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The Construction and Fiction of Consensus

In Houailou today, since the ‘events’, social relations appear more peaceful, especially in communal spaces: ceremonies, villages, tribes and places where Kanaks live together operate as public space. Having observed how these spaces were imbricated with a colonial order, my ethnographic research reveals how they are being reconfigured at the current time. Through the production of collectives and forms of public consensus, these realities are emerging in relationship with violence and conflict. The point here is thus to grasp not the opposite of violence, or its end, but rather the internal articulation between social relations, contractual relations and relations of power, at the heart of the ambiguity from which this book takes its title: what do the people of Houailou today do to ward off war?

Ceremonial politics

During the time I was conducting research in Houailou, from the early 1990s on, the most frequent occasions for large gatherings (from several dozen to many hundreds of people) were the few marriage celebrations and the more numerous ceremonies marking the beginning and end of mourning that took place there; these formed key moments in local political life. Ceremonies of exchange between groups probably represent the most significant site of public affirmation in local social life: before a gathering of members of various clans, without equivalent in everyday life, numerous speeches are made in which the historical and social

links between the groups present are extolled, justified, remembered, euphemised or quietly ignored. These events are moments of both collective joy and high tension, in which the issues emerge very clearly through a series of actions peculiar to the ceremonial context, enacted by its participants. They are the occasion for affirming, reconfiguring or contesting a public order, with speeches or challenging claims sometimes giving rise to protests or fights. They may also be considered as one of the sites of naturalisation of a social order that is nevertheless riven with tensions and even violent conflict, an order essential to the consolidation of relations of power and influence, through the construction of ordered collectives. They are, therefore, doubly interesting for my purposes: first, because the contractual relations formed there may help to resolve or settle a past disagreement or contribute to the present-day mobilisation of those assembled; second because, conversely, they can on occasion reveal the failure of such projects, manifested in the aggressive language, exchanges of insults or scuffles that can break out there.

In the case of customary ceremonies, however, the reference to 'public' space or 'public' gatherings cannot go unquestioned. In a segmentary system, the duality of public and private has to be understood as a continuum rather than a binary opposition. In the physical terms of use of space, ceremonies always take place on someone's land, in an appropriate place into which one should not enter without invitation (although there are sometimes exceptions). Nevertheless, given the size of the gathering, what goes on there and what is said there may be considered more public than anything that happens at other times in local life.

A sort of theoretical dualism prevails in the anthropological analysis of ceremonial exchanges. Ritual procedures and actions are often considered as one aspect, strategic actions and political contextualisation of ritual as another. Thus Stanley Tambiah notes:

On the one hand, it can be said in general that a public ritual reproduces in its repeated enactments certain seemingly invariant and stereotyped sequences, such as formulas chanted, rules of etiquette followed, and so on. On the other hand, every field anthropologist knows that no one performance of a rite, however rigidly prescribed, is exactly the same as another performance because it is affected by processes peculiar to the oral specialist's mode of recitation, and by certain variable features such as the social characteristics and circumstances of the actors which (aside from purely contingent and unpredicted events) affect such matters as scale of attendance, audience interest, economic outlay, and so on. It is therefore

necessary to bear in mind that festivals, cosmic rituals, and rites of passage, however prescribed they may be, are always linked to status claims and interests of the participants, and therefore are always open to contextual meanings. Variable components make flexible the basic core of most rituals. (Tambiah 1985, pp. 124–25)

This dualism partially overlaps with the opposition between structure and event, rules and strategies, grammar and style. Thus, using the term ‘ritual’ to describe these ceremonies would already be to adopt the dualistic approach, privileging form and repetition over the political context of exchanges and speeches that occur within them. Following Tambiah’s suggestion, then, I believe it is essential to attempt to describe ritual procedures and strategic actions together.

Some ceremonial forms

The ceremonies under discussion here are complex events. Leaving aside the annual ceremonies celebrating the first yams (or first fruits), which today in Houailou are confined – when they do take place – to the family space, the main ceremonies held there are linked to the ‘life cycle’, on the occasion of birth, marriage, mourning and the end of mourning. Older descriptions can be found in some of Maurice Leenhardt’s writings: his article ‘La fête du pilou en Nouvelle-Calédonie (The Pilou Festival in New Caledonia)’¹ (reprinted almost word for word in the eighth chapter of *Notes d’ethnologie néo-calédonienne* (1930), before being substantially reworked in the chapter ‘Le pilou, moment culminant de la société (The Pilou, the High Point of Social Life)’ in *Gens de la Grande Terre* (1937a)), is a linear paraphrase of Bwêêyöüu Ērijjiyi’s series of notebooks on this subject;² there is also an account in the fifth chapter of Paul Montague’s manuscript, on ‘Social Organisation and Customs’.³ My own research indicates that all these ceremonies follow a general model of reciprocal exchange between families gathered into two groups sitting opposite one another: the people of the house (*ka-wêmwâ*) and the guests (*tewö*). This division is made in accordance with a central alliance: for a birth, exchanges are made between the clan of the father of the child (and of the child) and that of the mother (and the maternal uncle);

1 Leenhardt 1922b.

2 Aramiou and Euritéin 2002, pp. 15–102.

3 Translated into French in Leenhardt, Sarasin and Montague 1998, pp. 32–39. I referred to this manuscript in Chapter 2.

at a marriage, the organisers (the bridegroom's clan) and their relatives sit opposite the family of the bride and her relatives; at the formal start and end of mourning, the masters of ceremony (the clan of the deceased for a man, that of the deceased's husband for a woman, and those allied to them) face the family of the maternal uncle of the deceased and his relatives.

When a child is born, a gift known as *mèèpèmaa*⁴ (which may consist of shell money laid out on a square of cloth) is made to the baby's maternal uncle by the father, or by his close family. The uncle must then visit his nephew or niece to speak a blessing. This exchange, though fairly informal, seems particularly important for the eldest child, especially if it is a boy, the birth of whom testifies to the success of the alliance between the two clans.

The celebration of marriage was a site in which the missionaries invested heavily: the first focus of mission policy was matrimonial alliances. Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries issued a series of prohibitions on 'mixed' marriages (between members of the two faiths), polygamy, forced marriage, and marriage promises contracted at birth. The effect was such that it is worth considering to what extent present-day marriage between young adults is a missionary creation. Leenhardt wrote: '[The elders] give [the young initiates] and the woman they will marry holy water to drink, removing the final dangers to their union. They then send the two to a hut (Gomen). They are given a mat to sit on (Houailou), the woman is given a yam to cook afterwards and eat with the young man (Voh, Garope) – parallel details which all represent the *unique ceremony of marriage*' (Leenhardt 1930, pp. 140–41, my emphasis). Two of my interviewees offered similar accounts:

When she is about 3–4, the girl is given to the grandmother, and the boy is given to the grandfather, and each one will do his/her duty of education. The grandmother teaches everything that is the woman's work, even bearing children, or weaving mats, or cooking, all of that, the things that are women's concern. And the grandfather does the same for the boy. That boy doesn't see the woman, he is only [told] 'You are going to marry such-and-such a girl', but it's the grandfather who makes the decision for him. He is obliged to say yes, you know, but he doesn't see the girl. He only sees the girl on the day of the marriage. (Guynemer Karé, extract from interview, July 1995)

4 Literally, end (*mèè*) of coleus (*pèmaa*).

In the time of the ancestors, for example, there was no big wedding like you see there, because marriage ties were already established, you're somebody's wife as soon as you're born, you're destined, you know. All the big show you see today, it came with colonisation because there was a big reorganisation, the rules are no longer the same, today you choose your wife, you choose your husband, and you make do. You make do and not only do you make do, but the social structures are disorganised. Whereas before, you didn't touch a woman like that ... And when a woman left, you go and sit over there and that's the end of it. She came, when you saw her come with the subjects, well she was your wife, you know, you knew she was your wife. It was a different life, different rules. (Narcisse Kaviyöïbanu, extract from interview, January 1999)

In earlier times a similar system of bride price seems to have given rise to exchanges at the time when the marriage was arranged, like those that take place today at the marriage ceremony.⁵ Three significant moments can be distinguished in the proceedings of present-day marriage ceremonies in Houaïlou, each of which may be accompanied by a specific speech:

- the request or reservation (*pè èrè bwè*: ask for the woman; *pè tuwiri bwè*: reserve the woman)
- the sending of the woman by her clan to the clan of the bridegroom (*vinôâ*: send the woman, say goodbye, marriage custom)
- the payment of the bride price to the bride's clan, an amount greater than that paid previously by the maternal relatives (*urhii bwè*: pay for the woman, provide bride price). This act may be supplemented by specific gifts related to any children born before the marriage (*yawîî mèômwâ*: close the door, or apologise for already having taken the woman; *pubwaara* or *kî mârà*: doff one's hat or tug one's forelock, that is legitimise children already born, or thank their uncles for their birth). Elsa Faugère on Maré, Christine Salomon in the Poya region, Dorothea Deterts in Koné, and Hélène Nicolas on Lifou have identified the different elements of matrimonial exchanges in these regions, and how they may be interpreted, particularly in terms of gender relations and the domination of women by men.⁶

My experience in Houaïlou suggests that mourning and the end of mourning are the most complex ceremonies today, engendering the greatest investment of time, work and money; their form is more difficult

5 For informative definitions, see Testart 1996–97; and Testart, Govoroff and Lécivain 2002.

6 Faugère 1998; Salomon 2000b; Deterts 2000; Nicolas 2012.

to describe. It is at the formal end of mourning that the largest gatherings of men and women occur, the most substantial gifts are given, and the rights of the maternal relatives are most significant.

There seems always to have been a distinction between two stages: death and burial (*pè jöwîi*: to close the coffin, *pè pètürü*: to carry the coffin out of the house and take it to the cemetery, *bürü ma mâ kwa*: meal to bid the deceased farewell) and then the end of mourning a year later (*néjaumé*: one year of mourning). Each of these stages is accompanied by small gifts and specific speeches. But the heart of the ceremony of exchange, the gift of shell money (*kurumé*: custom of mourning) and the exchange of more substantial goods (*lèèwi*: wealth, that is to say yams, taros, sacks of rice, cloth, clothing; *mie* shell money and European money),⁷ may take place either five days after the burial (*mèè bwèni*: fifth day), during the first ceremonial phase, or at the end of mourning. Both the availability of foodstuffs and the importance that the organiser wishes to ascribe to the ceremony, or the complexity of the gathering he hopes to bring together on this occasion, seem to be important criteria in this choice. It is also at the *kurumé* that some of the most poetic and beautiful Kanak ceremonial speeches are made (*pèvipö*: speeches of condolence). Finally, a meal is offered to all those present, in the form of piles of foodstuffs (*bwèè*) shared between the different families in attendance. A further speech is made at the distribution of these piles of foodstuffs (*pè pawirè bwèè*: speech for the presentation of piles of foodstuffs). These exchanges are weighted slightly in favour of the maternal relatives (*tèvö*) in terms of the circulation of money, and more so in relation to the other goods. The dominant ideological model of restricted exchange (exchange of sisters or bilateral cross-cousin marriage) suggests that obligations are matched and, in the medium term, exchanges between clans balance out. A simple genealogical review of alliances refutes this assertion and, in fact, imbalances give rise to recriminations among the groups who feel they have been wronged.⁸

Even where the exchange is formally reciprocal, and the organisers' 'gift' is met with a 'counter-gift' from the maternal relatives, there is a certain asymmetry in shell money (the first black – most prestigious – shell money is not returned) and in other goods (a certain proportion, which I did not quantify, is not returned) as well as in time and labour, weighted in favour of the *tèvö*. On the death of the last surviving sibling

7 See Faugère 2000.

8 See Leblic 2000.

in a family, the maternal relatives have a substantial right of appropriation or even destruction (*jèdo*) of the goods owned by members of the 'house' side, since the ceremony then closes the debt occasioned by the alliance between the parents of the deceased:

What does *jèdo* mean? It means that people come and then they take everything they want in your house. They do it because they can no longer eat at your house, since relations are no longer renewed. So there is that *bwéé*, and that *bwéé* [pile of foodstuffs] so that's the last meal you owe them, after that there's no more. (Narcisse Kaviyöbanu, extract from interview, April 1999)

Inclusion/exclusion

Beyond the simple formal description of the ceremony, and the modalities of reciprocity it brings into play and thus its role as a process of contract agreement between those assembled, some aspects of the ceremonies make them more than just a formal mechanism for exchange repeated identically from ceremony to ceremony. They become a singular political event, in which aspects of the relations of influence and power between the groups involved are at play on each occasion. I should like to outline some elements of this political play, on the basis of a number of examples. It appears that, to begin with, a ceremony is the site of an organisational dualism: two groups face one another to exchange goods, words and sometimes people. This dualism results from the production of the groups involved, a social labour that unfolds in various ways.

Structural exclusions

The central actors in the various stages of the ceremony demonstrate by default that the many individuals present at the public display of exchanges in an open ceremonial space are highly differentiated as actors. The young women are almost always kept at a distance (usually cooking); the young men take on the tasks of handling goods (putting the piles of foodstuffs in place, transporting yams); and, while older married women are sometimes present in the ceremonial arena (at a number of stages in marriage and at mourning), most of those present are men, and they alone have charge of the most prestigious acts of unrolling shell money and making speeches. It is worth remembering, in this context, what Pierre Bourdieu wrote: 'the *social* function of ritual ... [is to institute] a lasting difference between those to whom the rite pertains and those to whom it does not pertain ... Thus sexually differentiated rites consecrate the

differences between the sexes: they constitute a simple difference of fact as a legitimate distinction, as an institution.’ (Bourdieu 1991 (1982), pp. 117–18, emphasis in original). In the New Caledonian context, Christine Salomon has shown that the exclusion of women often leads to them being present at ceremonies at a distance:

Their attitude in the ceremony ranges from active though silent participation to more or less resigned passivity (waiting in their place until the ceremony ends, or chatting until the men tell them to be quiet), right up to discreet disparagement and acrimonious remarks on the content and above all the length of the speeches (when the meal they have prepared is long since ready). (Salomon 2000b, p. 331)

Invitations and the destination of custom

Ceremonial action produces collectives, through a series of operations the most basic of which is the distribution of the invitations that, on the occasion of a death or a marriage, will form the two groups who face one another to circulate goods, words and sometimes persons from one side to the other during the ceremony. If this is a public event, how is that public constituted? It is the organiser of the ceremony, in other words the head of the family of the agnatic group of the bridegroom or of the deceased, or of the husband of a deceased woman, who takes responsibility for communicating the news or appointing messengers to inform those concerned by the ceremony. The choice of which heads of family he will notify and which words he will use offers the possibility of bypassing some, of drawing support from marginalised groups – in short of reinforcing or overlooking the social role of any given person – and is thus politically tactical. The construction of a collective uses the grammar of social relations: one invites the members of the houses of one’s lineage, one’s clan, of allied clans, sometimes one’s political or religious associates, thus accentuating the value of these relations. In 1999, I asked Narcisse Kaviyöibanu what he was planning to say at the forthcoming marriage of a young man from a family with whom his clan then had close relations:

The day I arrive with my ceremonial gifts ... I shall have to recall the deep ties that bind us. And when I recall those ties, that’s the opportunity for me to say things that are not said every day. First I will thank them for inviting me to come to be at their side, that’s the first thing. The second important thing I will say is why their father [the organiser of the ceremony] has asked me to come. And that’s when I’ll tell them: ‘The words I’m going to say to you are words that belong to you and to me, words that must stay in our houses, none must leak away because that is what binds us.

In your clan there are lineages bearing the names Kamwinô, Nébürüwaa, Wéavèra. Those names are not just names in the air, they are words that mean we are bound today. What does Kamwinô mean? In the time of the elders I called on you, you the warrior clan, because I was in difficulty and to translate that difficulty, you bear the name Kamwinô that means where the word of the Mèyikwéö [the maximal clan to which Kaviyöibanu, the speaker's clan, belongs] finds relief [literally, 'where the word breathes']. The house of Nébürüwaa [literally, 'messages of war'], why? Because all the warriors come with their war medicines in relation to the house of Nébürüwaa, which is your house. The house of Wéavèra [literally, 'one word'], what does that mean? One single word, that's your house, when you say "It's OK", it's OK. If you say "no", it's no. That is how we are bound together by words. The elders have passed on, but the word they left, it's that in difficult situations, in difficult moments, I will never be against you. I shall always be by your side.' (Narcisse Kaviyöibanu, extract from interview, April 1999)

This speech mobilises historical knowledge both to extol the warrior role of the clan being honoured (citing the name Nébürüwaa, 'messages of war') and still more to emphasise the importance of the relationship that binds it to the clan of the speaker, both in protection in war (glossing the name Kamwinô, 'where the word breathes') and in political decision-making (on the basis of the name Wéavèra, 'one word').

As well as changing over time (now incorporating political or religious associates), this grammar is not unambiguous: it always permits more or less significant exclusions. The choice of people to be invited and of words to be uttered allows the organiser to bypass some potential guests or to draw support from marginalised groups. In consequence, invitations may arouse resentment and lead to frequent refusals to come, or even public protests on the day of the ceremony.

I yelled at him here, every time when something happens at his house, well, he doesn't let us know. He doesn't let us know, he goes off with his wife and they go into the customs, and then we're not there. Or else they go off before with the family down there, and then we go, and then that creates [a] bad [impression], you know. (Extract from interview, March 1999)

One of the key points of the invitation is the decision as to the destination of the principal money, with a number of possibilities deemed legitimate: maternal relatives (the mother's clan), *pûûpèmöö* (clans of the grandparents, particularly the maternal grandmother), *bééniaa* (clan of the son of the

mother's sister) or even the clan of the brother in the case of a ceremony for a woman who has died. Similarly at marriages, it is not always the man's clan that provides the principal money of the bride price,⁹ nor the woman's clan that receives it, depending on the prior relations between the clans involved. Thus in one mourning ceremony I attended, one of the maternal relatives protested vehemently against the way the invitations had been made and the attribution of the custom to a clan other than his, shouting out his grievances in front of everyone present. In another case, in front of the shell money laid out in the ceremonial space, two members of two different lineages in the same clan came to blows to establish who should receive the first money offered.

In his turn, the person selected chooses whether or not to disseminate the information to the *tëvö*. I witnessed conflicts that manifested these difficulties around invitations, in other words the inclusion or exclusion of a given person in a particular group. For example, on the day of preparation for the mourning of the grandmother of one of my interviewees, his uncle (with whom he was in conflict) tried to join the organiser's group of agnates (*ka-wëmwâ*: the people of the house). The agnates already present refused this uncle's help, however, seeing him as a maternal relative. Embarrassed by this refusal, the uncle did not return on the day of the ceremony. As one of my interviewees put it:

Often there are protests like that because you've forgotten such-and-such a person. After the event, I don't know, a drunk or something like that, that's when you get criticised, and sometimes they shout at you in public, when you come to talk, they reproach you: 'Oh yes, you come today, but yesterday the day before? Did you think of me when that happened?' (Extract from interview, January 1999)

Finally, it is quite common for individuals to be invited to the ceremony by the two groups who sit on either side, and are thus free to emphasise one or other of the bonds concerned. The way in which members of a given family may be split between the two groups varies, and is primarily determined by the local social and political context. For example, at the marriage of the son of the chief of a village in the Houailou valley, the bride's maternal uncle, who was a member of the same village, invited all

9 As I showed in the case of Bwëda Nèwau (see Chapter 2).

the village's inhabitants, as had the chief. With one exception, they chose to sit on the maternal relatives' side as a way of contesting the legitimacy of the chief, thus arousing his anger.

Rather than asking what is the collective subject of the collective action constituted by the ceremony (which is thus reified by being described as a 'society' or 'the whole'), the question can be turned round to ask how ceremonial action produces collectives. As can be seen here, it is through a series of operations, the most basic of which is the choice of participants, the choice to include or exclude. But while this group is constructed from highly valued categories (one invites the members of one's lineage, one's clan, of allied clans, sometimes political or religious associates), this does not mean it is perceived in terms of collective identity. The staging of 'the whole' and the production of 'consensus' in ceremonies thus always rests on more or less important conscious exclusions or avoidances, and therefore on the prior construction of a collective (actor).

The choice of money

At the ceremony, the internal work in each group to decide who is going to offer his shell money to the exchange partners who are to be honoured is another site of potential political affirmation for social actors: 'Your aim has to be true, you can't be off target, if you're off target the people on the other side aren't happy' (Guynemer Karé, extract from interview, August 1993). The organisers have to agree among themselves how many pieces of money they will offer to their guests (one piece which is not reciprocated, plus one piece per clan or group of clans present on the opposite side), and decide who will offer them. This offering is the focus of intense preparatory political work. For example sometimes, contrary to prevailing practice, a piece of money is attributed to an absent clan so that someone who claims to be of that clan can take it. On the day, some hours are devoted before the guests arrive to a discussion among mature male representatives of their clan or lineage, to choose together which families will have the dignity of publicly demonstrating their wealth and importance by offering a piece of money to those invited groups they wish to honour. At this point all of the families, gathered around the master of ceremonies, try to persuade him to accept theirs because of this or that relationship that binds them with the guests. This discussion is an opportunity to demonstrate one's rhetorical prowess and the breadth of one's historical and social knowledge, in what one of my interviewees called a 'diplomatic brawl':

Everyone tries to get a position, there's a whole art to it, it's at that point that, in the house, you learn things, or you reassert things you all know, you know, your rank, or your rights, or stuff like that. What's dangerous is that when you reassert that, now there are people who make use of it to settle scores. (Narcisse Kaviyöibanu, extract from interview, September 1995)

I was not able to record these discussions when I witnessed them, and I do not know enough about the nature of the arguments, but be that as it may, 'the clans are not happy when you take out their money [when it is excluded from the exchange], because they came to support us' (Guynemer Karé, extract from interview, August 1993).

Equality/hierarchy: An order and its production

The order of money and foodstuffs

While reciprocity (between the two assembled groups) and proportionality (between goods brought and goods received) are essential components in the exchange,¹⁰ thus demonstrating that material wealth is not the principal factor in prestige, some moments of the ceremony also contribute to the definition, or the production, of an order.

Firstly, the offering of money generates a classification, an ordering of the clans in attendance: the first piece of money, generally presented to the bride's clan at a marriage, and at mourning to the clan of the deceased's mother, is followed by a series of other money offerings to the other clans present on the side of the maternal relatives, the equivalent being strictly returned in a counter-gift. The way these pieces of money are laid out, which is based on the proximity of the clans present to the maternal clan, can be seen as an action defining a hierarchical order: 'There's a whole customary hierarchy that's referred to every time there's a death or a customary act: when you place the money you can't put the one who's lower before the other, you have to place people *in order*' (Narcisse Kaviyöibanu, extract from interview, January 1999, my emphasis). Guynemer Karé gives an example of this practice:

When the dead person's mother is from one of these clans, if you do it *in order*, here they are from Wéma Gwâê, and their money is classed as first. And then, among the Wéma, it's like you recite *in order*, the Wéma Gwâê, the Wéma Nirikani, the Wéma Nèèè. They're *greater* than the other two,

10 See Bensa 2006.

but *in order*, you put them there. So the second money is Wéma Nirikani, and the third is Wéma Nèèè. The fourth money is Mèèèvâ, because Mèèèvâ is *greater* than Bwawé and Gowé. And then fifth money [Bwawé], sixth money [Gowé], and that's it. (Guynemer Karé, extract from interview, February 1999, my emphasis)

Similarly, the arrangement of the piles of foodstuffs that are distributed at the end of a mourning or marriage ceremony testifies to an order: 'Everyone comes, but *in order*, you see?' (Guynemer Karé, extract from interview, February 1999, my emphasis).

While my interviewees refer to a hierarchical order that seems true or self-evident to them, the perspective can again be reversed by stating that it is precisely this work of placing in order that contributes, on the ceremonial stage, to influencing established hierarchies, for example by altering the relative classification of a series of lineages. Finally, one variant of these classifying and ordering operations consists of deploying, more or less extensively, the layered segmentary levels of social organisation, bringing together or splitting the agnatic groups present. Thus a piece of money or a pile of foodstuffs may be offered to one lineage, to all the lineages of a clan, but also to more complex subgroups ('In the division, I separate [lineages] L1 and L2 [on one side] from them [L3], to one side'), or to a clan or even a group of clans. Uniting and dividing are thus potential new actions available to the master of ceremonies, allowing him to bring out (or not) the specificity of any given group.

Names in speeches

During the course of the ceremony itself, exchanges of goods are accompanied by speeches. Some of these, which only a few specialists know by heart, correspond to a very specific stage of the given ceremony, and can therefore be reproduced almost identically at different ceremonies. Two other types of speeches may be given, more specifically adapted to the particular local and social context of the ceremonial event. Firstly, relatively free speeches of thanks and criticism are delivered; almost all heads of family can improvise these. In these free, contingent speeches, the rhetorical subtlety of the best orators allows them to demonstrate great skill in insinuation, implying or making listeners believe that they know more than they are saying, and thus suggesting that their private social knowledge is greater than it might seem and that they are not fooled

by public politeness, nor satisfied with the existing political situation. These speeches may be more or less public (in the house or in the open, unenclosed exterior space of the ceremonial arena).

There is also another form of speech, the highly formalised genealogical declamation (*mêrê vivaa*), which cites, in the form of a list of proper names, the clans gathered for the ceremony. In my view this form is important as a manifestation of an authorised version of history and the current relations between clans that should derive from it. *Mêrê vivaa* are lists of proper names of two types, either of ancestors or of residential alleys that are precisely and specifically attached to certain clans, or even to certain lineages. Formally, these lists are presented as discursive blocks corresponding to local social groupings (*mwâciri*: hamlets or sections of larger villages), broken up into large agnatic units, where appropriate accompanied by their servants, within which the different lineages proceed in order. Depending on the situation, an indication of the connection between names of ancestors and alleys, and names of clans, may or may not be given, sometimes in rather vague form. Here is an example:

I shall honour and call attention to the descendants of Miimö and Pawirigu and Kakè and Yakörüi and Gÿyi and Kaa'bwèèwè [six names of ancestors] in Nékoè [name of residential alley]

and Udo and Mèèvara [two names of ancestors] in Nèwari [name of residential alley]

and Béyixémi and Javèru [two names of ancestors] in Wâkià [name of residential alley]

and Leregu and Apwarö and Akuii [three names of ancestors] in Wèèbénéxö [name of residential alley]

and Payù [name of ancestor] in Némi [name of residential alley]

Lee and Bèidowa and Jiirua and Kayarhëë [four names of ancestors] in Néii [name of residential alley]

who make up the Bwêûa Gwâê downstream, and here the Bwêêwua Mii and the Bwêrê and upstream the Néii [four names of clans]. (Bwêêyöuu Ęrijjiyi in Aramiou and Euritéin 2002, p. 33, English from author's translation into French)

If speeches can be said to manifest a social order, in my view it is in the *vivaa* that this function is most clearly seen: these lists of names declaimed are far from transparent to their audience, requiring a knowledge that

is unequally distributed in order to interpret them. The location of the residential alleys cited is not always known, nor the history of some of the ancestors named. Even today, however, heads of family know all or some of the names corresponding to their own lineage, and sometimes also to other families, which is enough to identify their own place in the speech. Two things are then particularly important: who is cited (or not) in relation to a given space of residence, and in what order. Names of ancestors or of prestigious or sordid alleys may be forgotten or taken over (by one agnatic group rather than another), and with them the part of local history pertaining to them (and the local status implied therein).¹¹ And the order of naming of clans in a given space of residence refers to their local status, in a complex way: thus the first clan cited may, depending on the situation, be the founding ancestor of the country or the chief. Given that the declamation is public, and that there are several versions of *mêrê vivaa* relating to the same spaces of co-residence, it acquires a degree of official stature, which changes it into a potential site of humiliation or homage. These lists would be recomposed by communal decision during agnatic integration processes (or at the welcome or adoption of clans from outside) if the adoption gave rise to a local reorganisation or the change in social relations led to modification of the speeches.¹² Delivery of them is, therefore, problematic, as indicated by the fact that their recitation can arouse great discontent among some listeners about the way their clan is cited. Neither a simple manifestation of a pre-existing relation of power nor the pure construction of a new order on the blank slate of free speech, speaking in a ceremonial context emerges as a risky act, in which each person has little room to manoeuvre.

That's why now there is difficulty, fights and all that, because the guys who *vaa* [who deliver the *vivaa*] take the one who is at the top and put him at the bottom, and they take the one who is on the bottom. 'Wi-rè! [Hey you!] Did you just say my name above the other?' Then the other one is anger. (Gilbert Kaparâ, extract from group interview with the Lèwèò council of elders, June 2006)

It is in the ceremonial space that the dominant version of history, and the relations between the groups making up the local group, are constructed or ratified today. Every ceremony thus has a retrospective gaze on social

11 See Harrison 1990.

12 There seem to have been major revisions of speeches of genealogical declamation in the early 20th century, at the time of the displacements following the demarcation of reserves described in chapters 2 and 3.

relations, which is necessary both to bring together enough participants around oneself and thus put on a good appearance, and to give meaning to the ritual event itself. Public utterance testifies to a moment, by its very nature unstable, in a local organisation that is legitimised by a historical discourse, but which can be altered by a range of political events: changes in place of residence, fights, deaths or speeches made in public. The violent forms of public confession at the time of the visit of the seers to Houaïlou represented an alternative way of visibly inscribing a relation of political power (described in Chapter 4). The recitation of *vivaa* can, therefore, be an opportunity for lateral historical reminders, or for introducing new interpretations of particular historical events. The proper names of residential alleys and of ancestors cited in these speeches all refer to episodes in history or events that are considered important in the history of the clans, and therefore have a political significance:

A name is not innocent, it always contains a history ... so the composition of *mèrè vivaa* is a whole pile of concepts, well of words that contain histories. Well, people tend to say: 'Yes, that name, it's that ancestor.' But that's too easy, they don't know the content. Yes it is a name, but it's a name that corresponds to a history, it's the name of an ancestor, the name was given to an ancestor so that he can carry the history, but you have to know, you have to peel back, what does that name mean? That's where you find the history of the marches [the displacements of clans] ... The genealogical speeches, like the name of houses, the name of alleys, all that, it's history. It's written, the history. And when you analyse it there, when for example I take the history of Gwâmee [from *gwâ*, head and *mee*, split, cracked, the name of an ancestor of the Mèyikwéö clan mentioned in Chapter 2], eh, it's a history. When I tell the history of Gwâmee, there you go, Gwâmee was this this this and this. You say the name Gwâmee, it's an envelope, I would say it's a concept, but what's behind it is a whole history, it's a whole page, two pages of history. That was the old people's thing, the genealogical speech, it's simply that. People today give speeches, speeches are a hierarchy, a treasure. It's a treasure that we've lost. That's why the people who gave the genealogical speeches, they were protected by medicines, because you can wound people too. When the person concerned, for example, whose pride is wounded, they know it's their history. Maybe he was defeated in a war, well, the word then there, when you analyse the word, you'll say it's him, but him when they make the speech, him in his heart, even if there were agreements between the old people, he's still wounded, because when the history is recounted, his history will be told, eh, that his ancestor was defeated. That's an example. (Narcisse Kaviyöbanu, extract from interview, February 1999)

The risk that speakers take is not so much that they will be attacked verbally or physically during the ceremony – although that possibility exists – as that they expose themselves and their family to accidents or illnesses that could be caused by errors on their part or by witchcraft attacks from third parties.¹³ In the view of local commentators, sickness or death are then seen as retrospective proof that a given speech was inopportune or incomplete. Participants in the public acts of communal life are aware of this death risk; silence (or non-participation in ceremonies) thus comes to seem the simplest way of avoiding it.

For example if there is a custom that comes back to you and then him [the giver] he gets on well with me, then he'll say something like: 'No, we're not going to give him the custom, we're going to give it to this other one', you see, they're not going to give to you, they're going to give to me because you've fallen out ... But that can cause problems for them, he can fall ill with that, but nobody will look after him. You'll take him to the doctor, he won't get better; you'll take him to another healer, he won't treat him. He has to come back here, and then ask forgiveness, he has to recognise he did wrong like this: 'I am sick because I did that, I turned away something that belongs to you, I gave to another.' (Philippe Kavièrènevâ, extract from interview, March 1999)

However, there are encompassing rhetorical forms allowing the speaker to avoid such faux pas; these can be thought of as the reverse side of the political game played by those who deliver speeches at ceremonies:

So that's a way of saying that if anybody is forgotten, there are taros and yams there, that you will eat, you know. There are also the *lèèwi awa ma kwèèbe* [literally, the ceremonial goods made of beaten bark and banyan root] that are there ... So that's the way of saying in case you have to correct yourself, you know. You always say it in case you haven't named someone, because if you don't say it, well you might get swallowed by the custom, I mean the person over there, who hasn't been mentioned, but they'll have a heavy heart, and when they go home it's heavy, so automatically in return, you'll catch a misfortune; but if you say that, you close the door [to misfortune]. (Narcisse Kaviyöibanu, extract from interview, April 1999)

The tendency of some of my Kanak interviewees to gloss names openly (particularly the proper names contained in the *vivaa*) should not obscure the silent corollary: a no less significant number of the individuals I met

13 See Chapter 4, and Salomon 2000a.

asserted their lack of understanding of these speeches, and of their poetic, metaphorical and social impact. It is empirically impossible to confirm such 'ignorance', and we have to settle for noting the repeated assertion by a number of people that the understanding and functionality of these speeches are diminishing, without drawing conclusions one way or the other.

When you work on that ... that's when you'll realise people's limits. That many of the elders, for example, actually they don't know a lot ... Today, in the Kanak population, I'm talking about Houaïlou, there are maybe, I don't know if there are even 5 per cent who understand Kanak society that way, the way the old people understood it, saw it, you know, eh. And the proof is that today they're incapable of making a speech. We're incapable today of making those speeches, the young people ... who haven't been brought up with that, that vision of Kanak society ... Before, everybody could speak, and that's where you'll see the weak point in the Kanak people. We hide behind custom, we hide behind a lot of things, but actually inside, it's empty. It's a great void. (Extract from interview, February 1999)

Conversely, confidence in intrafamilial transmission of knowledge gives some courage in their truth:

My strength is my faith in what the old man told me. When you have truth with you, you have nothing to fear, even if you're all alone. With time, you'll get them ... The true version is gaining the upper hand. (Extract from interview, March 1999)

Notwithstanding these reservations, one sign of the continuing political importance of ceremonies is the fact that some older men decide themselves to organise, in their lifetime, exchanges that should take place after their death, in order to honour their maternal uncles and ensure as far as possible that the ceremony and its effects run smoothly. This ceremony of anticipated mourning, known as *pèuwè*, demonstrates that, for the actors themselves, the stakes in ceremonies are first and foremost political.

In the Houaïlou region, Kanak ceremonial speeches consist of a set of specific genres of formalised speeches, and free speeches that correspond to the various moments of rituals performed on the occasion of birth, marriage, death and the end of mourning. While their poetic dimension makes reference to a metaphorical field peculiar to this region (which it would be useful to compare with other parts of New Caledonia and even of Oceania), their inclusion in the proceedings of the ceremonial

event and their articulation with other ritual practices make them one tool among others in the local political play (through operations of equalisation and hierarchisation, inclusion and exclusion, uniting and dividing). The ceremonial gathering thus represents a particularly important space of political manoeuvring, given its relatively public nature. The temporal structure of the ceremony means that these political choices mobilise a social knowledge referring to a more or less distant past. The mobilisation of afferent history thus allows those involved to recall the origin of the relations between the clans principally concerned in the ceremony. The wealth of history that can be drawn on depends on the knowledge of the organiser and his relatives, but also on the current situation and the present state of relations between the clans involved.

Hence a ceremony is made up not only of the exchanges and discourses that take place onstage (in the open-air space where goods and words are exchanged) but also of the less formal moments, at times accompanied by consumption of large amounts of alcohol, that are the occasion of jokes, ironic comments, provocations, and sometimes fights. These moments arise as people become more drunk, and represent the chaotic counterpoint of the tightly controlled speeches that precede them. In some cases, fights resolve tensions that date from before the ceremony, or arise within it. For example, in early 2008, in a tribe in the Houailou valley, a hundred or so participants in a mourning ceremony decided to go and have it out with one of their neighbours with whom the organisers of the ceremony had, for various reasons, been in conflict for several years. They ended up destroying windows, doors and household equipment in his house, as well as his car, before beating up both him and the two people who had come from neighbouring houses to intervene. Thus the production of ceremonial agreement between groups results from multiple operations that bring into play political subjects bearing their own plans and emotions. The reverse side of this celebratory moment of consensus and apparent agreement of contract is the maintenance of tensions due to ongoing conflicts, which sometimes lead to physical violence, and frequently to a shared anxiety about the risk of witchcraft attacks at public gatherings.

Four spaces of mobilisation following the Nouméa Accord

I turn now to consider contemporary forms of political mobilisation in the Houaïlou region, keeping in mind the connection between the production of consensus and the persistence of violence in the ceremonial arena. I base my consideration on case studies of a party political campaign in 1999, a village conflict that has continued since 2002, the public management of this conflict and, finally, the work of collectors of oral heritage that has also been under way in Houaïlou since 2002.

Departure from reserves and abandonment of farming

[Modern] processes of denucleation in Ilahita are operating through a diversity of practical situations which are, in aggregate, pulling the village apart. Internal land disputes, political defections, business rivalries and even sectarian discords are undermining ward solidarity, but only in the absence of positive reasons for this solidarity and of traditional means for ensuring it. The modern dismantling of Ilahita village is both cause and effect of, both indicates and accelerates, the decay of Ilahita's ideological nuclei. (Tuzin 1988, p. 95)

Since it was launched in 1978, and particularly since it was sped up following the Matignon-Oudinot agreements in 1988, land reform has contributed significantly to the transformation of rural worlds in New Caledonia. In particular, the reserves are no longer the sole frame of reference for Kanak rural life on the east coast of Grande Terre. Between 1978 and 2005, 6,582 hectares were assigned to Houaïlou. Of this, 699 hectares was allocated to enlarge the reserve, 1,493 hectares as clan properties, and 4,390 hectares in the form of 'local specific rights groupings'.¹⁴ Hence over 30 per cent of the municipality's customary lands are now located outside of the reserve (without taking individual private properties into account). The effects of Kanak recuperation of the lands expropriated in the 19th century are materially evident here, in a lower density of houses and gardens, and a tendency for people to move away from the reserve lands. This geographical evolution, combined with (and sometimes intensifying) internal frictions in the spaces of collective habitation of the tribes, means that the forms of social organisation centred on the reserve that were established in the

14 According to Sourisseau 2006, p. 24.

late 19th century (the small tribal chiefdom and the district-wide high chiefdom) are no longer fit for purpose. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that the chiefdom continues to structure all the various aspects of village social life. In fact, successions to the status of tribal chief have become highly problematic in Houaïlou, and there has been no high chief in any of the municipality's six districts for several years. Moreover, this same period has seen a huge shift in tribal village economies, as Marcel Djama has shown for Grande Terre as a whole:

There seems thus a clear trend towards reduction of the area under food cultivation ... But this decrease has not been made up for by any marked increase in agricultural productivity ...

The main constraint on all farmers in New Caledonia is that of access to a limited and highly concentrated internal market ...

Although still focused largely on subsistence of individual domestic units, [agricultural production] does not supply the majority of their food, as it did in the pre-European period. Nor does it constitute a major source of income as it did during the era of colonial development of the tribes. (Djama 1999, pp. 9, 15 and 23)

The general drop in agricultural activity, the fall in the number of farms and the increasing age of farmers noted in the most recent agricultural censuses (1991 and 2002) are also evident in the Houaïlou region. The first analysis produced by the ADRAF (Agence pour le développement rural et l'aménagement foncier (Agency for Rural Development and Land Use)) in 2006, for the purposes of creating a Grouped Land Planning Operation (OGAF)¹⁵ in Houaïlou, reveals the same tendencies, with a very sharp fall in horticultural food production and in small commercial production (coffee cultivation has collapsed, and cattle farming is declining markedly, in Houaïlou). Fruit orchards live on year in year out, and 'there is in the municipality a growing interest among producers in production of lychees, which is less labour-intensive than coffee farming, offers greater added value in sale price terms, and has technical facilities available nearby' (ADRAF 2006, p. 17). This production is supported by an annual lychee festival held in Houaïlou since 1997. These developments are partly linked to the more numerous opportunities for paid employment amid the economic growth that followed the political settlements of the

15 Opération groupée d'aménagement foncier, a local planning structure set up under the state-run territorial development program [trans.].

Matignon-Oudinot and Nouméa accords. Within Houaïlou, however, income from paid employment is limited to statutory public employment (for the municipality, the province, schools), subsidised contracts (for example, young development interns), and a few dozen jobs directly or indirectly related to the mines that are worked nearby. The alternative is temporary or long-term migration to Nouméa or to the (few) other employment hubs in the North Province (Houaïlou residents being fairly sceptical about their chances of getting jobs in the mining development region of Voh-Koné-Pouembout).¹⁶ Overall this picture testifies to the rapid transformation of a context that is no longer that of an economy of colonisation, which more or less persisted until the events of the 1980s. Djama has shown that these developments should be seen as the result of local adaptation to the very marked structural imbalances in the agricultural market in New Caledonia as a whole, which are such that for Kanak producers:

the economic reproduction of average domestic units is based neither on paid employment nor on agriculture, but on a *combination* of paid employment and production and harvesting activity. At the level of the individual this combination needs to be understood in the context of a professional life cycle: this is not really an organised portfolio career, but rather an alternation between cycles of activity on a pattern that follows the fluctuations of the job market. At household level, the mobilisation of resources needs to be understood in terms of both economic diversification and division of labour. (Djama 1999, p. 22)

The preparatory study for the Houaïlou OGAF confirms this analysis: 'In general, while agriculture predominates in the economic life of the population, it is no longer experienced as real work capable of generating regular income. It competes with mining work and paid employment' (ADRAF 2006, p. 16).

In both their conversation and their practices, residents of Houaïlou seek to imagine new ways of living together, in the face of a shift in the political and economic framework of their lives at least as significant as that experienced at the end of the *indigénat*. They are grappling with the need to develop the forms and terms of this reorganisation of a local social life where village solidarity seems to be in decline, sometimes with other solidarities (of clan, for example, or political affiliation) taking over. In my view, all the recent forms of mobilisation express, either explicitly or

16 Sourisseau et al. 2006, p. 167.

pragmatically, a point of view as to the need for local reorganisation, and often, though not always, stress the importance of customary rules and values, while still reflecting on the forms and uses of legitimate violence. The following examples of these mobilisations, emerging from widely varying registers of action and discourse, highlight ‘politics’, ‘clan’, ‘custom’ or ‘culture’. While far from exhaustive, I present four ways of emerging from village life as it was articulated in the colonial and neocolonial forms of the chiefdom, the council of elders and the missionary associations (see chapters 3 and 4). Thus, in some of these registers, the levels of municipality, province and *ajië-arhö* customary area prove more relevant than the ‘tribe’ to the understanding of contemporary forms of collective living. All of these levels contribute to shaping and organising the new situation of residential dispersal noted above, and thus compete with one another to determine a new postcolonial governmentality. I shall seek in particular to grasp the contemporary shifts in the modalities of individuals’ engagement and the use of physical violence in the conflicts they encounter, in order thus to understand the way my interlocutors devise ways of increasing their autonomy or their emancipation.

1998–2002: A new political party

At the time of my field research in Houaïlou in 1999, discussions were marked by the recent signing of the Nouméa Accord, in May 1998. Under this agreement, New Caledonia entered a new dynamic, for a transitional period of 15 to 20 years, extending the Matignon-Oudinot agreements of 1988. These had brought Kanaks into the process of determining the institutional future of the territory, following the violent ‘events’ of 1984–88. Thanks to a wide-ranging transfer of responsibilities and the establishment of new institutions (local government, the New Caledonia Assembly, the Customary Senate, provinces with increased powers), New Caledonia currently has a status without equivalent in France. The preamble to the Nouméa Accord, a remarkable text in the context of French colonial history, is effectively a call for decolonisation:

The time has come to recognise the dark side of the colonial period, even if it was not devoid of light. The impact of colonisation had a lasting traumatic effect on the first people. Clans lost their names when they lost their land. Extensive colonisation of land led to considerable displacement of the population, in which Kanak clans saw their means of subsistence reduced and their places of memory lost. This process of dispossession led to a loss of reference points for identity. Kanak social organisation,

even if its principles were recognised, was brought into disarray by this process. Population movements broke down its structure, ignorance or power plays too often led to the denial of legitimate authorities and the installation of authorities with no customary legitimacy, reinforcing the traumatic loss of identity. At the same time, the Kanak artistic heritage was ignored or looted. To this denial of the fundamental elements of Kanak identity were added restrictions on public freedoms and a lack of political rights, despite the fact that the Kanaks had paid a heavy toll in the defence of France, particularly during the First World War. Kanaks were relegated to the geographical, economic and political margins of their own country, a process which, among a proud people not without warrior traditions, could only provoke rebellions that were met with violent repression, aggravating resentment and misunderstanding. Colonisation damaged the dignity of the Kanak people and deprived them of their identity. Men and women lost their lives or their reason for living in this confrontation. The result was enormous suffering. These difficult times need to be remembered, the mistakes acknowledged, and their confiscated identity restored to the Kanak people. For them this equates to a recognition of their sovereignty, prior to the foundation of a new sovereignty shared in a common destiny. Decolonisation is the way to rebuild a lasting social bond between the communities living in New Caledonia today. (*Accord sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie signé à Nouméa le 5 mai 1998*, p. 8039)

This agreement led to a reconfiguration of the political space in New Caledonia. One noticeable effect in the Houailou region was a split in one of the independence parties, the Parti de libération kanake (Palika), some of whose members came together with activists from other movements to set up a new party, the Fédération des comités de coordination indépendantistes (FCCI, Federation of Pro-Independence Co-operating Committees). This party, which formed a territory-wide alliance with the anti-independence Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République (RPCR), demonstrated that the issue of independence was being put on the back burner following the signature of the Nouméa Accord.

So, what is the FCCI right now? It's the third way, the way of people who reflect and think about this country, you know, we're obliged to live together. It's not possible for us Blacks to be all alone on one side, and the others on the other side; for development, for all the rest, it's not possible ... There with the FCCI, we're bringing together people on our side who want to take initiative, who want to take responsibility for the future, you know, so that tomorrow we build a future of peace, of happiness and above all of peace together for all the young people of this country, whether they're Black, White, Yellow, Green or Red, there you are, that's how we see it. (Extract from interview, March 1999)

In the Houaïlou region, some individuals' decision to join the FCCI was accompanied by a customary procedure in which a number of pieces of ceremonial money were offered to one of the chiefdoms in Yaté, the municipality of origin of one of the leaders of the party:

We'd like the FCCI to be set up on a solid foundation, in relation with Yaté ... That's why us here in Houaïlou, we took a custom, presented it to the Yaté chiefdom with that idea, that today the FCCI is going to become a political party, and in order for that political party to be strong and when people hear the word FCCI, it sounds better to them, well we need to make its base in Yaté. There you have it. And that's why, when we went to Yaté, we took that custom, to bind ourselves whether to the people of Yaté, or the people of Bourail, the people of the north, the people of the south, the people of the islands, and it's that custom that bound us all. (Extract from interview, March 1999)

So, why did we take the Kanak money? ... We thought that in order for the FCCI to last as long as the Union Calédonienne, we needed to put in something strong as well, and what's the strong bond that unites two families or two clans among us Kanaks? It's Kanak money; Kanak money acts as glue, for something, a construction ... And that's how, talking in that way, but instinctively, we went there, each of us took a piece of money ... And the word that went with the Kanak money from the Houaïlou people that was laid there, in front of everybody, it was the protection of leaders. That Kanak money will correct their words if they are not straight, that Kanak money will be a bodyguard in their work. And at the same time that Kanak money will be Kanak justice, Kanak law, if they ever deceive their people. (Extract from interview, March 1999)

This decision to circulate a piece of Kanak money thus acts as a public formalisation of a political commitment, as in the ceremonies examined at the start of this chapter (hence the reference to the 'word that went with the Kanak money from the Houaïlou people that was laid there, in front of everybody'). This formalisation mobilises the presumed powers of the ancestors (alluded to in the mention of 'Kanak justice' in the second interview extract, an expression I commented on in Chapter 4). This close articulation of 'politics' and 'custom' can be understood particularly in the light of the fact that this party political split led locally to major commitments to reconfiguring village life: while the national goal of constructing a 'common destiny' played its part, in Houaïlou the high level of local activism was rooted, for those leading it, in a desire to restore what they considered authentic customary hierarchies at village level.

Thus the first decision of the activists in Nérhëxakwéaa was to become involved in the local council of elders (in an extension of the political movement of the 1950s examined in Chapter 4). Christine Demmer has also shown, in relation to a different activist context in Canala, how Palika activists chose to become involved in the council of elders and ceremonial activities during the period of the ‘regions’ (1985–88), as a way of supporting the economic autonomy project of ‘constructing Kanaky’ from the bottom up, instituting a *de facto* independence.¹⁷ While in Houailou the issue of economic development and initiative was probably less significant, the mechanism of local mobilisation of the FCCI through the councils of elders was the same:

That’s really the work that we’re doing there, when we take on the restructuring of the council of elders, the political work we’ve been trying to do up to now. If we want to bring people back to the right balance, people need to recover cultural values, really. And those cultural values, in a way, today they don’t exist any longer in houses, the word no longer exists in each house, so we have to teach people to respect one another again. We have to teach them how society was organised, teach them again how you should speak ... So that we can resolve problems of lands, so we can resolve problems of conflicts. The conflicts are just a reflection of that reality, people don’t know their custom any more, there’s no respect for the uncles ... Because there are always conflicts, in every society there are conflicts, but a conflict can be managed, there are rules, but here that isn’t the case. (Extract from interview, February 1999)

This was a pragmatic and proactive extension of the diagnosis made by the same individual a few years earlier, in a different political context:

People speak any old how nowadays. That explains the mess we’re in. Because if people referred to the respect to each house, well, a lot of problems would be resolved. But the problem is that a lot of houses no longer have any structure, there’s no respect any more for the clan elders, the clan house ... Well, maybe that’s a bit of a retrograde position, but it’s the best position to ensure security in the tribe, a more pleasant environment to live in, you know. (Extract from interview, June 1995)

Thus, campaigning activity was based on the mobilisation, redefinition and even the invention of ‘customary’ social relations, in a process that has a long history in Oceania.¹⁸

17 Demmer 2002.

18 See Jolly 1982; Keesing 1982.

The FCCI is where families come together in custom, not just in politics. It's the opposite of selfish demands. (Extract from interview, February 1999)

Conversely, all the weight of 'customary' relations between families was harnessed to ensure maximum possible support for this project, with strategies including transmission of historical knowledge:

That's what I explained to X yesterday, I told him: 'You see, there are things you don't know.' And I said to him: 'The FCCI in Houailou, I based it on the foundation of our strength, the strength of your house and my house, and you are missing from that, because me I wanted to give it deep roots. You haven't understood that because there are a lot of things you don't know', so that's what I said to him, I told him: 'You see, there are things I'm going to tell you now, things I don't [usually] say but now I'm going to tell you, your father is there, he knows, and you'll hear it from my mouth.' So then I explained all that to him. (Extract from interview, April 1999)

In this example, the relations between two clans were directly articulated in order to facilitate a shared political mobilisation, brushing aside (or bracketing) the political reservations of a man who was not persuaded by the FCCI's general political arguments. Education in certain elements of the history of the clans involved and their relations served as the ultimate justification for a commitment from which no individual should be missing. The effort to clarify local history and modes of social life in the Houailou region that some of these campaigners agreed to make, in the interviews I conducted with them during my fieldwork in 1999, resulted from their desire to reform village life, which then made sense of their activism in the FCCI. In short, what some of my interviewees told me during this field research could perhaps be considered the consequence of their investment in these 'customary' structures.¹⁹ This combination of political engagement with a view towards electoral timeframes (provincial and municipal elections) and the desire to reorganise village life on the basis of a model of imagined social and customary order, which arose in 1999 out of a party political split, is again apparent in the following interview extracts:

That's when we felt the need to reclaim our values, our way of speaking, be closer to people ... That's why for example we need to sort out our situations in the tribe, we have to make our customary marriages, we have to baptise our children, we have to get married, because you can say what

19 See Naepels 2008.

you want, but those are the values people pay attention to ... People live their ordinary life, judge according to their way. And what's their way? It's: who goes to mass? You're in order, before you speak you start first by having a house, being married by the book, not stealing girls, you have to pay for girls, and then you have to get married and then you have to baptise your children. Those are after all the reference criteria that can't be bypassed, if we want people to be with us. That's it, that's what's lived in the tribes. (Extract from interview, February 1999)

On the political, FCCI level, we have to refer back to the history of colonisation, how did colonisation become established? How did religion become established? It was on the basis of family units, chiefdoms, things like that. So the FCCI, if we want it to be something strong, we have to take that into account ... And when [a party member] gets married, or at the end of mourning, all of that is what we've taken into account. (Extract from interview, January 1999)

Ceremonial formalism emerges here as a legitimate aid to political mobilisation. The activist team, therefore, decided to implement a strategy of irreproachable adherence to custom, through assiduous attendance at ceremonies of mourning and marriage, sometimes speaking at them, and by organising a number of marriage ceremonies in their own families, so as to resolve their overall position in this new tribal balance of forces. Thus, the takeover of the council of elders and investment in custom represent the spearhead of a political campaign of local development, through the revaluation of customary functions: as one of my interviewees said later, 'politics succeeds when the link with custom has been made' (extract from interview, September 2002).

Me, how I see the FCCI today, well, what we're trying to do, is to base ourselves on cultural values, in the way we do things. For example not keeping to ourselves, for example if tomorrow the FCCI is well established, well we'll still carry on seeing people from the RPCR or the Union Calédonienne or other parties, whatever, it's not a problem, if there's work to be done, let's do it together. That's the customary spirit, the spirit of the people of one country ... all of that is really what we need, well, to learn to live together again, you know, to ensure that everyone has freedom of opinion, but without wanting to crush the other at all costs because he doesn't think the same way as you. (Extract from interview, February 1999)

Although more limited in scope, a certain similarity emerges between the political project developed by the FCCI in Houaïlou in the late 1990s and the Protestant mobilisations of the 1950s, where the council

of elders also served as the principal vector of a reorganisation of local social relationships following the abolition of the *indigénat* system (see Chapter 4). Indeed, according to those involved the claimed success of the campaign in support of the FCCI was also due to the implementation of nutritional restrictions and rules of abstinence, following the visit of a healer who had come to the most active tribes at their invitation. Their aim was both to ensure the purity of the members of this new party and to protect them from witchcraft attacks. While this visit did not result in a witch-hunt like that which accompanied the visit of the Ponérihouen diviners (*jauu*) in 1955 (perhaps because the FCCI activists were not powerful enough to instigate it), the aims were certainly comparable, and justified the use of protection against potential witchcraft attacks. For some of my interviewees, then, political activism ran in parallel with a war between shadowy powers, justifying the use of a whole arsenal of ‘medicines’:

We’re in the period of politics ... So there you have to be vigilant, you know. So, among the medicines I’ve prepared there are several compounds ... there’s the medicine for when people activate things to hurt you, so I’ve got the medicine to block that; I’ve got the medicine of words of curse; I’ve got the medicine of the clan’s spirits, the devils ... and then in there I’ve put a slingshot medicine ... and there’s one last medicine I’ve put in, it’s to remove, because when people do something bad, they’ll take their medicine and they’ll attach it, when somebody makes bad medicine, they’ll cast a spell on you, they’ll talk to you, and they’ll attach ... But the medicine I put in there, it’s a medicine that’ll jump over all those medicines, but not only will it jump over the medicines, it will remove what he’s done. And not only will it remove, I’ve loaded a slingshot, that’ll blow up in his face. So that’s how there are screw-ups that happen, you know, accidents, or this or that. If the person who’s making the stuff protects himself, it’s his family that gets hit, you know, that’s their problem. Well, I’ve got other medicines I can load up, I’ve got very powerful things but I don’t use them, I often keep to just that. But the ones I’m already using are strong. But I’ve got other, more powerful medicines, so if I want to send them to the graveyard, I send them, but that you only do in extreme cases, you know. (Extract from interview, April 1999)

This political mobilisation also meant continual calls on the wives and children of the main activists involved: the large number of meetings organised to establish the new party, of village fêtes to finance it, and of marriage ceremonies planned relied on a substantial labour of production, practical organisation and availability of domestic labour, principally that

of women. This process was made particularly visible in Houailou by the women FCCI activists who organised the region's first International Women's Day demonstration, in the municipality's main town in March 1999; it was also highlighted because the prohibitions recommended by the healer included one on women preparing food while menstruating, which several times obliged older men to take on this work during campaign meetings, whether they liked it or not.

2002–08: A clan war in Wakaya

I turn now to the second space of collective mobilisation I saw in operation during my research, around a serious village conflict between two agnatic groups.²⁰ In 1996 (the date of the most recent census providing such data), the village of Wakaya comprised 15 households, with a total population of 75; 45 other people stated that they belonged to this village, but did not live there. These families form part of two agnatic groupings that I shall here call the 'L' and the 'R'. The tribe lies about 10 kilometres from the main town of Houailou municipality (administrative, medical and commercial centre), at the end of a dirt road some way away from the major communication routes, which serves a total of five villages. Wakaya is the name of one of the tributaries of this small valley, lying along a dead-end branch of the road that passes by the houses of the L, then those of the R, making up Wakaya village.

Here I offer an ethnographic description of a social situation of conflict that has been going on for several years, marked by the most serious confrontations that Houailou, and probably the whole of Grande Terre, has seen since the political 'events' of the 1980s. These have involved gunfights between several dozen men, as well as many brawls. This 'low-level war' is not dissimilar to the classic ethnographic descriptions of pre-colonial wars in Oceania.²¹ It also shows some continuity with processes of militarisation of village conflicts, including even the formation of militias, as far as they are known in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.²²

Since 2002 a conflict between these two clans has taken a somewhat violent turn, resulting in an escalation or intensification of the forms of physical violence used. This is a conflict of low or very low intensity. Nevertheless,

20 An initial analysis of this conflict appeared in Naepels 2012.

21 See for example Knauff 1990.

22 See for example Dinnen and Thompson 2004.

incidents are frequent enough and violent enough to be at the forefront of concern for the individuals involved, other members of the two agnatic groups, and the population of Houailou well beyond them. I sought to understand this situation through interviews with members on both sides, drawing on relationships I had that predate the conflict, and on third parties who have good enough relations with the two sides, and often (but not always) conducting interviews outside of the village (in other Kanak villages in Houailou or in other municipalities, mainly Nouméa and its suburbs). This does not answer all of the methodological and ethical questions relating to securing sources, verifying their reliability, the extent to which they can be deemed relatively comprehensive, and the forms of account it is possible to construct. I certainly cannot claim exhaustive knowledge of all of the events linked to this conflict (in particular the detail of exchange of insults and gunfire).

In June 2002 an argument in the municipality's main town degenerated into a fistfight between two of the R and one of the L. The latter, on his return to Wakaya, went to get his gun and fired buckshot at the son of one of his opponents that day. In January 2003, when he was released from prison, there were several exchanges of gunfire between the two families. A dozen of the houses and huts belonging to the L family were burned. In retaliation, one of the L shot one of the R, seriously injuring his leg. The ambulance taking him to the health centre was attacked. In October 2003 another shootout resulted in two people being wounded, and then the burning of a number of houses. In September 2005 there were further exchanges of gunfire. In July 2007, following a reconciliation meeting that the R family failed to attend, a more substantial gun battle resulted in six wounded, including four members of the R family who drove past their adversaries' houses, gun barrels at the windows of their car, in a gesture of defiance and who were then caught in an exchange of gunfire and had to be evacuated to hospital in Nouméa owing to the seriousness of their injuries. Following this gun battle, roadblocks were set up on the road (which here serves only the two families involved). In November 2007 there was another shootout between the two families in the main town of the municipality, during a fête, and four people were wounded. The gun battles continued in the tribe, with more casualties, four houses were burned, the gendarmerie vehicle that came to put a stop to the incident was shot at. In January 2008 a 17-year-old man accompanying his L cousins was killed. The alleged gunman gave himself up at the gendarmerie a few days later. In the following months, during the first half of 2008,

a number of representatives of institutions called on the R family to leave the place temporarily. They did so, moving mainly to a site in a disused mining settlement in the municipality. All of their houses and huts were burned. Shortly afterwards, a member of the L family who had come to get drunk in the mining settlement was beaten up in his car. Hospitalised in Nouméa, he was attacked again by members of the opposing family living in the capital.

In order to understand this conflict, I begin with a few remarks on the forms of social organisation it brings into play. Firstly, it arises between patrilineal groups that are extremely close, and are listed together in the *vivaa* (the ceremonial speeches whose sociological significance was discussed in the early part of this chapter). Nevertheless, the conflict is not confined to a simple agnatic definition of the actors involved, primarily because there are internal divisions in each of the two groups around their varying levels of engagement in the conflict. For example, following the burning of a number of houses, one member of the L family was reproached by members of his own family, was beaten and suffered lasting neurological damage. Segmentary principles of fission and fusion characteristic of family commitments in the Houaïlou region are thus being brought into play. Secondly, the conflict continually spreads beyond the principal families involved, following the individual lines of alliance or affinity of the people in question: the maternal nephews, brothers-in-law and maternal uncles of a given individual sometimes participate directly in a given incident. For example, V, a young man, was hit by buckshot in 2006 as he was walking with his L brothers-in-law; after the fête in November 2007, some of the maternal uncles of the wounded joined in the burning of the shooters' houses. More crucially in terms of physical violence, the young man killed in 2008 was not himself a member of either the R or the L family; and today, with hindsight, some of my interviewees link the current conflict between the two families with the death of a young R man killed in a knife fight by a member of the other clan in 1999.

'Youth', moreover, is a distinct characteristic of those involved in the violence; as far as I was able to tell, the vast majority are men, although women are often present at scenes of violence, and women originating from or married into both clans consider themselves deeply involved in what is happening, and contribute to the circulation of accounts of it.

The deviant behaviour of those involved is very widely stigmatised, both by local Kanak commentators and by the media, who relate it to their youth, and to the consumption of alcohol and cannabis.

It seemed obvious to us that people were taking too much liberty in the tribes, and since at the same time they can't solve the problem of youth among their own children, the young people have become the mainstay of the disorder in the tribe – cannabis, alcohol and then theft and all that. And at the same time, you've got the conflicts between adults over land rights and the legitimacy of social hierarchies, whether it's at the level of customary authorities or of older/younger brother, and so on. So the two came together somewhere: the adults sort of used the young people, well, they didn't use them on purpose, I mean the young people, there is delinquency, but when it's connected to clans to families who themselves have conflicts over legitimacy, that creates bombs, you know, that's the whole of the big problem. (Extract from interview, July 2008)

In the New Caledonian context these variables are not unique to this case, but incidents of physical violence do not necessarily result in tension and escalation like those discussed here. This could be a case of social patterns that are well known elsewhere: the instrumentalisation of 'youth' in local conflicts, but also the autonomisation of violence (though here it does not result in the creation of specialist institutions, militias or armies, but rather refers back to a specific practice of physical violence and weaponry), over and above the reasons given for it. These acts of physical violence emerge as moments of greater autonomy for young people, who do not always have much say in decisions that involve their family; it also seems to be the continuation, in another form, of a period of warrior initiation prior to marriage that may have existed during the pre-colonial period, if we are to believe Maurice Lenormand in one of his articles on Lifou:

In olden days the young man was first a front-line warrior who had to remain physically fit and observe a number of rules of abstinence. Therefore he could only marry after several years of service among the warriors of his tribe ... In order to marry, he had to prove himself as a man, that is to say, as a warrior. (Lenormand 1970, p. 52)²³

23 I am grateful to H  l  ne Nicolas for alerting me to this passage. Accounts along the same lines can be found in the second series of Bw   y  uu   rijiji's notebooks, in Aramiou and Eurit  in 2003, pp. 95–102.

Pragmatically speaking, older men certainly have more to lose when violence is resorted to:

X wanted to help defend us, he wanted to give us a hand; result of the chases, his house was burned, but him, he's got his kids, he loses out in the story. His wife and children, they went to the grandmother's house ... He would have done better to stay calm. He should have left it to the ones who were still unmarried. (Extract from interview, July 2008)

As far as cannabis use is concerned in relation to this conflict, Houaïlou is the municipality with the largest number of arrests for breaches of the drugs law, and the largest seizures of cannabis, in Grande Terre in recent years.²⁴ Wakaya is one of the three Houaïlou tribes most often mentioned in the local daily newspaper in relation to cannabis seizures and convictions for drug dealing. The profitability of cannabis is very probably far higher than that of the rural development projects that compete with it. Christophe Pommé writes that 'household income [from cannabis] in tribes amounts to 36,390 CFP francs²⁵ in Houaïlou' (Pommé 2006, p. 22) – a figure that can be put in perspective by comparing it with the ISEE (Institut de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques, Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) data: in the North Province, one quarter of households receive less than 80,000 CFP per month, and half less than 176,000 CFP francs per month.²⁶

In Houaïlou itself, Wakaya and its groups of 'young people' have a rather bad reputation, mainly owing to the disturbances they cause in the municipality's main town. Similarly, the village is mentioned in relation to car thefts (some vehicles stolen in Nouméa having been found burnt out there). Some members of one of the families involved in the conflict deliberately play on this, choosing to adopt the alias 'Al-Qaida'. Finally, certain young men from the two families are regularly (rightly or wrongly) accused of exporting both the problems dividing them and the methods that unite them (in thefts and assaults in the neighbouring mining settlement of Poro, but also in relation to burglaries in a low-income Kanak neighbourhood in Nouméa, or in a neighbouring tribe where a senior member of the community was threatened at gunpoint in June 2008). The point that interests me here is not the question of

24 See Pommé 2006, p. 17.

25 Currency used in French overseas collectivities of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna [trans.].

26 ISEE 2009.

‘delinquency’, but rather understanding that this is a case where physical violence has become autonomised, going beyond the manifestations linked to the conflict between the two families. The involvement of those concerned in the destruction of public facilities, and some of the assaults at the municipal health centre, also testify to this development.

As we have seen throughout this book, conflict (including the resort to physical violence) is not an unusual way of performing social relations in the Houaïlou region. But this conflict is striking in both its duration and the escalation it demonstrates. We therefore need to examine its origins, which invites broader reflection on the historicity of the conflict and the way history is or is not mobilised within it. My interviewees pointed to a period in the 1970s when relations between the neighbouring families deteriorated sharply. Evidence of this is the claim for a private settler property situated in the Néawa valley, initiated in December 1977. This claim, accompanied by the threat to occupy the land to force the settler to leave, was one of the first public claims brought in Grande Terre (see Chapter 5). It was mentioned in the territorial assembly as early as 1977, resulting in a visit by the high commissioner and the head of the civil service, sent by the French Ministry of Overseas Domains and Territories to launch the land reform in 1979. The important point here is that, from 1978 onwards, despite the fact that the land rights movement also involved other clans, the two families came into conflict, by launching competing claims to one part of the land; on this issue, there has been barely any movement in the conflict over the last 30 years. This situation indicates a pre-existing opposition between families and recalls earlier episodes from a few years before the land claim was lodged, at the very beginning of the 1970s, when there was a serious disagreement between some members of the two family groups over the ownership of coffee trees planted on reserve lands and a harvest. While a knife fight involving a woman from the R clan and a woman married into the L clan took place, insults deemed extremely serious that were exchanged between the husband of the R woman and men of the L seem to have been the immediate source of a breach in the moral relations implied by residence in the same village.

It seems that, from this breach onward, all of the past disagreements that might have divided the two groups at one point or another were communicated en masse within the opposing families. Thus the background to the violent incidents today is based on a conflict of legitimacy, and competition between divergent historical knowledges

relating to older disagreements, which have become current again since the fights in the 1970s. The conditions of introduction of the Catholic and Protestant religions in the late 19th century, the installation of administrative chiefdoms in the early 20th century, and also the reasons for the two groups' arrival in this valley prior to colonisation and the social position occupied by each of the families, are the subject of accounts that agree on certain points, and diverge on many others.²⁷ At the times when the state has intervened in this conflict (in particular during the land reform operations and in the courts), these differences have been widely disseminated (in the form of letters sent to state institutions, statements made to the police or in the courts, and public declarations at meetings organised by the municipality or at customary councils), beyond the habitual confines of the transmission of history within the family. The accounts I was sometimes given of elements of the history of the families involved obviously fall into this register of justification.²⁸ There is thus a powerful capacity for escalation in the naturalisation through knowledge of the enmity between the adversaries, which is exploited in different ways depending on the individual: it could be said that more of the individuals concerned now know more things about the history of their family, but also that, even when they do not possess this legitimising knowledge, the perpetrators of the violence fall back on the certainty of being supported by their relatives in this context of enmity. The question that arises then is under what social conditions this construction – and also the success or failure of any potential mediation – comes into being.

2008–10: Warrior ethics and public management of the conflict

One of the striking aspects of this conflict is the willingness of the families involved to pursue it despite the public disapproval it arouses – or alternatively, their strong resistance to media and political pressure to reconcile with one another. Contrary to the usual procedure for resolving conflicts by broadening the issue out to other actors (allies or co-residents), mediation by third parties and an attempt to reach a historical synthesis by emphasising agreements and passing over discord, here an apparently self-sustaining dissenting logic prevails. The choice of the alias 'Al-Qaida' falls into this logic. When one of my friends asked him how

27 See Naepels 2000a.

28 See Naepels 2008.

he saw the attempts at reconciliation then under way, accompanied by ceremonial exchanges and pleas for forgiveness, one victim of a gunshot wound replied: ‘The war continues.’ It is worth considering how collective factors and individual determinants are interwoven in this attitude. The fact that many members of one of the families have regularly appeared at the police court since the 1950s, and the way my interviewees frequently linked this fact to their pre-colonial status as ‘warriors’, certainly makes it possible to distinguish between an affirmative modality of the relation to physical violence, and a reactive modality that refuses to accept the unacceptable, experienced as a denial of rights – in short, not letting oneself be walked over.

I’ve heard that the elders always told it like that, in the Kanak clans, there are some who find it easier to screw up that way. When you hear the elders say it, it doesn’t surprise us because it’s been going for generations like that. Yes, they don’t know how to behave well, they’ll always do bad. And the proof can still be seen today, you know. If they don’t do it in their tribe or here they go to the city, Nouméa, to mess up. The elders, when they talk like that, they say it comes from the blood. (Extract from interview, July 2008)

It may be added that the weight of unequal gender and age relations in these forms of violent mobilisation makes the ‘family’ a key site for understanding the conflict and the violence, both as regards the acquisition of repertoires of action, socialisation, the construction of habitus (in which physical violence, sexual violence and intimidation are not necessarily seen as illegitimate) and as regards the segmentary erasure of the distinction between public and private. Christine Hamelin and Christine Salomon’s work has moreover shown that, in New Caledonia, levels of domestic violence correlate with alcohol and cannabis consumption.²⁹

One further analytical dimension that can be added to this description relates to the mode of regulation of social relations it reveals. The procedures for managing conflict in spaces of collective habitation that were current in the colonial period (that is, confinement to the reserves under the authority of an administrative chief, sometimes supported by a council of elders, collaborating with the colonial administrative authorities, primarily the gendarmes) are clearly failing here. As in the majority of tribes in Houaïlou, there is currently no administrative chief in Wakaya, since succession to the chieftdom is increasingly disputed.

29 See Hamelin, Salomon et al. 2005.

And the intervention of clans in a position to act as mediators (principally those who are matrimonial allies of both clans in the conflict, which is not unusual), or senior members of neighbouring Kanak villages, which has been attempted here through very many meetings of the council of elders and the district council, has enabled periods of calm, but not the suspension of the conflict. It therefore seems that this conflict is proof that colonial village governmentality has indeed fallen away. Faced with this shift, three types of actors are seeking to assert their central position in the local construction of a postcolonial governmentality and in the management of violence: individuals and families (in other words, 'clans'; that is, collectives constructed on a segmentary model), the state through its political and administrative bodies, and the state through its neocustomary structures. I should like now to address this point.

The actors in the conflict appear to assimilate a large number of public institutions with white colonial power: the shooting of a police car, the publicly declared indifference to court convictions, the vandalising of schools and the assaults at the health centre and the hospital are evidence of this. At the same time, state institutions can also be seen as resources: the successive bodies overseeing land reform regularly received letters from the two clans, or visits to offer justification, make claims or, occasionally, to contest their opponents' claims, and one of the first involved in the 1977 claim was himself a gendarme. Finally, the political authorities at the various levels of local administration, the municipality of Houaïlou and the North Province, were born out of the Kanak nationalist and independence movement and, therefore, take on the mantle of some local civil society initiatives (such as the march against violence that took place in the main town of Houaïlou municipality in November 2007). This is clearly a way of asserting their own legitimacy, refusing to be identified with white colonial power by asserting, on the contrary, their takeover of institutions. It is, then, significant that the new municipal team in Houaïlou, elected in 2008, insisted during the election campaign that it was essential that the courts and the gendarmerie be involved in resolving the Wakaya conflict.

Finally, following the murder in January 2008, some representatives of the customary council of the *ajië-arhö* area went to Nouméa to meet with members of New Caledonia's Customary Senate (both institutions created under the Nouméa Accord). The senators proposed to organise a conciliation committee (comprising members of these customary bodies, the councils of elders concerned, and churches). The presence of church

representatives revives an experiment first conducted in the ‘mission of dialogue’ that followed the Ouvéa massacre in 1988, and sought to achieve the conclusion of the Matignon-Oudinot agreements; it also returns to work carried out in recent years to reconcile the families involved in the deaths of Jean-Marie-Tjibaou, Yéwéné Yéwéné and Djubéli Wéa in Ouvéa in 1989. This is how Georges Mandaoué, a senator from Houaïlou, explained the Senate’s intervention in the attempt to resolve the Wakaya conflict:

Because ultimately, from a conflict over legitimacy, we’ve ended up with an excess of violence, and today they’re managing a violent situation, but they’re no longer trying to resolve the problem of legitimacy; so I burn your house, tomorrow I burn yours, we meet in the village I shoot at you, and tomorrow I shoot at you ... So we tried to start all over again. (Georges Mandaoué, extract from interview, July 2008)

In July 2008 a meeting of around 80 people (including 10 from each of the L and R groups, representatives of the Néawa district council, of the *ajië-arhö* customary area, the New Caledonia Customary Senate, Houaïlou municipal council, the North Province, the gendarmerie and the land reform organisation) was held in Houaïlou. The aim of this was to set up working groups to look at the regrouping of Wakaya lands, the possible installation of mediating clans who could serve as a buffer between the two clans, the conditions for social and economic development that could benefit the Kanak villagers, and at the role, authority and powers of constraint of chiefdoms and councils of elders in this tribe. The process is currently under way, and it is too early to know whether it will achieve its aims: ‘The first thing is to give back meaning to their communal life up there ... so people start to live again and their minds are more occupied with projects than with conflicts’ (Georges Mandaoué, extract from interview, July 2008). This resulted, in March 2010, in the parties involved signing a ‘charter of commitment to improving the security and development of the Ouakaya valley’ at Houaïlou town hall.

Over and above the hoped-for reconciliation, the issue is clear: at this local level, in the management of a conflict and appraisal of the right to exercise physical violence, what is at stake is the construction of a postcolonial state, and of the spaces of autonomy it will allow to different categories of actors, in the context of the decolonisation initiated by the Nouméa Accord.

We can't live like that, each clan individually, and not be attached to an authority, we call that anarchy. That's not what we want ... That's why it's important to restore the customary authorities and if we had put the customary authorities in place, we could have made up for the lack of parental authority over these more and more chaotic young people ... Chiefdoms, councils of elders with a solid structure of constraints, we wouldn't be where we are now. (Georges Mandaoué, extract from interview, July 2008)

2002–12: The customary land register and collection of cultural heritage

Over and above the Wakaya conflict, the customary council of the *ajië-arhö* area is doing much work to re-establish a greater role for 'custom' in the organisation of municipal affairs. As has been noted, and in line with what is observed in other regions of Oceania, this is a highly ambiguous term.³⁰ By 'custom', my interlocutors understand the full range of norms and practices that governed local social life before the arrival of the Europeans – or rather, what they believe today to have played this role in earlier times. Doubly metonymic, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the word 'custom' also designates ceremonies of exchange (on the occasion of marriage or mourning, for example), which constitute one of the key moments in customary life, and the treasures exchanged during these ceremonies. Since 2002, the *ajië-arhö* customary council has been undertaking a toponymic and genealogical collection, sometimes under the encompassing term of 'land register', in view of the links between toponymy, family history and land rights.³¹ This activity is rooted in the belief of a number of actors that restoring greater power to the 'customaries' would bring an end to most conflict situations, thereby justifying the work. There is, however, no consensus around either the assumptions behind this position or the demands that are being made:

– Hermesse Pwâdi: The customary council, they want us to put everything back again, bring back the chiefs, the high chiefs, the tribal chiefs. We went on a tour with a committee to inform people, they're not interested any more. We dropped it.

30 See Keesing 1982.

31 See Naepels 1998.

– Marcel Mèèjà: Yes it does, it interests a few people but there are gaps ... It's all very well all that, but setting up this and that, you have to put it into practice, they have to be pretty solid rules. Well, I think that in these customary things, it just pisses everybody off, they're consultative. They ask your opinion, OK, well, we don't like your opinion, we're rejecting it, we're not taking your opinion into account, so what's the point? You're consultative, you're an observer, what you want isn't taken into account. (Extract from a group interview with the Lèwèö council of elders, June 2006)

The term 'land register', used particularly during the years immediately following the signature of the Nouméa Accord,³² is admittedly still used. Nevertheless, the idea that creating a cartography of land rights could be a simple and rapid solution to the various existing conflicts on the one hand, and that the area customary council could constitute a suitable site for building a consensual customary truth on the other, no longer seems to carry much weight today:

In any case, there will always be conflicts, maybe not us, but I think the generations that come after, because each person will think: 'I've heard stories, I know my pine stump isn't here, my coconut palm isn't there.' And then that'll make even more trouble for the customary register. In one way it's good, but it makes you grind your teeth, because I don't know, Kanak mentality, at the time of the ancestors, the ancestors buried all that so that it didn't go any further, so there was harmony, social cohesion, so there wasn't any more dispute or war.

– Are the difficulties coming up again?

Yes, that's it, they're digging up the war axe, that's what's happening. Well, so much the better as long as each person takes responsibility. (Charles Pükü, extract from interview, July 2006)

Since 2004 the customary council of the *ajië-arhö* area, in partnership with the Cultural, Heritage and Research Development department (DCPR) of the ADCK (Agence pour le développement de la culture kanak, Kanak Cultural Development Agency), has been collecting oral heritage in an operation that has largely replaced the initial project of creating a customary land register. This program of collection of Kanak oral heritage was launched by the ADCK in 2002,³³ starting in the Canala region. Since 2004, a network of freelance collectors – trained, contracted

32 See ADRAF 2002, Le Meur 2003.

33 Following other similar projects carried out by the Cultural Office during the 1980s.

and paid jointly by the ADCK and the customary councils – has been built up. The collectors meet together once or twice a year to share their experiences and discuss problems raised by collection (as relates to both archiving and protection or transmission of the data gathered). The meeting of the collectors itself forms part of the process initiated by the ADCK, and aims to increase the interactions between those who collect, to reinforce their faith in the importance of what they are doing, and to contribute to motivating everybody when the collectors return to their regions of origin. The most important aspect is thus perhaps not so much the resulting collection as the process of bringing collectors and the institution into a relationship with local scholars and knowledge valued in and of themselves. I was present at the collectors' meetings that took place over four days in Houaïlou, in the Gôdè tribe, in July 2008. The director of the ADCK, Emmanuel Kasarhéou, himself from Houaïlou, invited me to participate, following our earlier conversations about the collection process at the launch of the program in 2002,³⁴ and in 2006 (with the entire DCPR team). My role was specifically to contribute to clarifying what is at stake in the collection, and to improving the means used in relation to the stated aims. I could not fail to be impressed by the number of people and the energy I witnessed at this meeting, which took place in the presence of collectors from the five customary areas of Grande Terre and Ouvéa, the DCPR's permanent team, members of the tribe (notably the Gôdè council of elders), and several members of the customary council of the *ajië-arhö* area originating from other tribes.

Thanks to the collection of Kanak oral heritage, the data collected has been archived in the médiathèque at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre (on minidisk), and transcriptions are made in vernacular languages and published in an annual report on activities sent to each customary council that has signed agreements with the ADCK. Two types of document are contained in these reports: texts describing practical skills related to weaving, horticulture, medicine, dance, fishing and hunting, the organisation of ceremonies and the vocabulary of kinship; and texts made up of knowledge about society and history: clan histories, genealogical speeches and explanations of place names.

34 See Naepels 2003.

What are the effects of this process of ‘collection’? Firstly, it changes the status of ‘intangible heritage’: however rigorous the collectors and however faithful the transcriptions, to collect is to alter. The oral tradition is adapted to context: narratives are drawn on in certain circumstances (in ceremonies, local conflicts, land claims for example). Historical and social knowledge is still transmitted in this way in Houailou, as a living knowledge to the extent that it is linked to current practices and issues, such as land rights or the place of each family in local social relations. The first effect of collecting is materialisation, the transformation of what is held in one or more individual memories into a material object – cassettes, minidisks, digital files and video recordings – and then, via a process of transcription, the writing down of these oral accounts. Collection thus establishes a mode of existence for the narrative that is disconnected from the speaker and from the context, in other words first and foremost without the rhetoric linked to the people present and the social situation. This is the process of all museography.³⁵

Secondly, the notion of ‘heritage’ poses the question of the owner: through collection, individual, lineage or clan knowledge becomes a knowledge deposited with the ADCK and the area customary councils, where it is archived. This is the second transformation, from a knowledge located in a clan to a knowledge located in the institutions of culture or Kanak custom.

Finally, for the collectors themselves, the very process of collecting reveals the diversity within each area as a treasure, not just a web of contradictions: each one can observe that there are different versions of the histories of clans and lands, different versions of speeches, different ways of organising ceremonies, different explanations of proper names. The very process of collecting involves bracketing, at least temporarily, the (scientific and practical) question of truth. Otherwise collection could be accused of becoming a weapon in the fight to promote this or that version. This was precisely why a collector from Wakaya eventually had to stop working, for fear that the historical and clan accounts he was attempting to collect might aggravate the conflict situation within his tribe.³⁶

35 I described the first steps in this process in Houailou in Chapter 2.

36 Described earlier in this chapter.

There is without doubt a tension between the pragmatic and immediate aims of the Customary Senate and some area councils, and the ADCK's heritage agenda. One of the points of friction is the level of confidentiality instituted, with varying periods of consultation negotiated with speakers, described here by one of my 'customary' interviewees:

For us, collecting the information is so it can be used now, it's not to make a thing you'll consult in 20 years, that's not much use to us. For us society is being constructed now, so we need the data now, you see. People didn't understand the point of collecting data that can be used to identify people and legitimacies through creation of the customary land register, so [the ADCK collectors] do their work which is linked to their own concerns, but it's not linked to our concerns. Well, in short, the kid who in 20 years or 30 years is going to reread the thing, won't that revive conflicts? ... Inevitably in the history of oral societies, the more you have information that goes back in time, the more you say it's the truth. But which truth? Is it really the truth? (Extract from interview, July 2008)

This comment raises the question of the goals of the customary councils and the ADCK, as actors involved in the process of collection. Beyond a discourse that highlights safeguarding, restitution, promotion and dissemination in a general way, there is the reality of conservation activities (and hence of material safeguarding) at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre. Nevertheless, the local political stakes need to be clarified. What is the status of the collection's annual reports? How can their dissemination be ensured? And what practical implications are there for local social relations on the ground? It sometimes appears that there is an abstract confidence in the practical efficacy of safeguarding the 'heritage' of the 'elders' that partakes of the scholastic illusion. It should be pointed out, however, that those involved in the collection are themselves often aware of this problem:

The collection of Kanak oral heritage and traditional knowledge is first and foremost a collective matter. Its preservation depends in large part on this. It concerns both the ancestors' generations and the generations to come. It concerns both this multifaceted past and this future to be constructed ... Writing the history of the Kanak land is no simple matter. It is a perilous and extremely complex exercise. To work on one's own history is to work in a minefield, it is to work at one's own risk and peril, it is to dig up things that have been buried, it is to bring up a painful past, it is to bring up things that are not pretty to see. (Justin Monawa, vice-chairman of the *ajië-arhö* customary council (*Collecte du patrimoine immatériel de l'aire ajië-arhö* 2005, p. 3))

Thus the general views held in New Caledonia about the articulation of politics and custom cover a wide variety of forms of mobilisation that seek, in singular social contexts, to imagine new relations that take into account the departure from reserves that, for many, accompanies land reform and the relative decline in agriculture. I have tried to show how, in Houaïlou, a great variety of collectives has formed for this purpose, drawing on diverse references: party political structures, the neocustomary institutions created under the Nouméa Accord, cultural institutions and agnatic groups. Such mobilisations sometimes fail (the FCCI is virtually non-existent in Houaïlou today); they are always subject to criticism focused on the individual interests of the people active in them, and they are often met by the scepticism of observers who note the persistence of some local conflicts. Nevertheless, they testify to the stubborn desire to create spaces of autonomy in place of an oppressive colonial governmentality – a desire that is also paradoxically revealed by those who seek the paths of emancipation elsewhere, in the new churches or in migration to Nouméa.³⁷

* * *

In this chapter, I have focused primarily on the various ways of constructing collectives, and forms of political mobilisation, in the context of decolonisation initiated by the Nouméa Accord. The ceremonial, political, clan, institutional and cultural engagement of the different inhabitants of Houaïlou here emerge as actors' strategies for reorganising the place of each individual in the village space, following the breakdown of the colonial order (whose forms of exploitation rested essentially on the combination of land reserves, subsistence economy, the administrative chiefdom, and the management of native affairs by the gendarmerie). While in the 1950s and the period of the 'events' of the 1980s (see chapters 4 and 5) these different sites of mobilisation sometimes, at least to begin with, converged fairly broadly, in Houaïlou today they appear much more disconnected, and even competing, in the plans for collective life put forward by one and the other. This competition is manifested particularly in the high level of conflict that accompanies the invention of postcolonial social relations in the village. The awareness of the risk of witchcraft, in both ceremonial action and political action; the direct violence in the conflict between

37 See Dussy 2012; Hamelin 2000; Naepels 1999 and 2000b.

agnatic groups in Wakaya; and the conflictual aspect of historical and clan narratives in the collection of oral heritage instigated by neocustomary and cultural institutions, demonstrate that the internal link between violence and power persists today in Houailou.

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