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## Indigenous responses to colonialism in an island state: a geopolitical ecology of Kanaky-New Caledonia.

Prof. Simon Batterbury, University of Melbourne, Australia and Lancaster University, UK

Dr. Séverine Bouard, Institut Agronomique néo-Calédonien, New Caledonia

Prof. Matthias Kowasch, University College of Teacher Education Styria, Austria

### Introduction

In 25 years, the *Journal of Political Ecology* has published two articles on New Caledonia (Nouvelle-Calédonie), a territory of Pacific islands still on the UN's list of Non-Self-Governing Territories and a 'collectivité sui generis' overseas part of France. One was a few years after a period in the 1980s when a percentage of the Melanesian population known as Kanaks, particularly unemployed youth, were in open revolt against the French state and the population of white settlers (Winslow 1995). The second was published when the Kanak had secured substantial devolution of political power after several post-conflict political accords and agreements described in this chapter (Kowasch 2012a). They now control two out of three provinces set up under these accords, and in 2012 they were building a multi-billion dollar nickel mine and processing plant known as the Koniambo project in cooperation with an international mining company (the Swiss giant Glencore, formerly Falconbridge and then Xstrata), and also creating a regional growth pole in the north of "Grande Terre", the main island of New Caledonia (Fig. 1), to counter the francophone-dominated capital Nouméa in the South (Kowasch 2012a). In French, this process of spatial rebalancing or redistributing wealth and economic opportunity is known as *rééquilibrage* (Kowasch 2012b). Winslow's 1995 article predicted some of the events described later by Kowasch (2012a). However, in an ongoing geopolitical saga, by 2018 (while the US was preoccupied by the mid-term Congressional elections in November, and the UK by its ongoing Brexit saga) New Caledonia voted in a referendum on whether to fully 'divorce' from France and become an independent nation. The Kanak, the majority of whom support independence for 'Kanak' after enduring over 150 years of French rule, were not successful – 56.4% of the list of eligible voters chose against independence. Unlike in the 'Brexiting' UK, and following a 1998 accord signed between France and New Caledonia's representatives, there will be two more opportunities to vote again on independence.

In this chapter we relate New Caledonia's geopolitical history to key themes in political ecology. This small island territory exemplifies many of the problems experienced by the world's few decolonized states, (numbering 17 countries, including Western Sahara and French Polynesia – see <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsgt>). The tight referendum result conceals a geopolitical ecology of struggle going back to the mid 1800s, one that led to the slow reorientation of a mineral rich colonial island territory towards

devolution of political power, but not yet to independence. The colonial period led to land dispossession, forced labour and genocides imposed on indigenous Kanak clans. But the lesson for political ecologists is not the usual one of oppressive colonial regimes discriminating against an indigenous minority, with capitalist firms overriding indigenous territory and culture and pillaging natural resources. This happened in abundance in the past, but today it has been possible for an indigenous Kanak minority to turn natural resource wealth some way to its own advantage. Nowhere else in the world does an indigenous group, working through its provincial government and a shell company called SMSP, control the majority shares in a mining enterprise on the scale of Koniambo.

The chapter examines how this happened, framed by reflection on postcolonial development strategies, pluriversal development paths, and the tension between the local negative effects of mining, indigenous participation in global capitalist commodity chains, and geopolitical struggles to reclaim and celebrate indigenous identity. Rather than eschew 'development' or practice 'degrowth', as writers like Arturo Escobar have argued for local communities who practice or reclaim their cultural distinctiveness (2015), the Kanak leadership have turned mineral resources to their economic and geopolitical advantage to benefit their own historically oppressed and marginalized population. The cost is the negative local effects of nickel mining and smelting on the natural environment, and associated social pathologies and problems that come with any mining enterprise. In addition, mining is hardly a favoured strategy to guide development, at a time when the world is seeking to reduce carbon emissions and, more locally, the poor condition of coral reefs and loss of biodiversity.

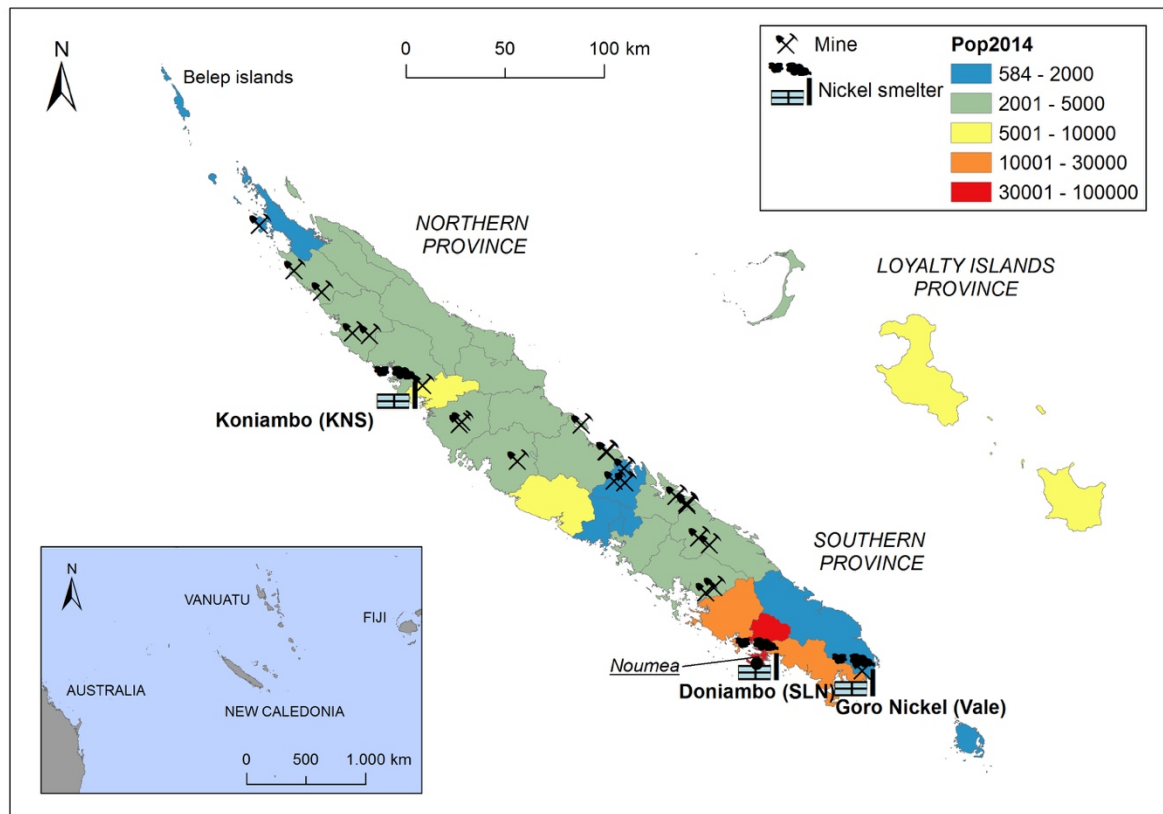
### **A brief chronology**

New Caledonia is a settler economy of around 280,000 inhabitants (ISEE 2018). Around 40% of the population are Kanak, whose origins are from Melanesian migrations. Material evidence - Lapita pottery shards - show they were present around 1,500 BC, with other studies claiming a much longer history of settlement. They operated a clan based patrilocal society based largely on tropical agriculture, some hunting and fishing, and island (and initially, inter-island) trade. Control of territory and land had large significance for the clans. Kanak chiefs had considerable authority over clan territory, there were distinctive regional linguistic groupings, and inter-clan warfare was frequent. Since formal colonisation by France in 1853, racial conflict arose between European settlers and the majority of the indigenous Kanak population. "Constant military expeditions" (Saussol 1988), armed conflicts and wars went on for many decades, and Kanak resistance was met with imprisonment, massacres and displacement (Paody et al. fc).

The ecology of the largest island, Grande Terre (approx. 450km x 60km) is unique, although the environmental politics surrounding its protection is tense, given the large mining sector (Rodary fc). The islands have the world's highest number of endemic plant species (3,380), but there were no large mammals that survived into precolonial times other than a flying fox (*Pteropus vetulus*) (Jaffre et al. 1997). Gondwanan flora from the late Cretaceous still exists. Grande Terre consists of plains falling to the ocean on the west side, short lateral river catchments, and a mountain chain to the centre and east which falls to the ocean with fewer beaches and bays, on a coast that is rainier and less accessible by land. Grande Terre also has around 25% of the world's known nickel reserves exploited in around 20 opencast mines (Fig. 1) and the world's second longest coral reef (1,100 km).

FIGURE 1. MAP OF NEW CALEDONIA (SOURCE: ISEE, 2016; CARTOGRAPHY: KOWASCH, 2019) **NO COPYRIGHT**

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While Marist Catholic missionaries and priests, sandalwood traders and American whalers were on the islands preceding formal annexation of New Caledonia by France in 1853, France's occupation of the islands was supported by military intervention. French settlement advanced in several stages but culminated in expelling Kanak from the western plains, which became devoted to cattle and European agriculture, although these had limited success. Over a century, the French settlers - including released prisoners from the capital Nouméa's *bagne* (prison) when free settler numbers faltered - developed their own identity as Caldoche, largely but not exclusively loyal to France and its interests.

The discovery of the vast reserves of nickel and other minerals in 1864 set the scene for even greater 'accumulation by dispossession' - the first big mine was at Thio, which opened in 1880, not far from the francophone capital, Nouméa (Le Meur 2017). Waves of indentured and free labor came to work nickel deposits, resulting in some new settlement from New Hebrides (Vanuatu), French Indochina (Vietnam), other French overseas territories, and even Japan. Combined with alienation of their land for agricultural settlement, Kanak resistance grew against the loss of territory, their forced relocation to 'reserves', endemic racist policies, and lack of access to education, services, and citizenship. There were three major periods of violence between settlers and Kanak warriors – the 1878 guerrilla war, another in 1917 and then again from 1984-1988 when both sides were armed (Paody et al., fc). All insurrections were defeated by the superior French forces. Meanwhile, capital from mining was accumulated by a succession of French companies over more than a century, latterly dominated by SLN ("Société Le Nickel", today a subsidiary of the mining group Eramet), who established a nickel smelter called Doniambo in Nouméa in 1910, in addition to its mine sites (Fig. 1). It employed

a diverse workforce in unhealthy conditions – the smelter is operational to this day and estuarine and air pollution are still worrying (Rodary *fc*). Mining's manual labor, much of it non-European, has extended for over 140 years in several large mines, but Kanak were almost never placed in management positions.

The Feuillet governance reforms of the late 1800s increased white settlement on the islands to try and dilute indigenous resistance to France. Governance remained brutal, culminating in the imposition of *indigénat* (French “native regulations”) codes (Merle and Muckle 2019). These included forced labour, reduced mobility (Kanak people were not allowed to leave the reserves without permission from the colonial administration), discrimination and imprisonment without trial. However, the second World War saw 50,000 Americans and New Zealanders stationed on the island to counter the threat from Japan. Kanak, for the first time, witnessed African Americans working as equals with whites, and partly as a result of this major cultural shift, the *indigénat* was abolished in 1946.

Despite the lifting of the *indigénat* regime, expansion of reserves and a mishmash of development efforts, Kanak people were largely ignored by the public authorities until the 1970s, even as their political consciousness increased. An example of development measures and the involvement of Kanak people into the market economy was the launching of coffee plantations by the colonial administration in the 1930s. This seemed to be a success, and on the eve of the Second World War, coffee production peaked at 2,350 tons, of which 2,000 were exported (Leblic 2007). Nevertheless, agricultural and social policies did not reverse the feeling of marginalization and the gulf between Kanak and European standards of living, services, and infrastructure (Kohler and Pillon, 1988). The war led to a decline of the coffee sector, and with the rise of nickel prices in the 1960s, the production of coffee fell again.

An economic boom led to a decline of political autonomy, translated by a statutory reform in 1969 (the *lois Billotte*). Nickel, chromium and cobalt became “economically strategic resources”, and the New Caledonian districts were transferred back under the control the French state. The undermining of political autonomy was followed by rising demands for (Kanak) independence. Between 1969-72, the so-called “first nickel boom”, more than 8,000 French citizens arrived in New Caledonia (Forrest and Kowasch 2016). The migration was again supported by the French government, still aiming to increase the proportion of non-indigenous residents. Indeed, the Kanak population were 51.1% of the total population in 1956, but 46% by 1969 (Vivier 2009). The nickel boom - with production records reaching nearly 8 million tonnes in 1971 - was followed by a deceleration in prices and demand until the 1980s, affecting SLN and small-scale mining operations (Bouard et al., 2018). Thus, the fluctuation in world nickel prices disrupted the value of New Caledonia's primary export and local employment possibilities and wages.

As late as the 1980s, Kanak communities remained cut off from much of their ancestral land, which was still occupied by settler farmers, mines, or other operations. Health, life expectancy, school outcomes and child mortality show continued disparities to this day.

The struggling mining sector coincided with an increase in political conflict. Kanak youth, impelled by several pro-independence leaders and political parties, took up open resistance to settlers and loyalists (Connell 1987). For four years in the 1980s there was sabotage, roadblocks and violence, with over a hundred people killed and multiple arrests. The civil war, called “*événements*” in France, was a low point in the history of the territory in the 20th century. After a hostage tragedy on Ouvéa island (Loyalty Islands Province, Fig. 1), where 21

people were killed after human rights abuses, the Matignon Accords led to peace (Waddell, 2008). The agreements were signed in 1988 by the pro-independence movement FLNKS (*Front de Libération National Kanak et Socialiste*) and its charismatic Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the anti-independence party RPCR (*Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République*) and the French government. Considerable concessions were offered by France in a 'partial decolonization'. One result was the splitting of the island into three provinces (North, South and Loyalty Islands; Fig. 1), making New Caledonia a small “federal state”, enabling the Kanak-dominated Northern and Loyalty Islands Provinces to control their own affairs (Mathieu et al., 2016: 103). Financially, the French State had to provide most of the money needed for new local authorities to operate – in effect, subsidising their operations, but proposing that mining revenues could supplement these transfers. The North and Loyalty Islands provinces benefited from a formula that was favourable to them, receiving three quarters of the allocation from France. In the North, *rééquilibrage* activities commenced in 1990, for example the construction of new roads linking east and west through mountainous terrain (Bouard et al., 2014; Kowasch, 2012b). The Territory (New Caledonia), has the authority to set its budget, including taxation and allocations for territorial projects. Moreover, the Matignon agreements also served to suspend the raising of the issue on self-determination for a ten year-period.

Despite a fickle market for nickel, the New Caledonian economy grew from 1965-2010 averaging almost 4% per year, greater than mainland France (Mathieu et al., 2016). Per capita GDP growth averaged 2.3% per year from 1990-2010, ten and fifteen times greater than that of the Pacific islands closest to New Caledonia (Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu) and twice as high as in the French overseas departments like Reunion and Martinique. Across the islands, life expectancy and the numbers of tertiary educated citizens have increased. Nevertheless, there are still major social-economic inequalities between the provinces, and especially between Noumea, the 'Paris in the Pacific', and the “bush”. The last Census in 2014 show that out of a total population of 268,767, 179,509 (66.8%) live in Greater Noumea, which includes the districts of Noumea (99,926 inhabitants), Dumbea (31,812), Mont-Dore (27,155) and Paita (20,616) (ISEE, 2016) (Fig. 1). But Noumea, in the Southern Province, is also economically and financially dominant. In total, 84.1% of employees in the country work in Greater Noumea and 74.9% of the enterprises are situated in the South, where 33% of the population is European and “only” 26% Kanak (ISEE 2016). The main campus of the University of New Caledonia and most secondary schools are located in Greater Noumea.

### **“Development” efforts and ideals**

Besides the provincial reorganization, there were two major geopolitical changes, which contributed to involve Kanak people in socio-economic development.

Firstly, land reform, aiming to restore land tenure to Kanak clans, started in 1978. It has been slow but progressive. The proportion of indigenous customary land on “Grande Terre” increased from 10% at the outset to 19.3% in 2019 (ADRAF 2019a; Kowasch et al. 2015). Considering that the Loyalty Islands Province was always classified as “customary land”, the distribution of the territory’s total land area shows that 15.8% of the country is private property and 27.4% customary land, which is inalienable, unseizable, incommutable and non-transferable. For anti-independence parties, the land reform should be terminated, even as new claims are still being made. From the perspective of many Kanak people, the colonial

theft of lands represents a loss of cultural identity, because social identity of clans is spatial, linked to a series of places that the group passed through and lived (Kowasch et al., 2015; Naepels, 2006). For them, the restitution of land is still incomplete. Claims and restitution have led to cross-clan tensions, especially since some were displaced by the colonial administration and thus have lost connection to place (Kowasch et al., 2015). Legitimacy is always non-fixed and non-finite (Lund and Sikor 2009) but some clans close to towns and mines have profited from relative stability by developing some of their customary land commercially, as also occurs in Canada, the US and Australia.

Secondly, the struggle to reclaim land has been followed by a new strategy, 'leading our own development'. Kanak political leaders in the nickel-rich Northern Province have used their political power to achieve control over mining projects, thus guiding mining development on their own terms. Mineral revenues themselves represent only one source of economic benefit from mining, which also include employment, business contracts, shareholding and infrastructure development (Banks, 1996). The socialist Kanak leadership of the Northern Province chose majority public ownership as their strategy, through a 51%/49% shareholding model. The Provincial leadership looked for an industrial partner to build a nickel processing plant in the Northern Province from the early 1990s (Pitoiset and Wéry, 2008). The Koniambo nickel project (Fig. 1) was initiated in 1998 (under the Bercy agreement, a complex swap of mine titles) and it comprises mountaintop open cast nickel mining, and a new smelter powered by a coal-fired power station. It is a large in scale, and produced its first nickel ingots in 2013 (Kowasch, 2017). The project has to return any profit to the Northern Province, which operates a controlling shareholding through its shell company SMSP (*Société Minière du Sud Pacifique*). The Swiss mining giant Glencore (who bought out Xstrata and financed 96.5% of the smelter construction) operates the plant, and future cashflow will be used to reimburse them and also French banks. Even though it is under majority Indigenous control, Koniambo is far from being "the world most competitive processing plant ever" as the enigmatic SMSP Chairman, André Dang, once labelled it (Nacci, 2015). There have been technical problems with the plant, and its stakeholders cannot control nickel prices on the world market. In 2019, the project – and indeed the Province – are in major financial difficulties (prefigured by Nacci, 2015). But the achievement of control over resources and decision-making is significant. The pro-independence movement FLNKS wants New Caledonia to control its own (mineral) resources and thus, SMSP is eyeing up SLN's mining titles as well. According to the so-called 'nickel doctrine', the nickel industry should fuel local development of benefit to Provincial citizens (David, 2016).

#### *From rebalancing to common destiny* [subheading]

As we have described, the Matignon agreements promoted the ideal of "rééquilibrage", i.e. spatial planning of new infrastructure and by pursuing socio-economic development in the North (e.g. construction of a cultural centre, a hospital, shopping malls and industrial zones in Koné), to achieve a better distribution of wealth and power. The increased human and financial resources devoted to local development are shown by the explosion in the number of projects carried out, and technical support (Bouard et al., 2016 a). Readers familiar with levels of development on any of the Anglophone Pacific islands would be surprised. The budgetary allocation formula in favour of the pro-independence provinces (Northern and Loyalty Islands) has aided this, along with some complex political negotiations around voting eligibility in provincial elections and the 2018 referendum. These were drawn-out, with Kanak wanting to restrict the mandate of newer arrivals that could upset a delicate political

balance. The arguments back and forth around the independence referendum soon became geopolitical, although beyond the scope of this chapter (see Fisher, 2013; Fisher, *fc*; Robertson, *fc*).

For the first time in French history, the various political accords provided the establishment of legislative power in an overseas territory and the transfer of political competencies leading to “shared sovereignty” (Forrest and Kowasch, 2016). The Noumea Accord stated that colonisation had attacked the dignity of the Kanak people and deprived them of their identity (Fisher *fc*) and extended the date of the independence referendum to 2018. The Noumea Accord also introduced the idea of a “common destiny” for the territory, which invites the entire population to unite and develop together. While for some this is a mere political slogan, it has acknowledged the ugly colonial past. New Caledonia has had to acquire new symbols of its identity, including flags, another source of conflict between loyalists and independence supporters.

The two principles of rebalancing and “common destiny” have made it possible to recognize and legitimize previously marginalized population groups, leading to the introduction of differentiated public policies (Bouard et al., 2014). By transferring powers to local authorities, the Noumea Accord has thus responded to (although not fully met) the Kanak people's request for autonomy, while preserving and strengthening cooperation between political parties in the establishment of a relatively collegial elected government.

### **Broader lessons for a geopolitical ecology**

Winslow (1995) was correct to note a shift in Kanak engagement with modernity and development in recent decades. The rise of the France-trained, independence-supporting, socialist Left before and during the violence of the 1980s, mollified by Tjibaou's more conciliatory influence as a truly great Pacific leader (Waddell 2008), has led the current effort to create an economic growth pole in the North of “Grande Terre”. This has been a 'development by industrialisation' strategy that is only now beginning to decelerate (Sourisseau et al. 2016). Its success is not yet assured, but the trappings of modernity - including 4G communication networks, brand new public facilities like a swimming pool, bike tracks, movie theatre, and community centre and library, are already in place in Kone and surrounds. There are western-style hotels, and a small number of international workers – most of these live in the region. The Northern Province has the capacity to provide its population, which is 70% Kanak (ISEE, 2016), with services and jobs.

The problem is that the partial transformation of New Caledonia's economy into an industrialised one based on nickel, is not sustainable in the long term, once deposits are exhausted. The technical difficulties encountered by Koniambo and the volatility of nickel prices call into question the short-term implementation of growth based on the nickel sector. There is still a significant debate over how to diversify economically (into other niches including tourism) but also deep questions about how, if the territory becomes a country, currency devaluation would play out in the event of losing the “Franc Pacifique”, a hard currency pegged to the Euro. The reinvestment of the incomes derived from nickel must certainly be treated carefully (Sourisseau et al., 2016). Despite Koniambo and the growing Kone metro area, the capital Noumea remains the economic center of the country, and

discrimination and ethnic inequalities are not resolved: Kanak people still have far less opportunity in the better-paid labor market compared to Europeans (Gorohouna, 2011).

On France's side, it does not want to be forced out from a territory that contains potential marine mineral reserves, since the giant marine EEZ has unknown quantities of hydrocarbons and seabed minerals. There is also a sub-population that are strongly loyal to France (the 56.7% of the voters against political independence in the 2018 referendum), and New Caledonia is surrounded by anglophone island nations with stronger geopolitical and economic links to Australia, New Zealand and the USA.

## Conclusion

In this complicated mix of indigenous aspirations, conflict, and neo-colonial inequalities and control, mining is central to the geopolitical game. Two factors are of particular interest to political ecologists. A mineral – nickel – is enlisted in circuits of capital that spread from Kanak communities to Chinese, Korean and European manufacturing plants, and to consumers and defence contractors. This, along with the poor environmental record of the industry, are unsurprising now that we all occupy a multi-scalar, connected world in which there is plenty of demand for scarce minerals. Nonetheless, given New Caledonia's position far out into the Pacific Ocean, it often escapes attention as a major mineral supplier or even as a source of Indigenous revitalization and protest (Horowitz, 2012). Secondly, New Caledonia shows that Indigenous control of a huge mining project is not only possible, but has shifted “scalar arrangements in ways that alter existing political ecologies, power relationships and conditions of access and marginality” (Miller and McGregor, 2019). The control of the Koniambo project, and its spatial calibration with new housing and economic development around a northern growth pole, is quite distinctive. It is situated quite far, intellectually and practically, from Escobar's pluriverse of indigenous ontologies and practices (Escobar, 2015). For one thing, there is no “degrowth” accompanying renewed recognition of Kanak identity and values by socialist leaders. Indeed, as Winslow and Kowasch both noted in their *Journal of Political Ecology* articles, the geopolitical strategy and the nickel doctrine still leave a reliance on worldwide demand for minerals. Indigenous public ownership of a mine does not really reduce this geo-economic and geopolitical dependency on regional and global economics, in an increasingly carbon-constrained and warming world, and with a fragile local ecology. But, locally, it certainly provides some hope.

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