showed me family things. When I left, he gave me them, I took them with me: ‘If war comes, well you do this, you do that.’ What I’m telling you is, there were family secrets, you know. He showed me that, but it was funny ... On 18 November in Houailou we nearly got killed, but I used that medicine. I’ll never forget it, I believe that’s what saved us, because we were in Néajjië, and then here comes X ... he egged all the young people in the valley into going to attack the town hall, and they came with two trucks ... I said to the others: ‘No, in the strategy we’ve planned, our role is to block the valley, here the mood isn’t so much in favour of the independence movement, so we need to take that into account.’ ... We talked for a bit, it was hard, and then X was still pushing, so in the end all the young people decided: ‘OK, we’re going!’ and they came with balaclavas, a whole pile of things, and everyone was there, everyone was silent. And then I said to X: ‘Listen, you’re pushing the young people, but look, among all these young people, there are some who won’t come

back, they'll all get themselves shot down there, there are people in the town hall, there are sure to be RCPR⁶ people down there, and they're armed, and they're people whose backs will be covered. But look, if the young people get killed, who's going to take responsibility? Will you? Will it be you that takes responsibility for that?' And he wasn't planning to go, he was pushing the young guys, but he wasn't going ... so I called the people, I explained to them, I said: 'Things like that, they're things we shouldn't do', I explained why, and then I said to them: 'Well, since the others insist on going at all costs, I'll go with them, but I want you to be clear that we're going, but we might not come back.' I said it straight to everyone – grandfather Y was there, he wasn't saying anything, it looked like he had tears in his eyes – I said to them: 'OK, but I'm going to tell the others that you're not going on your own, I'm going with you. Wait here for me, I'm going down, then I'll come back up.' I went down [to the river], I bathed with the medicines, then I got my gun, I went back up. You should have seen the looks they were giving me. I got into the first truck. When I arrived, I told the young people what they had to do ... I said: 'Inside we're going to have to shoot. You fire into the crowd, the one who's going to pick up the ballot box, he takes the ballot box, but you mustn't aim, there's no question of aiming, you have to shoot, anyone who has a gun you have to kill him, because it's him or us.' So off we went, we'd already planned where to take up position, there were several positions, and then off we went, but you know, we were saved by Z, it was as if he did it on purpose. He stopped us, he said: 'Listen, turn around, it's not worth it, we can't get to the bridge, and down there, the reinforcements from Ponérihouen, it's packed with armoured cars, and then the people are in the town hall, they're drunk, but they're armed.' So that's what happened, that's why we turned back. But the reason I'm telling you is because I used the medicine that day. I've always wondered whether it wasn't just a coincidence, I think it was the medicine that saved us. Because it's a medicine that's like that, it's a medicine that helps you to pass through dangers ... So talking of the medicine, that's the time when I used it. (Extract from interview, February 1999)

Christine Demmer uses the example of Canala to demonstrate the importance of the period of the 'events' in the development of a new generation of political actors at local tribal level.⁷ The epic and dramatised recounting of the various episodes of the 'events', the narrative elaboration of memories, the staging of the self, and the exclusion of subsequent generations too young to have been involved in these heroic feats,

6 Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République (Rally for Caledonia in the Republic), the local branch of the RPR (Gaullist political party in France), led by Jacques Lafleur.

7 Demmer 2002 and 2008.

undeniably colour the historical awareness of this period. This awareness initially developed through the shared experience not only of collective mobilisation on the day of 18 November but, also, in the following months, of arrest, prison, and the violence of mobile police and military units.⁸

We carried on with our disruption and all that, and then there were clashes here, I got caught up in quite a few raids, around the reserves here, the mobiles [gendarmes] arrived, they smash everything, they mix everything up, washing powder, sugar, rice, salt. (Raphaël Wéma Nèèè, extract from interview, May 1991)

As well as being a serious challenge to the inequality of colonial relations, the 'events' were also a time when people took action in a multitude of microlocal situations, harking back to political conflicts around the establishment of administrative chiefdoms, the arrival of the missions and the split in the Protestant church (some of which I have examined in previous chapters). For example, the mention of the local 'right wing' forces or the RCPR of course refers to the presence of European settlers in Houaïlou, and their extensive hold over land, but also includes a considerable number of Kanak 'loyalists', among them a number of elected representatives.

We were putting up barricades in the tribe, we put up a sign saying 'No RCPR members permitted to enter the tribe', and so we put a chain across the two parts of the road. He came, he saw that, he came right after the death of Éloi [Machoro], he came back, he saw the barricade, he said: 'What's all this?' We answered: 'You saw the sign.' He said: 'Even me?' and I called him over because he's a nephew of mine, in the family. He came down to see me, we talked a bit, I told him: 'It's better not to insist, because you've seen all the young guys there, you should understand.' He said: 'Yes, but I'm from the tribe.' I said: 'Me, I understand, but will the others? Because yesterday and the day before, we saw you on the TV, alongside the old guy who's categorically against what we're doing. We're demanding our dignity as Kanaks, but if you want to deny your identity, that's your problem.' That's how it was, that's it, when I said that, he tried to sweet-talk me, so then the young people started to come over. And then it was the mobiles [gendarmes] who escorted him through the tribe. (Extract from interview, May 1991)

8 See Feldman 1991.

A warrior

Going beyond the chronology of the ‘events’ in Houaïlou, the following four extracts from one interview offer an outline of the forms of military actions mounted, and the subjective involvement they reveal. Alongside the roadblock campaign, which is better known from the widely disseminated media images (both press photographs and television), and was more structured, being coordinated by leading political elements (in New Caledonian parlance, the ‘pressure groups’ making up the FLNKS⁹ and the local ‘committees of struggle’), the war in the 1980s in Houaïlou was also a time of marked autonomy and great freedom of individual initiative. Here I consider two scenes of fires (in a house and a shop), and two examples of attacks on drivers (of a lorry and a car):

1. The business at the A’s place, I was involved. There was one of B’s uncles there, who the A family had left there to guard it, then at that time there was also a company working on the road there. In the evening, they would park their machines at A’s place ... And then one night, I said to a nephew and a cousin, I said: ‘Hey, guys, we’re going down and we’re going to set fire to A’s house, and then burn a few of the machines that are up there as well.’ ... I got there, and then I chucked a Molotov cocktail at the little house, and it flared up brilliantly, but it only burned the wall. It didn’t do a lot of damage, you know. Then him, he was inside, well, he wasn’t asleep yet, he was inside, and when he saw the light, the fire, he came out. We were in the dark, we saw him come out, and then he came out with a gun, he looked around and then when he saw the light he went back in, he grabbed a bag, he shut the door, he took off, and he ran all night, he said he ran until he got to B, that evening ... That’s it, we made sure he’d definitely left. So then we set fire to the house, we set fire to the machines, then we scarpered. Afterwards, a long time after, when we told the story, it was one of our uncles, he was a runner, then we told him one day when we saw him again, we cracked up laughing after. Oh, there are some actions I still laugh about, because there are some that are funny, there really are ...
2. The C family, they had a shop there, before the events ... There were two people there, two Kanaks to guard the building. And in the evening, I saw that they had both gone into the house below with two guns. I said: ‘Well then, let’s see.’ And then I waited until it was late. And then around midnight, that’s it, I got my things ready, I

9 Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste (Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front), formed in September 1984.

made two Molotov cocktails ... I threw one at the window, it broke the window, then exploded inside. And then ... it caught fire straight away, then on the ceiling as well, there were boxes, all of that. I heard the two shouting inside, then all of a sudden I saw the fat one, the one called D, breaking down the front door, then the other one behind him. Me I was killing myself laughing up there, I was hiding behind. But hey, they weren't burned, you know, but they were scared by how big the fire was. Afterwards they looked, I saw them standing there, they looked around, they couldn't do a thing, you know. After when the fire had gone out, I saw the two of them go down towards where grandfather E lives, because they live there. Then after, I saw the two had left, after I went up. There's a house behind, well, I set fire to all of that, and then I went off to the mound to watch it all burn. Then I went calmly back home. Afterwards, in the morning, I heard on the news, and they said it was FLNKS activists. But down there even now, people don't know who it was. At A's place they know, but at C's they don't know who did it. (Extracts from interview, August 2004)

Another of my interviewees put a political slant on this second fire, setting it in the historical context of commercial and affective relationships between Kanaks and settlers, which I have referred to at various points throughout this analysis (see chapters 3 and 4):

The houses that were burned, they belonged to the settlers, C. We took advantage of the political events to chase them out, because we'd asked the council of elders to get up a petition to ban the sale of alcohol, he was selling alcohol there. So for us it was too close to the tribe, we saw how that caused problems in a lot of families. A father who sells a bunch of bananas, as soon as he's got three or four hundred francs,¹⁰ he can walk to go and get a bottle of beer. So as the council of elders, the customary authorities, weren't really doing anything, we took advantage of the political events to get rid of it. (Extract from interview, May 1991)

Thus, as in the 1950s, political activism had as much to do with the singular local relationships of proximity and exploitation as with the national slogans of the political parties. I continue with two further extracts from the first interview:

3. There's the story of F. When everything starts to blow up down below, he started to evacuate his stock to Bourail. And then one day, I go to the Col des Roussettes, I had my gun, loaded, and I had the bullets I needed and everything, and then I just happened to go up there.

10 CFP francs (currency used in Francophone ex-colonies), a sum equivalent to 2.5–3.3 euros.

Because in my head, I was saying: ‘Oh, I’m going up to the Col des Roussettes, if there are mobiles [gendarmes] passing through there I have to get one of them in the head.’ And I was going to do it, you know, I was! And as the Col des Roussettes was a good place for that sort of thing, forest everywhere around, well I went off, I set up camp in a little spot up there ... And then here comes F with his big truck full of cattle, I said: ‘Oh, look at you there, you who used to shoot at G’s brothers sometimes when they go to fish down there, there you are.’ ... Then when he got there, I’m there, I’ve already got the gun trained on him, I said I’m going to plug him. Then I said: ‘No, let it go’, into the truck tyre, on the driver’s side, his side, he passed right in front of me, and the lorry tipped over on his side, and I saw him panic, he starts to look all around, he must have heard the noise of the gun too, he knew as well, but since the front wheel on his side is completely blown out, and the truck is starting to slow down ... So after I reloaded, the two back wheels on the left, the driver’s side, I plugged two bullets in there. The truck accelerated like crazy, it was smoking and everything ... And then people don’t know who did that either. There are quite a few tricks like that that I pulled by myself. Without anyone knowing. But I don’t know, I like pulling those tricks alone like that. Without anyone noticing ...

4. With H it was the same as well, he said he’s had enough because every day there’s a roadblock at I, every day, and him, he’s fed up with it. And then one day, he said to all his work colleagues down there: ‘All the little rabbits in I, one day I’m going to slaughter them up there.’ And that didn’t fall on deaf ears among his workmates. And then J told us what he said. I said straightaway: ‘Oh, that’s how it is, just wait, let’s wait for him down there.’ I went down, I always had a little knife like that, nicely sharpened, he comes with his car, he comes down from the pass, he saw us there, I came out, I said: ‘Stop’, and he stopped, and then before I started talking with him, I cut the wheel, I cut two tyres, after the third wheel, I came up to his side. Then I said to him: ‘Oh, it’s you, do you remember, you said to J that we were rabbits and you were going to slaughter us like in Hienghène¹¹ – he said that, the little rabbits of I – you were going to slaughter them, it was you said that, wasn’t it?’ And then J was with us that day too, because we brought him along so he told the truth in front of him. Because he was a witness, he heard what he said. And then he started to panic, because some of the guys had sticks, others had tamiocs [hatchets], and I had my knife ... Then I said: ‘But why

11 An allusion to the murder of 10 independence campaigners near the tribe of Tiendanite, in Hienghène, on 5 December 1984.

are you lying? You should tell the truth.’ And then I started to yell too, and I started to roll up my sleeves, all of that, getting ready to hit him. Then I said: ‘If you don’t tell the truth, you see this knife? I’ll stick it in here and it’ll come out here, if you don’t tell the truth.’ And then his son beside him, his name is K, he starts to talk over there, I turned to him over there, and I made him get out of the car, I opened the door, and I made him get out of the car, and when his father saw it was going to turn out badly, he started the engine, first gear, but he was driving with three flat tyres. The others saw that he’d started off, first gear, that’s it, stones were raining down, break the windows, he must have got hit a few times as well but they got away. (Extracts from interview, August 2004)

The first point of note is the similarity between this last scene and the accounts of confessions elicited during the visit of the seers to expose alleged witches (see Chapter 4): here again, the use of violence is deemed legitimate as a means of producing truth. Equally striking is the resemblance between this account and the hunting scene – a genre narrative of a type frequently encountered in New Caledonia, and not only among my Kanak interviewees. Characteristic features include the staging of the self in the account and the extremely precisely remembered details (which may have been reworked over time: this interview took place more than 15 years after the events recounted). In the four extracts cited, the interviewee highlights the techniques of ambush, keeping watch and waiting, which are not unrelated to those of pre-colonial wars, as far as can be known.¹² My interviewee’s actions are also set in the context of his family’s history in war, one of his grandfathers having enlisted in the French army during the First World War, and other members of his family during the Second World War (see Chapter 3). Finally, these incidents of violence take place in a more general social context in which opposition to the ‘structural violence’ of colonisation meant that, for those involved, the use of war and physical violence was on some level justified.

Acts of violence during the ‘events’, as presented in this interview, are not of the order of direct confrontation or pitched battle. Rather, these are guerrilla techniques aimed at control of space: fires to intimidate or chase out settlers, especially those deemed most implicated in relations of inequality; roadblocks built with stones, felled trees or trenches dug across the carriageway; and stone-throwing (or occasionally shooting) at cars

12 Leenhardt 1930, pp. 34–46.

driving the roads – regardless of the political opinions of those driving them. In response, the state sought to maintain its control of the roads by operating convoys under military or police protection. Many Houaïlou men involved in the ‘events’ also participated in expeditions into the region’s mountains and forests, returning to the footpaths linking villages that were remote from one another by road, and thereby coming into contact once more with the old cemeteries. In this struggle for control of the roads, Simone Heurteaux, a teacher, was killed in April 1985 by stones thrown with great force as she drove past; this was the only death attributed to the ‘events’ in Houaïlou.

In returning to this focus on gestures, words and their contexts, we need to take a moment to interrogate the notion of ‘violence’, in terms of both the precise definition of the actions it covers and its moral connotations. In the sociological analysis of violence, the researcher faces questions of ethics and sentiment that cannot always be resolved in practice by the anti-ethnocentric anthropological principle of suspension of judgment. Some anthropologists use the concept of the ‘grey zone’ – a decontextualised concept borrowed from Primo Levi, which alludes to the way frames of moral reference are overturned in violent situations – to address this difficulty but, in my view, this simply reifies the paradox.¹³ The conflicts under consideration here have led me to meet murderers in New Caledonia who in other situations prevented violence; victims beaten to death who were known locally for their domestic abuse; politically and economically dominated individuals, victims of serious structural violence, who also perpetrate violence in unequal social relations within their own group (particularly in relations of gender, generation or status). ‘Physical violence’ is not a unitary reality, and portraying it as a political evil obscures rather than illuminates the specific features of each case.¹⁴

A judgment in Néawa

Alongside the actions against settlers, against anti-independence Kanaks and against Europeans using the municipality’s roads, the ‘events’ were also a period marked by tension among the local leaders of the independence movement, particularly in relation to actions undertaken. This is evident from the first interview extract cited in this chapter, in the conflict between my interviewee and X around the potential attack on Houaïlou

13 Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004.

14 Naepels 2006a.

town hall on 18 November 1984. Another FLNKS activist told of other internal disagreements: ‘I called out to Y, during the events: “If we were at war, I’d kill you, and the people defending you as well.” There are too many wimps. There are things you don’t need to argue about. A bullet in the head’ (extract from interview, February 1999). These tensions continued throughout this period, and culminated in a ‘judgment’ in the Néawa tribe, where there were disagreements among a number of local political leaders who were also organising military operations linked to the campaign. Although the issue in question was different, this form of collective judgment, within the setting of the village, echoes the tribunals organised by the *jauu* (diviners) in 1955 (see Chapter 4), including in this same Néawa tribe.

Insults and blows: Engagement of the self in land reform

The land reform on which the state embarked in 1978, as a way of countering the emerging demands for independence, gathered pace after the ‘events’. This was due both to the departure of a number of settlers (following threats of physical violence or the burning of their houses) and to the conclusion of the Matignon-Oudinot agreements. From the start, by questioning the legitimacy of the families making land claims, it also resulted in a plethora of internal conflicts within the Kanak population.¹⁵ Under the procedures for redistribution of state land operated by the body charged with land reform, the Agence pour le développement rural et l’aménagement foncier (Agency for Rural Development and Land Use, ADRAF), land was only assigned once a local consensus had emerged – in other words on condition that no claim was lodged by a third party contesting the presumed ownership. The conflicts that arose at this time were manifested in the long-term deadlock on reassignment of a number of sites. They also led to a general rise in social activity, particularly in the form of meetings and discussions, sometimes organised by the ADRAF. I shall examine two examples of violent actions linked to land conflicts, in Dâo and Koro, considering the forms of engagement brought into play.

15 Naepels 1998 and 2006b.

1991: A visit to Dâô and some meetings about land reform

During the first week I spent in Houaïlou in 1991, I was invited by the person I was lodging with to accompany him on a visit to a site in Dâô. We went with a dozen or so other men, members of the three main lineages of one clan, a week in advance of a meeting called by the ADRAF to discuss the potential assignment of this land.¹⁶ There was a palpable tension during the visit and all the men present, apart from myself, were armed with machetes and guns – for clearing the paths and hunting, but also to put up a front and be ready for all eventualities. The journey was remarkable for the fact that very few of the participants spoke during the two hours it took us to walk the site: one of the men present, however, identified the places where these three lineages had been living around a century earlier, before the colonial expropriation of the land. Some men, older than the speaker and members of other lineages than his, seemed rather surprised by what they heard him say. This visit allowed the three lineages to formulate a common position at the meeting organised by the ADRAF the following week; it also fed into the stand-off between these individuals and their adversaries at this meeting, in an exchange of insults:

Yes when [the ADRAF land agent] starts his report, talking about boundaries, all that, and then how the land is to be shared, and then he finished his report and invited everyone to speak. And then as the B family has a little plot in that bit of Dâô, me personally I didn't know, I found out the day we visited that site ... So it's in relation to that that grandfather A starts to say what he thought, you know. So he started his speech, he was really saying what he thought, what he wanted to do, all that. And then after, he starts to attack the B family about the site in Dâô, and how there was a plan for a GIE there,¹⁷ well he didn't agree, and you know he thought of himself as the one in command of all the families in that sector. So he doesn't recognise the B family there, and then he said that if the B family did anything in that part, they risked coming up against him, him and then his family, you know. And then that was it, so he insulted us, because he was talking to dad B ... So he let loose the first insult, then the old man didn't say anything, second time he didn't say anything, third time he didn't say anything, so then I replied. I told him what I thought. Yes, and then it didn't come to any conclusion that meeting, then everyone went home.

16 I described the conditions of colonial expropriation of this site in chapters 2 and 3.

17 GIE: *groupement d'intérêt économique* (economic interest grouping), a legal vehicle for development projects at that time.

— And father B, you think he didn't answer, why was that?

I don't know, I can't tell you why he didn't answer. Anyway, he just answered: '*Ah! Tëvë e ma kwa tëvë yaané!* (Speak then speak well!)', you know.¹⁸ There's no point insulting people. That's what he said. That's what he said, and then no, he didn't react. (Extract from interview, August 2004)

The same disagreement over the attribution of the site in Dâô was expressed at the following meeting, a few months later, which ended with a renewed exchange of insults and then a brawl:

So the chairman of the council of elders opens the meeting. And then he invites everyone to speak so everyone can state their position and say what they think and all that. And then C starts to speak, and then he was stating his position, you know. Then he came back to what happened down below. And then uncle D replied to him, uncle D stood up, and he was talking loudly, and then he showed C that he didn't agree with what he said about what happened down below, you know. So they were speaking, we were on the road, and then they were on the verandah, sitting on a bench, all the elders there, him, he was talking and going towards C, and C stands up, and then he raises his voice on the other side as well. And then uncle D threw the little tamioc [hatchet] he had. He threw the tamioc, well it was just to make the point, you know, that he was there too. Well he didn't want to hurt him, the tamioc fell just next to him, you know. And then when C saw that, he calmed down straightaway. And then after, there are voices that start to speak, he's calmed down, in the end he's sat down, he still carries on talking, uncle D, after he's thrown the tamioc. Me I got in ahead of uncle D, I went after C, and that's when the fight started, that's it, that's how the meeting ended, you know. (Extract from interview, August 2004)

In dialogues, a collective is formed around oneself both through traditional historical appeals to a pre-colonial legitimacy, like those produced during the visit to the site, and through the delegitimisation of the speaker by means of mockery, insult or provocation. There is thus a continuum from speech to violent gesture.

1987: The death of K

The second case I should like to analyse had more serious consequences. It throws a very clear light on the way physical violence is articulated with the account of history and with local ways of interpreting misfortune,

18 Literally, 'Oh! Speak well but don't speak ill!'

in relation to the alleged powers of the ancestors. In October 1987, an open-air meeting was held to address conflicts over the reassignment of the Devillers property, involving the village of Koro.¹⁹ This meeting was remarkable, and its consequences particularly significant, in that one of the people present, whom I shall call K, died as he was speaking, while criticising the actions of the Z family. This situation helps to deepen understanding of the forms of subjective engagement in conflict, in its articulation not only of words and gestures, insults and blows, but also of the physical and the symbolic.

The way uncle was speaking, he was yelling at them, you know, and then he told the story, how they were thrown out of Koro, how they were chased away, how they came back from Bourail, all those stories, the name they bore as well, and then he came to that, why that name as well. And then all of a sudden, three times, we heard a tree falling, because there's a little forest just behind there ... then all of a sudden we heard 'crack', a big tree falling, and we turned round, and apparently nobody saw anything, you know ... we heard, everyone heard, everyone stopped, the old man stopped talking, then he started up again. Second time, same sound, a tree falling, everyone stopped, we looked, and third time, it starts again the tree about to fall, we're still hearing little creaks, all that, and then after, uncle crashed too, he was talking, talking, then he was biting his tongue. When we saw him, he starts to turn like that, and then crash, laid out, fell down dead. And then I don't know who jumped up, when he fell, the first to react was A, he got up from where he was sitting, and he went straight for B, then he said: 'That's your fault, and if he's dead, that's your fault', and then he hit B, crash bang wallop, then it all broke down, then it was a free-for-all, in the end a free-for-all, we beat up the whole family there, and then there were some who went to hospital, and uncle K they tried to take him to hospital, no luck, he arrived there, and the doctor said he was dead you know. And that was it, that's how it ended, everyone went home, and it ended with uncle's death. (Extract from interview, August 2004)

My interviewee's insistence on the simultaneity of the cracking of the trees and K's death indicates that he attributes this death to a non-accidental cause, referring implicitly to the part played by the powers attributed to ancestral forces.

19 I have considered the Koro war, which preceded the colonial expropriation of the land, from two different angles (see chapters 1 and 2).

So when we were discussing, well that's when he fell. We started to talk, only I told them first: 'We're going to meet, I'm going to see fair play. When the Z arrive, let me talk, I'll talk first.' No but him, by custom he talks, he's so annoyed when the others arrived, straightaway, I didn't even see him, he went off. He didn't talk for long, not even five minutes, he fell flat. So it was after that there was the punch-up, then I felt bad, oh, it was terrible. If I hadn't been there, some of the Z would have been killed. They brought out tamiocs, machetes ... Then I made them get out of there, I told them: 'Come away, now, if you stay here you'll die, it's better to come away', so I made them come away, they came away. But there had already been kicks, so the tamiocs, the machetes, I said: 'Hey, calm down, calm down', I had trouble stopping them. When they left all the cars were vandalised, they went off with the cars, there were no windows left and all that ... I got them to calm down, I said: 'Take the guy to hospital.' So they take the guy to hospital ... When we heard he'd died, I told them we'd take him up there ... I go up there, in the afternoon, I try to calm them down, the day of the burial, I try to calm them ... Then I said to them: 'The business with this site, there's already one person dead, if there are more who die tomorrow or the day after, you have to try and think about that.' (Extract from interview, August 1995)

All of my interviewees without exception made a link between this sudden death and the conflict over land that was under discussion at the meeting. As the two interview extracts describing the scene demonstrate, some of those present immediately attributed this death to the Z, who were in dispute with K's family – hence their violent reaction to members of this family who were at the meeting. Other interviewees emphasise the responsibility of K, who must, in either form or substance, have said things that should not be said:

Them, before they're defending the Z, and now they've quarrelled with the Z. When he's speaking, well you shouldn't insult others, you have to settle problems the right way, what's the point in insulting people? Shouting and insulting other people, it's not good ... K, then his brother, they were standing up both of them, they hadn't come to listen, that's it, that's how it starts, when you do things in anger, it's not good ... But that's not how it should be done, when the others are sitting all around, and then you talk. (Extract from interview, June 2006)

K told us once that it was thanks to them that the Z exist, because all of that, it's buried by our ancestors, you shouldn't say that now, because it brings bad luck. And him when he said that, what happens? Well he fell down dead. (Extract from interview, September 2002)

Whichever interpretation of this death is put forward, it refers to one of the two types of causality described in Chapter 4, as defined by Christine Salomon: either the dead man is the victim of powers of attack brought into play by his enemies, or he incurs the wrath of ancestors (his own or those of other clans) irritated by his transgressive behaviour. As one of my interviewees said to me in relation to this death: 'There's the other world, behind, that settles disputes' (extract from interview, August 1991). The process of reassigning lands in Koro was subsequently resumed and the various families concerned are now settled there (with some tension between them at times). However, the varying interpretations of the death remain. The conflict was resolved on the practical level through the intervention of the ADRAF and the mediation of a number of senior local figures:

After the claim, there were difficulties between the clans, all the clans. Then in relation to Karhövä and then Koro down there, the Z and us, there, that's created the difficulty ... When Devillers [the former European proprietor] gave it up, they were the first to go in ... That's where the problem is a bit hard. Then it's there that my big brother was lost [died] ... We wanted to have a meeting to tell them to leave Koro. It's there my big brother died ... Then after a while the ADRAF worked on that to organise meetings ... I can tell you it's thanks to the ADRAF, they worked hard so that they came to an agreement with us. That's that, and now they've already built in Koro, but we're still not reconciled ... What's serious is that my big brother died, because he fell down dead, it's like when a guy's shot with a bullet. (Extract from interview, August 1995)

It was me who worked on that, after K died, because they went back there, and they said the Koro valley was theirs, there are no other clans there. So the others responded, so we organised the meeting, that's where the brother fell down in front of us, among us. Then after he fell among us, then the people from Koro left, they left Koro ... So I tried to organise a meeting there in Koro ... Only I said to them: 'I'm settling the land issue, but the issue of reconciliation, that's between you.' ... Only I told them they had to respect the limits: 'If you overstep the limits tomorrow or the day after, once you've overstepped, it's for ever, there's no one else who'll settle the dispute, I'm the last.' So that was it, they've respected that up to now ... I did the work for the site, but reconciliation, that's up to them ... So when their old man died, he was buried over there. As for reconciliation, that's how it is, but there's still one more thing, according to custom, because when they came from Mèaa, they settled there, there's someone there in Koro, there's the owner of the site. So the owner of the site gave his land over to them, then he left ... They have to try to see those people to try and reconcile with them. (Extract from interview, February 1999)

This last extract introduces an additional element into the historical issues bound up in the reassignment of this site, by connecting the conflict between K's family and the Z family to their common origin in the Mèaa plateau, from where they came down to the Koro valley: hence their (more or less conflictual) relationship with the people of the Houaïlou valley. Two other interviews also point to this historical aspect:

It's like in Koro, when the Z came, even the Mèaa if they want to come, according to custom, they have to look behind a bit why did they leave by violence? But who began the violence? Then you see clearly that it's the Mèaa. So I'm telling you, this is just my opinion, according to custom, first of all you have to make a customary gesture as a reconciliation with the people of the valley. (Extract from interview, August 1995)

The problem for them is the problem of rights, because on lands like that, there is a history that speaks after all. For them, as long as things haven't been recognised on the customary level, it will always create problems ... Me what I can say is that the history of Koro, you never see the end of it ... People talk a lot about Koro, the Mèaa clans, but the problem is that Koro is secondary. The actual base of the Mèaa clans is up there in Mèaa ... That's why I'm saying, there they talk a lot about being from the Koro area, but Koro is the second zone. If they follow their origin to Mèaa, there they'll become really small. And they don't want to start that discussion up there, precisely because that's where the truth will be found ... The people of Mèaa, the thing that characterises them, we say *pâi pa néjàô ma kwé* [literally, 'the people of straw and liana']. *Néjàô ma kwé* are old lianas. What does all that mean? It means they're people who are always in conflict, who are always tearing each other apart and always fighting each other, who are envious of each other. But you must never get involved in their game, because once you get embroiled, you'll suffocate ... So that's a kind of clan character, and would you believe they're proud of it, the people of Mèaa, that they're like that. (Extract from interview, July 1993)

Readers will have noted that the villages in question in this chapter (Dâô, Koro, Mèaa) are places that have been mentioned in the first two chapters: the intensity of the conflicts described here is directly related to the complexity of the pre-colonial and colonial issues embedded there. And it is precisely the aliveness of the issues linked to these places, and the consequent local mobilisation of historical knowledge, that allows access to their history²⁰ – and at the same time makes it so difficult to write about without intervening in the conflict.

20 See Naepels 2008.

Political emotions

Experiencing affect (some political sentiments)

As these selected examples from the period of land rights claims and the 'events' show, the social relations described here are manifestly not regulated by any convention or a contract. As a general rule, each individual has first to take his/her position in a relation of power. It is therefore war, and its many avatars following the colonial 'pacification' (including witchcraft conflicts, conflicts over land and brawls), that are used to resolve conflicts originating in relations between individuals and between groups of belonging, relations that, if necessary, are formalised through contractual forms after the event (see Chapter 6).

Him, the day I go and talk to him, he's going to have a heap of problems ... I don't mean to boast, but they owe me respect. X, I'm waiting for him. One day I'm going to get him, and he's as good as dead. It's people like that you have to shut up. There's no point talking any more, today you have to kill people to express yourself. (Extract from interview, February 1991)

In the interviews I gathered, anger (*rhôê*) emerges as a systematically aggravating factor in violent confrontations, an intensifying element in the continuum of violent acts and a justification for action.²¹

So in the end, he hits him ... he's so mad and he has to do something with it, he goes to hit him. (Extract from interview, August 1995)

When I went to see him, the guy, instead of speaking well, straight away [he gets] angry. I said to him: 'Hey! One day I'll get fed up of telling you to go, one day I'll smoke [set fire to] your house.' (Extract from interview, September 2002)

Although my interviewees use anger as a descriptive concept to account for certain behaviours, they do not themselves necessarily subscribe to them:

But them, they're always fighting, arguing and angry. No, that's not how [things should be done]. What use is it to show your strength to say what? You have to show your strength in another way. (Extract from interview, September 2002)

21 See Harrison 1993, and my analysis of the role of emotions and anger in war, following Leenhardt (see Chapter 2).

Anger is also sometimes ascribed to specific family traits (linked to the agnatic group of the person concerned, or that of his maternal uncles), thus identifying characteristics, or *habitus*, that are embodied and, occasionally, supported by a discourse about the self as warrior.

When someone shows that he is angry, or when he behaves in a certain way, people say: 'Oh, it's not surprising, it's in that family's blood', because in that house they have that very specific character. (Extract from interview, June 1995)

In the same explanatory register, accounting for the resort to violence, alcohol is put forward as a disinhibiting factor (particularly in the context of anger). In his famous article on the grief and rage of an Ilongot headhunter, Renato Rosaldo emphasised the need for the social sciences (and anthropology in particular) to give proper place to emotion in understanding the actions these disciplines seek to account for.²² This project presents us with an analytical difficulty, however: in the retrospective narrative (the account I am able to gather from my interviewees), there is a constant oscillation between calculated rational decision-making and loss of control, between spontaneity and premeditation, between rage and calm.²³ But we will never know what goes on within an individual consciousness or the depths of subconscious decisions; we shall never enter the 'unbreakable kernel of darkness that their action is to themselves' (Veyne 1984, p. 191). This is evident if we compare two explanations of the same action, given by the same interviewee (a few years apart): one emphasises premeditation and calculation, the other immediacy and rage:

You saw my business with the old man, I almost put a bullet in his head, but it was a conscious act, I mean from the moment I decided to do it, I thought about it a lot, it's not the first time he's done the dirty on me ... I couldn't carry on closing my eyes to it, I had to stand up for myself at least a bit ... Now if the Whites' court convicts me because I've killed someone, that's up to them, for me it's nothing to do with me. But me in my reasoning, it's based on my values. I reckoned there was a boundary he shouldn't overstep, and then I reckoned he'd gone too far, it was the accumulation of everything he did, I reckoned I was within my rights, that I had to do it ... When people overstep a certain limit, you in relation to who you are, your past, what you should be, in relation to the society

22 Rosaldo 1989.

23 See Feldman 1991 on the narrativisation of violence.

you live in, you're a man after all, and you have rights to defend after all, and you can't carry on letting yourself be walked over all the time like that. (Extract from interview, January 1999)

A moment after, it was evening. It really came home to me in the evening, but me when I'm angry, when I fly into a rage like that, it's very hard to control. (Extract from interview, July 1995)

After he was beaten up by a group of several men, another of my interviewees told me in July 2008 that in hindsight he was glad his wife had reacted as she did: if she had not hidden his gun, he would have gone after his attackers in a rage, and killed them all. In speaking of violence and the move to action, we must avoid over-functionalising violent practice, identifying its relation to the uncontainable, the overwhelming, at the same time as to calculation. Hence analysis cannot be set within this psychological register, and we can only come back to the gestures, the words and the contexts as a way of producing the most specific description possible. In fact this is what my interviewees often do: thus the account I cited at the beginning of this chapter, of four actions during the 'events', distinguishes between military-style operations (the aborted action against the mobile gendarmes, then that carried out against F – see extract 3) from angry reaction and exhilaration (against H, who had denigrated the independence movement – see extract 4).

The laughter in these accounts (explicitly evoked in extracts 1 and 2, above, and sometimes interrupting the narrative itself, though I have not noted this in the transcriptions) clearly indicates the legitimacy of the use of violence. Most tellingly, physical violence or taking action are very often interpreted as 'legitimate self-defence' against attacks by witchcraft. The powers of healing ('medicines') are also held to be powers of potential attack, and local conflicts are systematically shadowed by the fear that oneself or one's family might fall victim to persecution from adversaries who are all the more redoubtable because their actions are neither visible nor foreseeable. In this context, words are at least as important as gestures, and words of curse may serve as explanation and justification of the resort to violence.²⁴ The accounts of crisis situations that I gathered consistently show a movement from actions deemed unacceptable to words (insults, warnings or curses) and from words (insults or curses) to actions (processes of asking forgiveness or taking violent action). This continuity, which is

24 See Salomon 2000a.

demonstrated by the examples below, makes it difficult to fully separate physical violence from psychic forms of internalisation of conflict. The following account, given immediately after a tense meeting, points to the potential for shifting from insult and provocation to fighting, as well as to the long history of witchcraft attacks between the families concerned:

Oh yes, X, he was lucky because I don't want to respond to him, because if I respond maybe there would be a fight just now, because the other there, Y, he's already angry ... because X insulted him up there, Y is annoyed, he said: 'Stop, stop speaking ill.' Oh yes, I think the others are going to leave by the window. Luckily there aren't very many of us, because if all the kids were there, my Lord I think there would be a fight up there. Him, he's already annoyed because when we speak, you have to speak well, you have to know how to discuss, we have to develop nowadays. That's why me when they started to speak ill, and the bastard calls on anyone who has the balls ... [understood: comes to fight him], but I didn't answer, you shouldn't speak ill. We speak well nowadays. They want to claim to speak today, but it's because before they eliminated all our elders, because they've always got bad medicine, me I accuse them of having killed my elders. (Extract from interview, September 2002)

Another account makes reference to a curse causing tension between families:

So there, the old man said: '*Gwè yè òi wènéndâ-î*' [literally: 'I'm going to eat your heart'],²⁵ those are serious words, with serious consequences. Me, I always remember grandfather, my mother's dad, he always says, the old people when they talk like that, it's not good, it's not good, then if you manage to sort it out straight away, it's good. If you don't manage to sort it out, then it has endless consequences, if nobody takes steps to resolve it, and to say: 'Well, maybe I was out of order', that he recognises he did wrong and that's that. It's quite simple ... Saying well, I did wrong, I'm sorry, for the Kanaks it's difficult to take that first step, nobody wants to make the first move, and look where we end up, you know. (Extract from interview, August 2004)

One of my interviewees referred to the protective practices that were required, owing to the risk of being subject to a curse:

25 These words can be understood in several, more or less metaphorical, ways, but the anthropophagic connotation is certainly present.

So there are always thoughts, because among us, we say that there is a back side to the word, *ko mërëa, ko mërëa*, that's bad. When you have bad thoughts about somebody, well that has an effect on the person. When you are anger, you curse him, you send him words of cursing, that has an effect. So why do I give the kids [protective medication] to drink? It's because of that, I'm still protecting myself, otherwise the children suffer in school, they can't work properly, they are sick, loads of things happen to them, you know. (Extract from interview, April 1999)

Thus, with social relationships rooted in relations of force, a paradigm of tension arises. This tension is grounded in ways of interpreting misfortune that establish word, insult, curse as significant moments in violent conflicts. Land claims mobilised a historical knowledge that had been relegated to the background during the years of most intense colonial oppression (from the government of Paul Feillet to the end of the *indigénat*), and hence aroused or exposed inter- and intrafamilial conflicts that were powerfully experienced, sometimes with extreme levels of tension, owing to the awareness of the risks (for oneself and one's family) that went alongside the assertion of the self in these conflicts. The local landscape of Houailou was transformed by the departure of one section of European settlers during the 'events' of the 1980s; this together with the collective but disputatious reflection on the forms of social life to be constructed meant that the issues entailed in establishing a new governmentality became embedded in bodies and psyches – as one of my interviewees made very clear:

And there are also all the histories related to the political situation. For example, we claimed rights, and that aroused conflicts, whether it relates to problems over land, whether it relates to problems of clans and all that, it gets tangled up, so it makes a big deal after all. The consequence of the policy we implemented is that we didn't have control over all of that, and that meant there were a lot of conflicts at the level of all the tribes, and that results precisely in misfortunes like that, where ultimately it leads to curses, conflicts, situations, things like that happening. Me, what I can tell you, is that when A died, when B died ... each time I had a lot of visitations.²⁶ What I'm saying is that for us, in our culture, there are realities on the other side. Creating conflict, that unleashes things. Well, they are things we don't necessarily have any control over, but anyway there we noticed it happening. (Extract from interview, June 1995)

26 My interviewee refers to manifestations of his ancestors in his dreams.

Both within and outside the family, including in relations between neighbours and in political relationships, physical violence and intimidation form part of a repertoire of actions in which many Kanaks are socialised, accustomed from childhood. Conflict and violence are significant aspects of social relations, an everyday presence in moral landscapes through accounts of attack, in both public and private and domestic spaces (which form a continuum, in the segmentary understanding of the inclusion of the self in groups of varying size).²⁷ Insults and blows feature, as does the interpretation of misfortune in terms of aggression. Information drawn from legal and public health statistics, especially from the Christine Hamelin and Christine Salomon's study for Inserm²⁸ on the health of New Caledonian women, indicates high or even very high levels of violence in New Caledonia today. This is true of physical violence (assaults, homicides, suicide and road violence), sexual violence (rape, incest) and moral violence (insults, bullying, sexual harassment).²⁹ Where figures are available, they show that these levels are higher than in metropolitan France (twice to nine times as high, depending on the indicator selected), comparable to those in some Pacific states, and lower than in other countries such as South Africa. Nevertheless, this does not imply that physical violence is uncontained or that it constitutes the only register of political action (see Chapter 6). On the contrary, incidences of violence have a converse in moments of contractualisation and pacification of social relations:

Well, at the level of custom as well, these are things that get sorted out among us. You let a little time go by, so the grudges dissipate, anger fades. Then after you take steps to get them to come and ask forgiveness. (Extract from interview, December 1991)

1991: An action halted

To conclude this chapter, I should like to offer a relatively detailed ethnographic description of a scene of 'ordinary' violence, by way of returning to some key points of my analysis.³⁰ I was not present at this scene, which took place before my first field visit to Houailou. As Jean Jamin writes, 'the ethnographer can generally proceed only by means

27 See Naepels 1998, Demmer 2009.

28 Institut national de la santé et la recherche médicale (French National Institute for Health and Medical Research) [trans.].

29 Salomon 1999; Hamelin and Salomon 2004; Hamelin et al. 2007; Salomon and Hamelin 2007.

30 See also Naepels 2004 and 2006a.

of reconstructing and investigating alleged incidences of violence, like a police detective, rather than observing them directly' (Claverie, Jamin and Lenclud 1984, p. 20). This assertion needs to be qualified, however, bearing in mind that some ethnographers have witnessed scenes of violence of which they have subsequently given an account.³¹ In general, much of what is learned through ethnographic enquiry refers to moments or episodes that are not witnessed by the ethnographer, rendering the formula 'participant observation' doubly problematic.

By 'ordinary' violence I mean firstly that this is not a scene of 'extreme' violence. In the 'continuum of violence' described by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, in which the scale runs from 'symbolic violence' to 'extreme violence', via 'everyday violence', 'structural violence' and 'terror', this is an incident of low intensity.³² What is more, we are dealing here with an action that was interrupted, halted. In this sense, it is as much a moment of nonviolence as of violence: aiming at the enemy – and ultimately deciding not to shoot. The term 'ordinary' here also indicates that such incidents are not entirely uncommon; at the same time, it is still an action of the order of an event, therefore unexpected, exceptional, even if it can be understood, and to a certain extent explained, with hindsight. This event or episode relates to crisis, but also reflects certain aspects of Kanak social relations in Houailou.

Here is how the main protagonist in the scene recounted to me how he almost killed a member of his family who had put a padlock on a gate, thus blocking the path the narrator habitually took to reach the river:

When I saw the padlock, I was annoyed, and I hit [it] with my tamioc ... On the customary level, that was going too far, they had done things, they overstepped the mark. At a push, making things difficult for me at the back, I can live with it, but that was just tying my hands, well, so for me it was a challenge, you know. So at that point I said: 'Oh no, I think he's gone too far, I've got to put a stop to it.' At that point it was maybe 10 o'clock, I took my tamioc, I took my gun, I went down, I smashed the padlock with my tamioc, I chucked it in the water, then I grabbed the gate, I chucked the gate, and I said: 'I'm going to wait, because the person will come.' Then there were A and B there. I said to them: 'Don't get involved, this is my problem.' And that's when one of the little cousins passed by, and he saw the gate was open. So when I saw him pass, I said

31 See Bourgois 2002, in Harlem; and Bourgois 2001, in El Salvador.

32 Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004.

to B: 'There's the guy.' He passed by and then he went back maybe to see his father, then when he came back he slowed down, and I looked at him, at that moment he slowed down, then he backed off, he asked me: 'Who opened the gate?' I said: 'I did', I said: 'Why are you asking?' He said: 'No because it was locked, the gate.' I said: 'Yes, but who closed the gate?' He said: 'It was dad.' I said: 'But what right does your father have to put padlocks on my property?' The little guy didn't say anything, I said to him: 'Go and tell your father that if he doesn't like it he should come, but he should bring his coffin at the same time, I've had enough.' At that point he left, and then he went to tell his father, and then they came back. The old man when he came down, he came with the idea of punching me. I was waiting for him, he came down, I let him come, when he got to about that far away, my gun was just behind the pile of sand, he hadn't seen it, I went and got the gun, I got out a bullet, I bit it, I loaded a cartridge in the gun. When he saw that he stopped dead, he was dumbstruck, and I pointed it between his two eyes, I said: 'If you come one step further, they'll be picking your brains up with a spoon.' I told him: 'Stay where you are, now we're going to lay it on the line face to face.' The first thing I was angry about, I told him: 'I've been waiting two years for you, your brother and your children, because I called you to a meeting, because we have family things to talk about, because we have the same name, but you do a lot of things behind my back, and you tell your children a lot of things that aren't true. And two years ago, I went to see you so we could talk and deal with the things between us. You always ran away, you and your children, I've been waiting two years for you. And these are your manners, you do this, you do that.' At one point he perked up a bit, then he was trying to smooth things over ... he said: 'Yes, you're like your big brother', speaking of C, 'You're like your big brother over there, you're both little jerks.' Then I couldn't hold back any longer ... I don't know what I said, there was a cartridge on the ground, I ran and grabbed it ... that was it, I was ready to kill him. And when his son saw that, he started [ran off]. Then I loaded the cartridge, yes I cocked the trigger, when he felt that he turned round, he started as well, so when they ran, I aimed for the old man, but because they were pellets I wanted to shoot him dead ... I was still pointing the gun, and when he arrived at the metalled road, he tripped on the edge of the road, he fell behind the barrier, but the bit behind the barrier was covered with lianas, so you couldn't see behind the barrier. I ran up, then I aimed at the back of his neck, I thought: 'When he gets up, I'll shoot him in the neck, he'll die straight away', I wanted to kill him quickly, you know. But I'm going to kill him, that's what I'm thinking, then I'm going to kill his son, then I'll have taken the car, I'll have killed his wife, then the kids right up to the youngest, I'll have killed everybody. For me killing one or killing 10 or 20, it's all the same, the result will be the same, it was in a rage ... And at

that moment B shouted, but it was a shout from the guts, and that's how I came to my senses, in my rage I got hold of myself again, then I stayed like that with the gun, you know. At that moment he put his head out the other side, when he saw me with the gun, he hid behind the gate again. Afterwards I went back down, I didn't say anything more. Then he yelled, and I was so angry I wanted to hit him, but I pulled myself together a bit, and it was then I spoke, and for a long time he was shocked, traumatised by what had happened. He told a lot of people that I almost killed him, that he almost died. He was shaken, you know. (Extract from interview, July 1995)

A number of the subjective aspects of the use of violence that I have described in this chapter can be recognised in this account. First there is the oscillation between rational premeditation and uncontrollable affect. Secondly, the mingling of words (reproaches, insults, provocations, shouts and curses) and gesture (fight, pursuit, aim and holding back from firing) is also key to both the move to action and its interruption. A witness to the scene (B in the above account) also points this out:

I panicked, I don't know what else to say, I don't know what else to do either, and I just said: 'Uncle, think of your daughter.' And when I said that, he stopped talking, and I saw him lower the barrel of the gun, and then after I came up and I picked up the gun, and I discharged it, and I took the gun down to the banana field, and I left it there. And then after, they yelled at each other, argued without any other consequences, you know. (Extract from interview, January 2004)

This moment of crisis can be accounted for on the basis of a set of elements, cross-contextualising it at increasing levels of generality. The gesture of placing a padlock is thus seen as an extremely serious 'physical attack':

When the old man came to put the padlock on, they showed their cards there, they had to attack me physically, why? Because at the level of using medicines, it wasn't working any more. (Extract from interview, March 1999)

This is effectively an act of appropriation or privatisation of a space that was contested, ambiguous, a space where superimposed layers of rights and concurrent usages existed (one of the protagonists cultivating crops and the other raising cattle behind the gate in question). Given the context of land rights issues in 1991, this conflict between two members of the same family over an unattributed piece of land is an expression of a more general conflict between two groups of actors. These two groups clashed

in the land attribution meetings then being organised by the ADRAF, drawing on different versions of history (pre-colonial and colonial) to justify their claims. But this land ownership conflict also reflects a more fundamental segmentary conflict, with the two protagonists each claiming to have greater legitimacy in the clan than their adversary, basing their arguments on their own appraisal of the value of the other's adoption into their common clan. The personal dimension of the conflict, the reciprocal reference to a multitude of wrongs, the disagreements in the approach taken to the ADRAF or to the organisation of customary ceremonies (of mourning in particular) are thus set in sites of habitual tension in New Caledonia. These contextual factors do not, however, constitute explanations, as Wolfgang Sofsky points out:

The context is not a causal factor and is neither a sufficient nor an essential condition of violent behaviour. At most it encourages or hampers violence. Determining the circumstances, whether they are biographical, social, political or historical, pinpoints significance and sometimes opportunity, but not causes. It may offer plausible stories, but not explanations. The context does not explain a single act of violence. (Sofsky 2003, p. 20)

Contextualisation always runs the risk of portraying an action as functional (or even inevitable, in the most rigid forms of causalist sociology) and, at the very least, of offering a retrospective justification of it. Perhaps it is sufficient to describe.

I have sought in this chapter to focus on the engagement of the subject in relation to violent action, without seeking either to explain it causally, or to justify it. This engagement arose in a context of high levels of mobilisation around political and land rights issues: individual or collective actions during the 'events' (in 1984), a collective trial process, brawls and a death (in 1987) in the course of land rights meetings, an action interrupted before it became murderous (in 1991). Long-lasting tension and fear, as well as explosions of anger, emerge as recurrent modalities of affect brought into play by the engagement of the self in local political life. These affects are overdetermined by accounts of attacks by witchcraft, and fanned by the exchange of verbal challenges and insults. Along the way, my analysis of these selected episodes has connected them to some important political developments in Houaïlou in the period from 1977 (with the municipal elections and the Union Calédonienne's Bourail congress) to 1991, the date of my first period of fieldwork in New Caledonia, when I began this

research, in the shadow of the Matignon-Oudinot agreements. In Houaïlou this phase of emergence of the demand for ‘Kanak socialist independence’ – that is for the development of a postcolonial social organisation – was lived as intensely as the transformations of the 1950s (see Chapter 4), following the end of the *indigénat*. In both the ‘events’ and the land rights campaign, political engagement came through the constitution of collectives mobilised in relations of power. This engagement occasionally involved the use of physical violence, in the form of roadblocks, brawls or gunfire, individually or collectively, spontaneously or with premeditation, and sometimes supported by ‘medicines’ employed in the hope of obtaining the greatest possible assistance from the ancestors. In this chapter I have sought to grasp the forms of subjectivity, of emotions, of affects and of calculations brought into play by this use of violence. Finally, I would add that the conflicts I have referred to in this chapter are recent, not always resolved and still sensitive – and, for this reason, the interview extracts I have cited are often anonymous and relatively uncontextualised.

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