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The Complexity of a Murder: Situational Dynamics, Social Relations, and Historical Context

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The aims of this article are to incorporate a historical perspective in a pragmatic description of a violent situation, through a case study of a murder in New Caledonia, and to examine the internal social and political dynamics in a situation where violence takes place. In order to understand the complexity of a singular case, I show that the interactionist study of a situation of violence is improved by a description of segmentary and antagonistic social relations, and their historicity. This research is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, and a historical approach in political anthropology. The empirical case of a homicide is drawn from research interviews, and the analysis demonstrates the relevance of an ethnographic description of the social and historical context in order to reconstruct the complexity of the situation, beyond a strictly interactionist approach. In this case, the ambiguity on the macro-structural level of segmentary kinship created occasions for conflict, and the ambiguity of the conversational interaction on the micro-situational level multiplied the probability for violence to take place.

Keywords: ambiguity, ethnographic fieldwork, historical approach, homicide, New Caledonia

In his book *Violence*, Randall Collins develops a pragmatic analysis of physical aggression on others. He emphasizes the situational dynamics of violence, including emotional dynamics, to understand violence as a situational process: “Violence is an interactional accomplishment in a situation structured by emotion. The most pervasive emotion in situations of violent threat is confrontational tension/fear” (Collins 2008, 449). He analyzes the pragmatic characteristics of the situation that lead to violence, drawing on comparison of a high number of cases of physical violence: number of people present, type of dialogic exchanges, characteristics of the audience, forms of

control of tension and fear, etc. This micro-sociological analysis leaves some questions open: How is the audience of a violent situation constructed? What are the local or cultural forms of mobilization of the material, social, emotional resources of actors? How are group solidarity, and social cohesion built up? Are there social and cultural forms of emotions? And moreover, this pragmatic perspective leaves the temporal dynamics of violence largely unexplored. As Collins himself writes: “What we need is a theory which includes the mobilization of both material resources (population and economy) and social/emotional resources (group solidarity, organizational cohesion and breakdown, emotional energy both high and

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low). [...] What we need above all is a model incorporating time-dynamics, explaining how long social/emotional resources are effective" (Collins 2009, 20). How do people learn, through interactions and institutions, to dominate or behave in order to avoid being dominated, and to act violently or not?

In this article, my aims are to incorporate an historical perspective in a pragmatic description of a violent situation, through a case study of a murder in New Caledonia, and to examine the internal social and political dynamics in a situation where violence takes place. In order to understand the complexity of a singular case (here a roadside murder), I show that the interactionist study of a situation of violence (particularly in its emotional dimensions), as proposed by Collins, is improved by a description of segmentary and antagonistic social relations, and their historicity. In a first part, I describe the methodological framework of my work by showing the contributions of an ethnographic survey to understanding the perspectives of the actors, I present the general research questions of my work around conflicting social relations by the use of the notion of segmentarity, and I evoke the benefits of an historical approach in political anthropology. In a second part, I present the empirical case of a homicide drawn from research interviews, and I propose an analysis demonstrating the relevance of an ethnographic description of the social and historical context in order to reconstruct the complexity of the situation, beyond a strictly interactionist approach. I shall conclude with observations on the contributions of such a comprehensive approach to murder, which brings out the ambiguity of emotions in the micro-situation by an ethnographic methodology, and the ambiguity of the segmentary context by an historical and social approach.

1. A Political Anthropology of Violence

1.1. An Ethnographical Approach

The aim of my overarching research is to accomplish a political anthropology centered on the understanding of a current social situation. The field of singularities targeted by my fieldwork is delimited spatially by a rural region of New Caledonia, Houaïlou, thematically by an interest in situations of conflict, and historically by my ethnographic fieldwork since 1991. The singularity of ethnographic fieldwork is the combination of two dimensions: On the one hand, the fact of "being there" (Geertz 1988, Watson 1999, Borneman and Hammoudi 2009), or "participation," opens a field of visibility that allows observation of interactions, behaviors, gestures, and gives access to what the actors actually do, and to a certain extent to the emotions attested by their bodily expressions. On the other hand, formal or informal conversations and interviews define a space of interlocution and discursivity, namely the production of discursive or linguistic materials, which gives access to the points of view of actors (or emic perspectives), through what they say, and permits a comprehensive perspective. The fact of being included long enough in a social world, in which the inquirer solicits comments on what happens there, singularizes the ethnographic method: situations of pure observation (interaction without interlocution), or interview surveys (interaction limited to the moment of interlocution) appear typologically at the two ends of the continuum of ethnographic methods. These two registers, which are constantly mixed in the investigation, are nonetheless discernible by what they produce: heterogeneous types of empirical material. I carried out ethnographic field surveys in Houaïlou in 1991–1992, 1993, 1995, 1999, 2002, 2006, 2008, and 2009, which led me to publish two monographs on New Caledonia (Naepels 1998, 2013). My objective is to create a political ethnography of the Houaïlou region, in order to describe and contextualize a situation in which virtually any social relationship is ambivalent: depending on the circumstances, two individuals put forward the links that unite them or the conflicts that divide them. I take internal conflicts and violent actions as the guiding thread of the description of

the political action implemented by the Kanak¹ people of Houailou today, wondering what I could learn of their transformations since the colonization of New Caledonia by France in 1853. The study of conflict, discord and political violence thus makes it possible to understand the conditions and modalities of the relatively unstable formation of groups in action.

I returned to New Caledonia to conduct a new ethnographic survey in 2015, as part of a collective project on customary justice in New Caledonia (Demmer 2016). Social actors are confronted with the inadequacy of colonial forms of social organization centered on land reserves, administrative chieftainship, and council of elders, and a transformation of the scales of political action. Is the “chieftainship” still a structuring institution? And of what aspects of social life? I seek to understand the transformation of the rural co-residence and the constitution of a new body of neo-customary representatives (members of the council of elders, clan chiefs, customary assessors, customary public officials). During this fieldwork survey, I focused my investigation on the discussion of three recent homicides as they are good entry points to capture the way people assess the role of customary arrangements and of the French justice system for the settlement of violent conflicts. I was not present at any of these three killings, and I rely primarily on informal discussions and formal interviews with protagonists who were close to the situation, and whom I have known for more than twenty years.

1.2. Theoretical Threads: Segmentarity and Violence

The political importance of segmentary social relations in New Caledonia prompted me to engage in a descriptive work on power relations. Rather than defining a permanent institutional structure, segmentarity describes a type of action: according to the situations s/he is part of, an individual can refer to different levels of social belonging to seek support. Thus, in the situation of land reform in New Caledonia and land reallocations to the Kanak people, opportunities for conflict are particularly numerous (following the Matignon Agreements [1988]

and Noumea Agreements [1998] signed with the French government to end violent pro-independence mobilization). Two clans in conflict over a piece of land may at the same time be united against another grouping of clans in a claim on another piece of land. Segmentary structural principles of fission and fusion described by Edward Evans-Pritchard (1940) take empirically the form of an extraordinary ambivalence of feelings and emotions that run through social relations. This segmentary logic must not be perceived as opposite to a state logic in a situation marked by more than one hundred and sixty years of colonial and post-colonial French rule in New Caledonia.

I have chosen dispute, division, conflict, and violence as directing threads, levers in fieldwork as in analysis, in order to grasp the logics of action of the inhabitants of Houailou, but my aim is not to propose a general theory of violence. I examine a number of social situations having a political dimension, combining collective mobilization and the use of physical violence, forms of action that can be captured through ethnographic inquiry. I let the harmonics of these family resemblances echo. In my work, therefore, “violence” is a heuristic lever to approach social relations in their singularity, complexity, and banality, not an object I try to make the theory of. In this paper, my empirical aim is primarily to describe a social situation, in the tradition of Max Gluckman (1940) and the Manchester School of social anthropology, articulating together material arrangements, practical patterns, frames of experience, power relations, and historicities. Case study has its own heuristic consistency, which is not necessarily culturalist or holistic, because it renders in their complexity the immense diversity of social, political, and economic relations in a social situation. It provides access to complex relational dynamics. This project of description is inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein, and seeks deflation in terms of grand theory: “We can only *describe* and say, human life is like that” (Wittgenstein 1979, 3).

In my book *Conjurer la guerre* (Naepels 2013), I describe family resemblances between social situations, throughout a

¹ This term, derived from the Polynesian (Hawaiian) word *kanaka* meaning “human being,” designated in the nineteenth century all Melanesians from New Guinea to New Caledonia in the vocabulary of Europeans interacting with them. This word became very

derogatory in the twentieth century (and remains so in German, where “*kanak*” is a racist insult which survived the loss of the colonial territories of northeastern New Guinea, the Bismarck archipelago, and northern Solomon Islands in 1918); it has

been reappropriated by the independence movement in New Caledonia, and is now a claimed term of national and cultural self-designation.

history of violence in the Houaïlou region. This book analyzes the conventions pertaining to the use of violence in a wide range of conflicts, in a colonial and subsequently a postcolonial context, taking occasions of resort to violence, segmentary disputes, and internal wars as a central theme, and a lens through which to analyze social relations in Houaïlou. As Michel Foucault suggested, I ask: “Can war serve as a useful tool for analyzing relations of power?” (Foucault 2003, 18). Through this approach, I make visible a set of rationales for action deployed by the inhabitants of this region, the historical context of the problems they face, and the categories of analysis that can be used to describe them. In his 1976 lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault (2003) argues, in opposition to juridical discourse, which is based on the sovereignty of the ruler and the subject’s obligation of obedience, that there is a need to make space for a non-state discourse that reintroduces the complexity of real actions, confrontation, and the defence of the rights and interests of the individual. Taking into account actual practices in situations of conflict means that the study needs to be firmly embedded within the field of empirical social sciences, through ethnographic fieldwork. Thus I take as my starting point power relations in all their diversity, their heterogeneity, their historicity, and their complexity – in other words, I take seriously the statements of my Kanak interlocutors, whose discourse is always circumstanced, contextualized, and bound up with the relationship between the speaker and their interlocutors (Bensa, Goromoedo, and Muckle 2015).

It also implies that politics needs to be thought within the spaces of autonomy that each individual strives to construct in the set of social situations they encounter, rather than purely within institutions. This work of describing singular configurations of power relations is part of the disciplinary tradition of political anthropology. It takes up the pragmatic turn in the social sciences which endeavors to study capacities implemented in action or practice rather than making typologies of institutions or procedures. It is critical to reintroduce the discourse of violence and contingency into our analysis of social relations:

Explaining things from below also means explaining them in terms of what is most confused, most obscure, most disorderly and

most subject to chance, because what is being put forward as a principle for the interpretation of society and its visible order is the confusion of violence, passions, hatreds, rages, resentments, and bitterness; it is the obscurity of contingencies and all the minor incidents that bring about defeats and ensure victories. (Foucault 2003, 54).

Such a perspective, Foucault tells us, “develops completely within the historical dimension” (Foucault 2003, 55). My analysis, linking the description of spaces of political action to their historical context, takes this path.

1.3. A Historical Approach

An historical approach to social anthropology is certainly not new. It was constitutive of anthropology’s evolutionary period, which has rightly been reproached for being a speculative history. This criticism of evolutionism explains the subsequent anchoring of functionalist and culturalist anthropology in ethnographic fieldwork, which gave rise to forms of description that were not only synchronic but very often also atemporal, taking neither temporality nor social dynamics into account. Evans-Pritchard’s Marett lecture (1950) encouraged anthropologists to return anew to a historical and diachronic approach.

Edmund Leach’s work, which analyzed two models of political organization among the Kachin people of Burma over a 150-year period – the egalitarian and democratic *gumlao* structure on the one hand, and the hierarchical *gumsa* system on the other – as well as the logic governing their transformations, illustrated this new concern with the internal dynamics of change within social equilibria (Leach 1954). At the same time, the notion of a “situation” enabled Gluckman (1940), and the Manchester School more broadly (Turner 1957, van Velsen 1967), to undo the misidentification of synchrony with stasis. The same movement, represented in France by the work of Georges Balandier (1951), and based on a shared understanding among Africa specialists of the need to take (particularly precolonial) history into account in order to understand the present, resulted in a number of works of great scope by French Africanist anthropologists such as Jean Bazin (1975, 1982, 1988), Michel Izard (1985a, 1985b, 1992, 2003), and Emmanuel Terray (1982, 1986, 1995). The publications – particularly those of Johannes Fabian (1983) and

Nicholas Thomas (1989) – which gave an epistemological critique of the ahistorical character of classical ethnographic descriptions, played a decisive role in the recent elaboration of the issues confronting ethnologists in their relation to historical research. Beyond a simple awareness of the past, a consideration of the internal social dynamics of the groups studied on the one hand, and their variable regimes of historicity on the other, thus became both possible and necessary.

In *Conjurer la guerre* (Naepels 2013) I implemented my research project through the presentation of a series of case studies, chronologically ordered (some colonial military operations carried out in 1856, 1867, 1917, an anti-sorcerer hunting in 1955, a pro-independence mobilization in 1984–88, and current village conflicts). By confronting these successive moments I take account of the complexity of the studied situations on the one hand, and I make these different moments resonate diachronically on the other hand. In his pragmatic consideration on the field of validity and the form of concepts, Wittgenstein showed how a concept is linked to a use in certain social and pragmatic conditions. He also proposed to do without the Aristotelian form of a concept defined by its common attributes, and substitute the notion of family resemblances (Wittgenstein 1953, § 65–71; Glock 1996, 120–24; Bosa 2015). As a social anthropologist I put conceptualization at the service of description and understanding in order to grasp the singular complexity of social situations. My aim is not to develop temporal comparisons between violent situations in order to generalize or to establish causal links, but to detect family resemblances locally, in order to understand logics of action.

2. Empirical Discussion: A Case Study

2.1. A Murder

Let us now turn to the scene of murder which will serve us as a case study (one of the three homicides I have recently studied). I begin by quoting six excerpts from interviews I conducted in Houaïlou between January and February 2015, with six different people, that partially renders the fatal shooting of a man I call John on August 2012, and the suicide of his eldest son a month later. They show the transition to the violent act to be

a hazardous event, and they mention its social roots, its inclusion in social relations and in relations of power, here with reference to an ancient conflict between two families, in relation to an institution (chieftainship), to land disputes, and to political conflicts (locally called “events”).

1/ It is a Sunday, boys were doing kebabs on the barbecue, on the roadside. The gang of nephews and cousins then arrived. They said: “Hey, this is not your land here!” [...] They arrived by car, and they began to yell and say: “Hey, you have to stop, it is not your place, this is our land!” John intervened because X or his dad wanted to hit one of John’s sons. X’s dad said: “Go ahead, shoot,” and John said: “Yes, go ahead, shoot!” We didn’t think he was going to shoot, because John was kidding: “Yes, go ahead, shoot!” You see he didn’t look dangerous, but the other guy shot, he shot, he killed him. [...] John’s son committed suicide a month later, at his grandfather’s place, with his rifle. It was devastating for him, after the death of his father, he did not recover.

2/ The conflict with John is a long-standing conflict. When they meet, John was going down the road, the others going up, and then X’s father told his son: “Get the gun, and kill him,” then the kid shot John. [...] His son committed suicide, just after John’s death.

3/ There is a girl, it was a ceremony for her wedding. John didn’t come to the wedding because he had a conflict with another family. What did he do? He waited for the other family. And the other family, what did they do? There is a gun in the car, that’s how the shot went off. The man who killed John, he didn’t want to kill him as he shot him in the legs, that’s how he hit the vein, John lost a lot of blood.

4/ All young people were doing kebabs on the barbecue. And the other family arrived. They stopped, and they shouted. John’s sisters said: “Don’t worry about them, because tomorrow you leave again for France. Don’t worry about them.” On the road, someone said in the language of Houaïlou: “Leave the gun alone,” [it means] they already had the gun in the car. And as John was not after them, they continued on the main road, they saw the youngsters, and this is where the fight happened. And then a young man told John: “They’re hitting us over by the road,” that’s why he has gone. [...] I think his son was traumatized. He saw the scene. Then they put John in the back of a car to take him to the clinic, and his son was behind with him. [...] When his father [John] was in France, they beat his

son. The one who shot John there, he used to beat his son. When his father arrived, he found out everything. He should not have come back here, he should have stayed in France.

5/ The other family, they have claimed the leadership, the chieftainship, for a long time. And now it stays like that. John was killed, and now where are they? The man who did it, he is excluded from the village.

6/ It was a conflict between two families, but it goes back to the events of 1984. John went to France, he came back, I think it was the second or third time he returned, he had rekindled the flame, that's how things have degenerated.

2.2. Situational Dynamics of Violence

I was not a witness to the scene in 2012, and I have no detail about the facial expressions and bodily postures of the opponents at the moments of confrontation by which I could describe the micro-sequence of their emotions. As the judicial process is still ongoing, I have no access to the court or police documents. Even if they are incomplete, the interviews I conducted in 2015 are the only available sources on this violent situation. To summarize: a few days before John's return to France, the day before his departure from Houaïlou to Noumea, a party is organized by members of his family. Probably about twenty young people prepare kebabs by the roadside. From my own experience, I believe that some of them will have had agricultural implements with them, such as machetes or knives; these are used for clearing the roads as well as for cutting meat – and can be used as weapons. One or two cars arrive, returning from a marriage ceremony, with at least three people living in the same village, in conflict with John's family, a gun in the car (that is less usual than machetes, and linked mainly to hunting practices, or to acute village conflicts). After exchanges of words, John, who was a little farther away with his sisters, intervenes, in spite of his sisters' attempts to restrain him, and after a brief exchange of words he receives one or several gunshots. He dies on his son's lap in the car taking him to the clinic. His son commits suicide shortly afterwards.

This scene is in keeping with a very basic definition of violence, such as the one that Collins gives in his interview with G er me Truc (2010), defining violent acts as those used to "physically hurt someone." To understand and to explain such

a scene of violence requires an analysis of social relations in their multiple dimensions, including historicities – here the social relations between the Kanak people of Houaïlou. The violent act in its singularity involves a contextualization reflecting structural violence: for instance, chieftainship, land issues, and political events are not comprehensible if they are not located in a colonial history of Kanak marginalization and exploitation; and the remoteness of many Kanak villages from administrative centers and medical facilities also testifies of the structural violence of the colonial history in rural New Caledonia. The issue of the relationship between the singularity of the violent act and the social condition of exposure to violence, or vulnerability, is a particularly difficult problem.

Two dimensions Collins developed in his book are important to understanding the scene I have just described. First, the importance of the audience in the confrontation, as onlookers can either help those in the confrontation to overcome their fear or on the contrary can be a factor in stopping it. The bigger the audience is, the more likely violence is to occur, if those watching support the transition to the violent act. Otherwise, Collins writes, a balance is sought by bragging and exchanges of insults. In the interaction I report, the actors and the audience stand quite ambiguously between these two poles. On one side, the father's words ("go ahead, shoot!" or "kill him!") cause the transition to the violent act by his son X.; on the other, the victim (John) seeks a situational balance by joking in the guise of bragging ("yes, go ahead, shoot!"). The second element connected to Collins's analysis is the fact that physical distancing allows the confrontation and thus makes possible the violent act. The firearm is critical here, and the homicide occurs without a fist-fight, by the gun.

2.3. Contextual Features: A Career through Violence and Segmentary Tensions

As Collins stresses, contextual features and motives for violence do not guarantee that violence will happen in any particular situation. They are only facilitating conditions, and particular situational conditions are necessary for a murder to actually happen. However, the taking into account of John's career is an occasion to observe the social construction of

emotions, and the temporal dynamics of the building of audiences and of group solidarity, connected to a violent situation. This will allow us to understand that the meanings of emotions, gestures, and words are not universal or transparent, even for the actors of the interactions that culminated in John's murder.

I met John during my first stay at Houaïlou, in 1991. I lived there with a man, Albert, and his partner. They also hosted John and his partner, who lived in a marital situation not accepted by their families, not regularized by a wedding ceremony. Their cohabitation aroused the disapproval of some of their kin. A few weeks before my arrival, John was instrumental in pacifying a confrontational interaction at the edge of violence. He prevented Albert killing his own uncle, whom he opposed in a land dispute, by shouting at him: "Think of your daughter!" – the little girl had not yet celebrated her first birthday. I was struck then by John's impressive physical appearance, and also by his shyness and kindness to me.

His grandfather had enlisted in the French army during both world wars. His father also participated in World War II and the French Indochina war. John received from these family experiences his Kanak first name (meaning "warrior" in the language of Houaïlou). His father, as a veteran back from Indochina, displayed violent behavior in the family, which led John to an itinerant youth. He was long raised by his maternal grandparents. Domestic violence is very far from being exceptional in New Caledonia (Hamelin and Salomon 2004, 2007, 2008), but John's close family were particularly affected by it.

He is himself responsible for direct physical violence in different ways: fights, beatings, shootings, material destruction by arson, especially during a short decade between 1984 and 1994. He engaged in such different actions during the "events" of 1984–88, that is to say a period of tension and confrontation between pro-independence Kanak activists and European and Kanak opponents of independence. He participated in several fights during the land reform that preceded, and followed these "events". This journey through violence took a puzzling form from 1993, when he began a period of significant cannabis use. I felt distressed when I learned that in 1994, John's great-uncle, with whom I had also conducted interviews, had died after a fight with John. Obsessed by the fear of being attacked by witchcraft, thwarted by several members of his

family, including his great-uncle, from getting married, he accused his great-uncle of being one of the instigators of his misfortune. In April 1996, he was sentenced to eighteen years in prison.

During more than ten years he actually spent in the violent context of different prisons in New Caledonia at first, then in three French detention centers, he was able to transform himself, before being freed on parole. In ten years, contrasting with the previous decade, he participated only in one fight in prison, when he knocked out a prisoner who accused him of being "a snitch." It is clearly necessary to contextualize the type of confrontation and audience that aroused emotion and drove John to violence.

After several years following his release on parole in France under judicial supervision, John made a few short visits to New Caledonia. This convinced him not to move back there, in order to escape internal problems related to his murdering his great-uncle, and internal conflicts within his village, between his family and a number of others (particularly X's family). In France, in the large town where he lived, he acquired a reputation as advisor and mediator among Kanak students and residents there.

In prison and then outside, he entered other interactional and emotional settings than those in which he had been socialized in the villages of Houaïlou. This helps to understand why the last words he pronounced in August 2012 were terribly ambiguous, ambivalent, and their meaning interpreted differently by the different people present on the scene. The meaning of John's words just before his death ("Yes, go ahead, shoot!") is clearly ambiguous: they can be understood as a joke or as a boast to defuse emotional tension, or on the contrary as a provocation, an insult, precipitating the violent act, but one cannot say for sure. As in many other contexts, it is important for Kanak people to avoid losing face when challenged in public, and to be able to use violence (Anderson 1999). In any case, the shooter solved the question practically. The forms, expressions, meanings of emotions, gestures, and words are not universal, and never transparent.

As the oldest man in the eldest lineage of his family, John had to fulfil internal responsibilities within his family, and pos-

sibly village responsibilities (he could have claimed “chieftainship,” but preferred not to). In a very classical segmentary conflict, he was in strife with two people older than himself, an uncle and a great-uncle, from less prestigious lineages than his own. This is a point of structural tension in all lineage contexts. These two old men hid behind various circumstantial reasons to prevent him marrying his partner and to become a complete adult. Such internal conflicts exist, of course, in many other families (without necessarily leading to a homicide). And they remain present today, after his death.

Locally, a multitude of conflicts between different families further complicated the broader social context in this village, and created a high level of tension in ordinary neighborhood relations. The family of John’s partner had been expelled from their village (with other families) during the “events” by the family of John and the family of his later murderer X. These two groups were opposed through long-standing conflicts over land and chieftainship. John’s family and his murderer’s family. But conversely, I can report many weddings between John’s siblings and members of X’s clan. John’s wedding was impossible due to both the refusal of his family and the expulsion of his partner’s family at the time of the “events”; this resulted in a persistent problem and left their children with a very uncertain social status. The 1994 murder was widely interpreted locally as an act of defense against the witchcraft attacks John was suffering. That murder provoked neither surprise nor astonishment, nor really sorrow, and none of these conflicts was resolved locally by imprisonment. It is, however, another issue that led to John’s death in 2012.

3. Conclusion

The political importance of segmentary social relations in New Caledonia prompted me to engage in a descriptive work of power relations that follows the descriptive proposals of Wittgenstein and the historical approach to violence defended by Foucault. Rather than defining a permanent institutional structure, segmentarity qualifies a logic of action: depending on the situations in which they are inscribed, individuals may refer to a particular level of social support. Thus, in the context of village life in New Caledonia, the opportunities for conflict

are particularly numerous: land reform, succession of the chieftainship, job opportunities, suspicion of sorcery. Disagreements may arise in such proceedings, at any level of lineage, between several lineages of the same clan, several clans or groups of clans.

John’s socialization, the intimate experience of domestic violence, the experience of violence as a common repertoire of actions in village conflicts, and his own violent practice in the decade 1984–94, are understandable only in the context of the structural tensions of his social position, his family, and his village. They also contributed to the creation of the spectators of the 2012 confrontation, his family counting on him to go to the fight, the opposing family fearing the risk of his violence. In this social landscape, the self-transformation he had known in France for over fifteen years, including in prison, was not considered by people in his birthplace Houaïlou. This emotional ambiguity cost him his life, as well as that of his son.

In this case, the ambiguity on the macro-structural level of segmentary kinship created occasions for conflict, and the ambiguity of the conversational interaction (“yes, go ahead, shoot!”) on the micro-situational level multiplied the probability of violence taking place. Gould (2003) addressed how ambiguity in the situation increases the risk of violence, especially when hierarchical relationships between two individuals or groups are not clearly established. Understanding them implies a thorough entry into an historical approach, which contextualizes the stakes of this meeting at the roadside. In a case like this, one can only notice the combination of the (segmentary) structural tensions in the village, the contingent dimension of the violent act (was the leg injury intentional, or did the shooter intend to kill?), and the weight of macro-causes (like the weakness of emergency services in New Caledonia rural areas). Thus, an ethnographic methodology attentive to the historicity of social facts completes the interactionist analysis of situations of violence, and takes into account several additional dimensions of their complexity.

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