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Abstract

This essay is the first to emerge from an ongoing international project which looks at storytelling for children by Indigenous women in the interests of promoting Indigenous languages and cultures. Impressed and humbled by the energy and commitment of the women writers, we ask, along with New Caledonia based French academic, Patrice Favaro, 'What can I bring to people who want to write tales drawn from the oral tradition out of their own culture about which I know nothing?' (11). So we, as a group of non-Indigenous women academics, want to acknowledge our lack of knowledge of Kanak traditions along with the multi-disciplinary collaborative approach we bring to this work. We bring insights drawn from sociology, Indigenous studies, literature and education to bear on our analysis of the ground-breaking work of Kanak women writers in the hope that the commitment to further Indigenous interests will be even more widely shared and understood.

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DEIRDRE TEDMANSON

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is the first to emerge from an ongoing international project which looks at storytelling for children by Indigenous women in the interests of promoting Indigenous languages and cultures. Impressed and humbled by the energy and commitment of the women writers, we ask, along with New Caledonia based French academic, Patrice Favaro, 'What can I bring to people who want to write tales drawn from the oral tradition out of their own culture about which I know nothing?' (11). So we, as a group of non-Indigenous women academics, want to acknowledge our lack of knowledge of Kanak traditions along with the multi-disciplinary collaborative approach we bring to this work. We bring insights drawn from sociology, Indigenous studies, literature and education to bear on our analysis of the ground-breaking work of Kanak women writers in the hope that the commitment to further Indigenous interests will be even more widely shared and understood.

In recent years a particular set of circumstances served to bring questions of literacy and traditional culture to the fore in New Caledonia. Widespread concern about the increasingly visible and numerous disaffected young people, high youth unemployment and high and increasing rates of youth suicide all combined to re-focus attention on Indigenous educational experiences. The recognition that the Bible was almost the only available text in Kanak languages caused some people to suggest that the absence of Indigenous language in any formal education had contributed to the destabilisation of Kanak youth and culture. We begin with a brief introduction to the movement for Kanak cultural revival in order to situate the work of the women writers in their politico-historical context.

KANAK CULTURAL REVIVAL

Ever since colonisation in New Caledonia the threads of Kanak cultural revival have been woven through Kanak community resistance. A movement for the recognition of Kanak languages, their preservation and teaching, gathered force in the 1970s as one of the focal points of Kanak calls for recognition. The Melanesia 2000 Festival organised by Tjibaou in 1975 was a pivotal event for rallying fifteen thousand Kanaks in Noumea, representing eight different

customary areas and twenty-eight languages, behind a unified vision for self-recognition and both civil and cultural freedoms.

The signing of the Matignon-Oudinot Accords in June 1988 signified a major shift away from the oppressive colonial regime that had entailed the repression of Kanak language and culture. The Accord legislated for the establishment of the *Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak* (ADCK) and committed the state to the promotion of Kanak cultural heritage, encouraging contemporary forms of cultural expression. The stipulation at that time was that by the end of ten years New Caledonia would vote on becoming independent from France. However the Noumea Accord of 1998 laid down the specific public recognition of the legitimacy of the Kanak people's aspirations and established a twenty-year program of civil and cultural empowerment. The Independence referendum was postponed for another twenty years. Since the Noumea Accord Kanak languages are increasingly recognised and are expected to become a part of formal education from 2006. As a result of the Accord, primary education is now the responsibility of the New Caledonian local government rather than the French government, and curricula are being developed and adapted to local needs. The main focus of Kanak language revival is positioned within this context as a part of the political resistance, rooted in the maintenance and assertion of Kanak epistemology, identity and power. This language revival is the active self-assertion of cultural identity and rights as a way of engagement with and interpretation of contemporary issues, as well as cultural maintenance in the more familiar ways of passing on information.

THE KANAK WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN NEW CALEDONIA

The work of Kanak women in the preservation and promotion of Kanak languages has a long and consciously political history in New Caledonia. As one of the authors of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre's 'Grain de Sable' youth project, Tyla Ayrault, says, 'My family culture is with the independence movement and I have been aware of the need to value Kanak language and culture as that is part of our renewal'.¹ Until recently there had been little attention given to the role and attitudes of Kanak women. This lack of interest in Kanak women coming from the official administrative and political sources has meant there is scant documentation of their work. In the colonial literature on New Caledonia, Kanak women are represented in terms of the worst prejudices of the period: seductive when very young (for example, in the novel *Kaavo: Histoire Canaque* by Georges Baudoux), they became quickly exploited and taken in by patriarchal structures. There are similar romantic accounts in the memoirs of those deported from the Commune to New Caledonia (for example, in *Les Déportées* by Charles Malato). However this story did retain some traces of the Kanak notion of women at the life-giving centre of the clan and of female leadership, for example the role of Queen Hortense on the Ile of Pines. We also know that the grandmother of Independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou was killed in the quelling of the revolt

in 1917. Overall however there is little literary record of the work of Kanak women for cultural revival. Such work would have to be developed from witness accounts and knowledge contained in oral history if it were to produce for the Kanak women a full and accurate memoir of their actions and historical positioning.

World War II saw the significant entry of Kanak women into salaried work. Prior to WWII women's work was mostly coffee picking or domestic labour. Most of the women found salaried employment in the town capital of Noumea when they left the countryside for jobs in the city, a journey that usually involved breaking with their social group or original tribe. Today forty per cent of Kanak workers are women. Moreover, women's entry into the world of work was accompanied by an increasing professional mobility leading to academic success.

Kanak women gradually became visible in the gatherings and movements for independence connected with action by the catholic and protestant churches. Marie Claude Tjibaou, the founder of the association SOS Against Sexual Violence in 1992, said, 'It was necessary to assemble live forces to interest the Kanak world and to alert them to the difficulties they were experiencing at that time. And to make Kanak society represented at the political level' (qtd in Mwà Vée 45). While their leaders may not have always seen the connection, the women's movement went along with the rise in power of Kanak political social and cultural demands.

The women's movement responded to numerous problems in the Melanesian world. Contemporary commentator Marie Claude Tjibaou said:

The people drink a good deal, men often beat their wives. Kanak society has been in a state of decay and it is absolutely necessary to get it moving again so that Kanaks become more aware of their situation and can do something about it.

(qtd in Mwà Vée 46)

In 1975 the women's movement shared in the work of Jean-Marie Tjibaou to create a festival showing the specificity of Melanesian culture, called *Melanesia 2000*. Moreover, there were several significant connections with the French women's movement. For example, in 1983 Scolastique Pidjot had created the Women's Advisory Centre at the same time as Marie Claire Becalossi set up the Office for Women in the South Pacific Commission. Presently a second generation of Kanak women are at the centre of the independence movement. Déwé Gorodé remains the figurehead based on her political stature and her literary work, even if she is no longer the only one known and recognised. She is now Vice President of the government of New Caledonia. She wants to put in place an observer on the state of women in New Caledonia. Within this second wave Kanak women are entering political institutions: Valentine Eurisouke, for example, is the president of the Office of Women in the northern province, while Elaine Ixeco, elected by the southern province, is responsible for Women's Affairs.

The foregoing is far from a thorough analysis of the many movements and associations, widely dispersed but all very dynamic. Above all we want to show that the coming to writing of Kanak women — the central focus of this essay —

is part of a movement that is much broader and much older. First was their entry into salaried work, followed by academic success. Further, those young women who wanted to participate in the writing classes organised since 2001 in New Caledonia have taken up a new angle. In the hopes of all these women, who are preoccupied with academic success for all young Kanaks and who engage with a balanced approach to bilingualism, with the pride of writing and speaking in the Kanak languages equally with French, the cultural demands are tied to politics in the broadest sense. The transmission of Kanak culture in all its dynamic and evolutionary aspects appears to be a stake that transcends political division.

WOMEN AND WRITING

However the movement for the revival and teaching of Kanak languages is not seen to replace French as the main language of New Caledonia. This is partly due to practical necessity given the shortage of appropriately qualified Kanak language teachers and also due to the pervasiveness of French as a dominant language. The maintenance of French is seen as a deliberate strategy to enable ‘both ways’ learning to the empowerment of Indigenous new Caledonian peoples ‘because when I write in French I use a Kanak way of thinking ... somehow by using the French language to achieve my ends I am engaging in subversion’ (Gorodé qtd in Mwà Véeé 24).

In discussing the present and future possibilities of Kanak language education in New Caledonia, Déwé Gorodé, an accomplished Kanak writer and widely respected leader of the emergent genre of Kanak women’s literature and past civil rights activist says: ‘My thinking on ... my own language and Kanak languages in general goes hand in hand with a consciousness that is first and foremost political before being cultural’ (qtd in Mwà Véeé 24). Gorodé places the notion of experiencing education and learning through the ‘mother tongue’ within the context of representation, identity and subjective meaning: ‘My own language represents a whole world. It is the whole history of the group that shares this language — past, present and what is to come ... languages ... represent a tremendous human history’ (qtd in Mwà Véeé 24). She believes that cultural meaning is given expression and power through language.

Marianne Hnyeikone, a teacher of French and Drehu (one of the Kanak languages), sees the significance of Kanak language teaching in the classroom as generating a new type of relation based on respect and recognition of cultural difference between student and teacher:

Through languages you learn who you are, your real nature. You also learn that what was sometimes presented and explained to us when we were children as a fixed and unchangeable, rests on knowledge that has never stopped evolving and which continues to do so. (qtd in Mwà Véeé 27)

Hnyeikone goes on to describe the journey shared with students:

[We] delve into [their] own language and culture ... getting closer to the heart of things ... we are communicating with our ancient culture, like through a window that is open onto the past. (qtd in Mwà Véeé 27)

So for these Kanak women language operates as much more than a communications system: it enables cultural transmission and cultural maintenance, it brings with it dreams and visions and allows people to think in terms of histories and futures. We now turn to one of the texts produced by Kanak women writers with the explicit intention of responding to these stated aims.

THE TEXT

The text that forms the basis of our analysis is *L'enfant Kaori/Wanakat Kaori*, which is the third book in the series of picture books for young children published by Grains de Sable and emerging from the Tjibaou Cultural Centre's project to produce work by Kanak writers. To this end the centre held a series of workshops in order to explore the ways in which children's stories could be produced offering an integrated approach to language and culture. In this case both the author, Maleta Hambouy, and the illustrator, Isabelle Goulou, are Kanak women who responded to the current issues for Kanak youth noted above. The project constitutes one explicit example of the expression of the central relationship between Indigenous women and cultural renewal.

All three books in the series are bi-lingual, written in French and one specific Kanak language — *L'enfant Kaori/Wanakat Kaori* is written in French and Iaii — modelling a linguistic collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers and speakers. The stories are creative derivations from foundational myths but are in themselves not simple replications of the myths as that would not be consistent with cultural practices governing who may speak the myths and who may listen. Perhaps the most striking feature of all these works are the wonderful illustrations which, in the way of many children's books, function as a bridge between the visual and the written, the spoken and the written, and constitute a form of cultural representation irreducible to language alone. Our analysis examines the illustrations in some detail below. But first we turn to the actual story.

THE STORY

The story begins with Nani, a woman whose husband is lost at sea. She goes to the forest looking for a sign from him. Then she hears a voice coming from nowhere which tells her that 'we are expecting you — look inside the water hole'. When she looks she sees a woman spirit who tells her that she is the guardian of the waters and that all the forest trees are her children. The woman spirit tells her that the trees are mourning the death of the giant Kauri. 'You too have lost someone close to you'. Nani replies 'Yes, my husband!' and the guardian of the waters tells Nani that her husband cut the giant Kauri to build his dugout canoe. Nani asks for mercy but the guardian says that Nani's husband has killed her child without the customary gestures and so he is punished and in prison. Nani wants to free him and then the guardian, seeing that she is pregnant, asks for her child as a replacement for the child (tree) that has been lost [see fig. 1]. In spite of Nani's pleas the guardian does not relent and Nani agrees to part with

the child. When she returns home her husband is there. After some time they go together to the forest and pause near the tree stump where a young shoot is growing. Nani bewails missing her child but her husband comforts her with the idea that her child will be king of the forest and the waters. One of Nani's tears falls on the stem and she wails, 'How I would love to hear just once that you forgive me for everything'. A soft rain begins to fall and she hears a sweet voice saying 'I forgive you'.

PART I ANALYSIS

From the outset the book's cover links the human to the natural and outside world. The art work is arresting, using deep colours and consistent patterning that shows a continuation of life from front to back. Thus the story ends and begins with the same image. The illustrations are clearly involved and function in the telling of the story. A young child or someone not literate in French or Iaii can gather most of the story from the images. Like other children's storybooks the space occupied by the pictures gives dominance to particular aspects of the story. Nani is represented as a deliberately imprecise human figure — neither black nor white, not visibly female or male. She is timeless, ageless, gender less and not racialised. Her amorphous physicality does not change throughout the story. Nani is human spirit. The choice of illustration is leading toward universalism. It allows for and encourages identification from a range of viewers/readers.

PART II ANALYSIS — PLACE AND GENDER

Prior to the written story beginning the reader is located in a 'place' imbued with cultural meaning. On opening the book the reader is confronted with the mystery of the dark green forest [see fig. 2]. Symbols conjure images of the ancient — not just Kanak but from all Oceania. Indeed, the illustration aligns the reader with Oceania by using the image of the 'pirogue' (dug-out/outrigger) along with images of shells and sea creatures. From the first page the reader is invited into a symbolic and spiritual world. In particular the repeated image of the watching eye indicates there is a presence here, giving a strong sense of the metaphysical context in which the story operates.

Feminist geographers have theorised place and its importance to collective and individual identities (for example, Domosh and Seager 2001; Grosz 1995; Massey 1994, 1999; McDowell 1983, 1999; Valentine 1989, 1996). Massey (1994) in particular has challenged the notion that the forces of globalisation decrease the relevance of place and hence serve to reduce spatial differences. In other words, globalisation has been understood as having a hegemonic effect in creating new global spaces which in turn reduce the importance of the local. Thus it is sometimes assumed that globalisation ends the sense of 'local attachment of belonging to a place with all its local idiosyncrasies and cultural forms' (McDowell 1999 2). This is not to argue that globalisation has no impact on the daily lives and customs of Kanak peoples. Arguing for the importance of the local — and

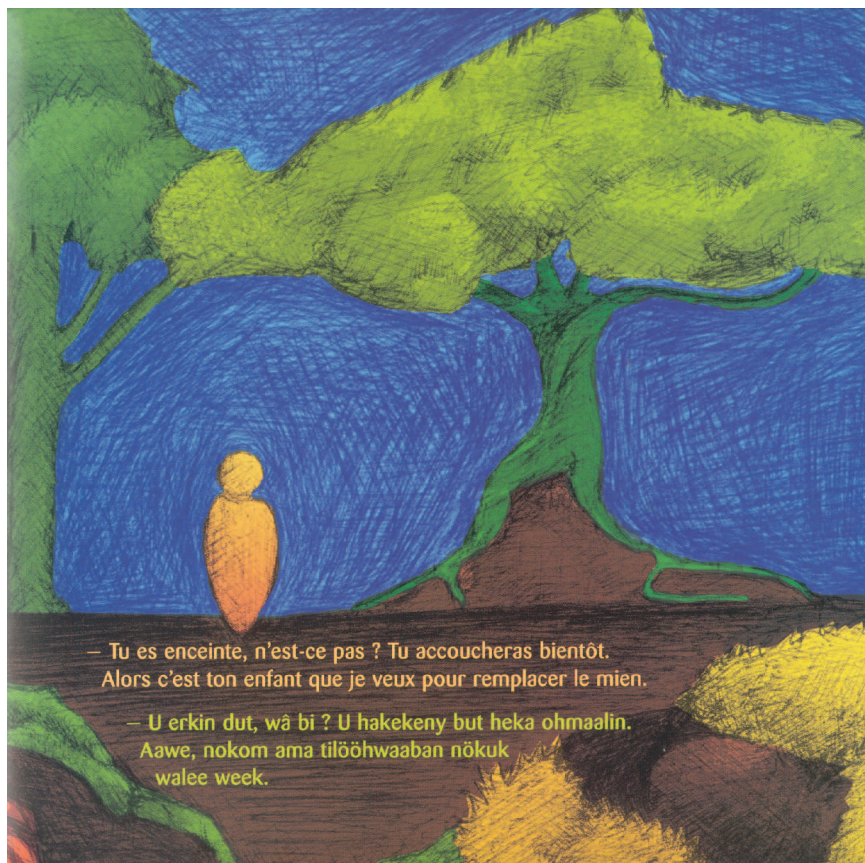


Figure 1, from Maélta Hombouy's *L'enfant Kaori*, illustration by Isabelle Goulou, p 19.

therefore place — entails a recognition that, despite effects of globalised economies, people live everyday life inevitably in a finite area. In the socio-political present of New Caledonia, place has meaning on different scales. It has meaning as a region and this is particularly evident in questions about the political positioning with other Kanak peoples, thus the terms Oceania, Oceanic, Pacific and South Pacific are used to collectively identify people and their customs. Place has also a more finite meaning. For example, within New Caledonia place is also understood as Ouvea, Noumea, Lifou, that is, islands with different languages, political, racial, social and therefore cultural historical meanings.

Indeed, Kanak women's writing (of which *L'enfant Kaori/Wanakat Kaori* is one example) serves to underscore local meanings. All these works are written in languages that have relevance to place and exemplify the importance of place. The story of *L'enfant Kaori/Wanakat Kaori* claims the importance of space, place

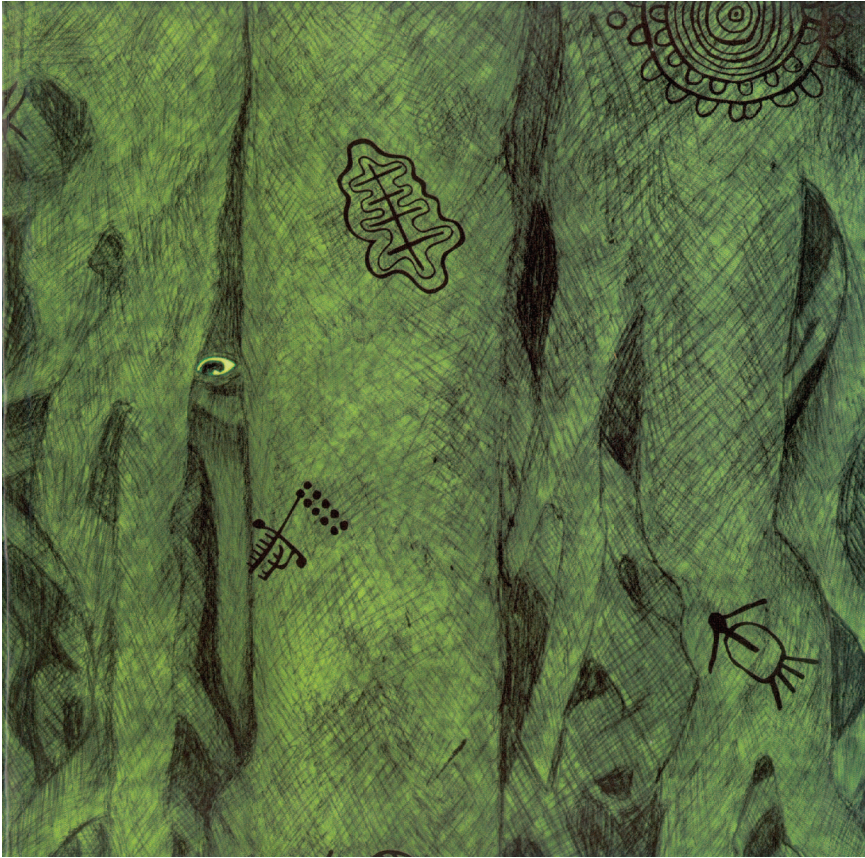


Figure 2, from Maélta Hombouy's *L'enfant Kaori*, inside front cover, illustration by Isabelle Goulou.

and time as it is written intentionally to link past generations with the present and to prepare new generations as it transmits and retains a sense of place for the future.

The reader is immersed in local beliefs which are neither hegemonic nor static. They are influenced by globalisation and colonisation but nevertheless are beliefs associated with and attributed to places inhabited by Kanak peoples. The opening cover page depicting the deep green mysterious forest with its watching eye brings the reader to the world of Kanaks. The story suggests that nature will provide signs. The pictorial image transcends the meanings of the words but the two languages, French and Iaii, are there. Despite the use of French words, Kanak story and culture dominate through the images. At the same time the reader is confronted with numerous symbols widely known through the region indicative of oceanic culture.

In the context of gender and place, Massey (1994) exposes place as open to and affecting gender relations and vice versa. *L'enfant Kaori/Wanakat Kaori* is overtly gendered in its messages and ascriptions of male and female roles. Nani is portrayed as needing male protection — she is child like and slightly shy as she hides near the tree. More telling are her feelings of being incomplete without her husband. When confronted with the sacrifice that the guardian of the trees and forest exacts from her, she agrees to give her first born because for her living alone is intolerable: 'I do not want to continue to live alone without him, without his return'. Of course the notion of living alone could be a modern non-Kanak representation, but Kanak culture does claim to validate the group over the individual and the transference of ownership of a child at the wishes of the chief is not unknown. At the same time, however, it is Nani who is woman, mother and wife, who must suffer and bear the decision alone to sacrifice self and her relation to child or husband.

As the story progresses it is evident that the absent husband has a good deal of power over Nani. The story revolves around him being missing and his transgression. He looms physically large over her as he tells her, 'It was not a sacrifice for nothing ... I love you for that'. The story recognises that a sacrifice occurs and that it is a gendered sacrifice — to her cost but not his. It also recognises that the transgression occurs by a male and his need to control and/or take from the environment without thought for the progression of life. In both instances — the husband consoling Nani and the recognition of his transgression — the reader is alerted to gendered power relations.

Curiously the depiction of Nani and her husband remains relatively ungendered except for a consistent size difference in favour of the larger husband. We know Nani is a woman because of what she says — even her pregnancy is stated but not drawn. As readers of the text we might ask why in such a gendered story do the main characters remain unsexed and in many ways not human?

PART III ANALYSIS — EDUCATION

From an educational standpoint *L'Enfant Kaori/Wanakat Kaori* can be seen to achieve its original aim of producing a bilingual children's picture book which strives to 'maintain a keen awareness of the material and symbolic expressions of Kanak way of life' (Tjibaou 11). Thus it comprises a children's story, complete with illustrations, inspired by, although not a literal translation of, themes from foundational Kanak myths. It makes a clear commitment to the recognition of Kanak language at the centre of cultural transmission, along with acknowledgement of the French language as part of dominant culture in New Caledonia. In this doubling of language the work also comprises a series of dualisms, a doubling of cultures with the Indigenous themes presented in contemporary western text, beautiful illustrations in the style of primitive drawings, a simple albeit metaphysical storyline that stands in contradistinction to the widely accepted realist genre that has been long dominant in writing for western children.

The book enables more complex analyses than perhaps usually associated with writing for children. In a fascinating fold (Deleuze 1997; St Pierre 1997) it combines the sorts of dominant understandings of Kanak mythology within its makers' political commitment to the preservation and maintenance of Indigenous culture. In refusing some of the binary distinctions between reality and myth, picture and words, French and Kanak, human life and that of other living things such as plants, the story positions the reader, regardless of age, as entering the field of Indigenous culture. What then are the themes the reader is likely to take from this story?

First there is the capacity for moral didacticism in which this work resonates with children's stories across the ages — Aesop, LaFontaine and the Brothers Grimm all recorded stories which had pre-existed in oral traditions and which had a distinct flavour of 'the lesson'. The moral here concerns the requirement to respect nature and the natural order and specifically that there are culturally ordained practices to which one must conform in order to avoid retribution for transgressions such as cutting the tree without permission. These rules as set out by the spirit, the guardian of the waters and of the forest, also imply that the spirit world has the capacity to monitor all behaviour and to punish transgressions. In this feature the trope of the all-seeing, all-knowing God of both the Old and New testaments is not too distant from the concept of the spirit, along with the more recent Orwellian notion of 'Big Brother'. The idea of an invisible presence watching is presented in both the text and the illustrations. The idea that the young readers will take up the notion of being 'under observation' and consequently become self monitoring resonates with Foucault's theory of the function of surveillance through which the gaze becomes internalised and hence we constantly self-monitor and thereby conform to expectations (Foucault 1977). At the same time this work is most definitely a Kanak cultural production: 'One of the few valid generalisations that can be made about Melanesian religions is that they all include a belief in a variety of spirits, some of human origin and some not, who interact with living human beings' (Chowning 5837). Thus by introducing the existence of the spirit world this story plays to a key theme in Kanak culture.

A related theme deliberately embraced by the writers concerns the need to write about death and the giving up of children — both topics that while not uncommon occurrences in Kanak families are seldom discussed, especially around children. The story works to normalise death and disappearance by constructing a spirit world wherein life goes on, albeit in a different form. Simultaneously this move serves to open up the possibilities of a magical space in which the rules of the real world do not necessarily apply — people can disappear, be presumed lost and then miraculously reappear.

Secondly the presentation of Nani carries some clear messages about the role and place of woman — and yet these messages also contain ambiguities. Nani is

both victim and key agent in the story. Throughout, Nani is presented as sad, weeping for the loss of her husband and then of her child. While she was not the transgressor she certainly must bear the punishment which she feels much more keenly than her husband who wants her to rejoice in his return and to celebrate the fact that their child will be powerfully placed in the spirit world. While on first reading perhaps it seems that Nani emerges as the classic victim, she also undertakes key responsibilities for the return of the husband, for the decision about the fate of the child. At one level she appears as the archetypal woman, caring, nurturing, pleading for assistance, smaller, weaker than the other characters, begging forgiveness. On another level she is key to the entire story. While from a western feminist perspective Nani appears as the traditional woman victim, she also reflects the central place of woman in the Kanak culture which associates woman with life and blood and privileges the mother's family — 'uterine' kin relationships — above all others:

My blood is my life, but it is the life that comes to me from my mother's totem, from the maternal clan, that flows in me. And I have no right to squander it. I must bless and honour it because it is mine, but it does not belong to me. (Tjibaou 26)

Nani is shown as weeping tears of blood reflecting these connections. In these ways Nani embodies some of the key tensions within western feminism — the need to respect cultural difference within a framework that encourages women to be active and powerful. Of course the intersections of gender and culture are inevitably complex and do not allow simple reductionism. The power of a simple storyline to give rise to these complexities is a further achievement of the work.

A third message embedded in the story concerns the sense that one is never complete as an individual but always necessarily and only exists in relation to others. Nani's renunciation of a life alone resonates with Kanak understandings of the importance of the group — in Nani's case it is the literal connection with the husband.

Life is given by blood. Blood is given by the mother. And she is the owner of that blood as are her brothers, her fathers. So I always remain dual. I am never undivided. I cannot be individual. The body is never a principle of individualism. The body is always a relationship. (Tjibaou 28)

Thus there is a sense in which these quasi human characters stand for much more than individual actors — they are archetypes such that Nani is everywoman (as in the *Everyman*, the early British miracle play) a vehicle through which all readers, regardless of age, sex or race can identify and through whose story important cultural truths are reiterated. Significantly the sensations of sadness, loss, guilt and loneliness are not restricted to the world of humans but are also shared by the trees and the spirit world which the trees signify. The fragility of the individual as compared to the strength and comfort of the collective — here made emblematic by Nani plus husband or the world of the trees — is another message in the story.

In ways reminiscent of women's undertakings in other Indigenous societies (Knott 1997; Leonard 1997), the Kanak women writers deliberately chose to use these illustrated books as a way of maintaining Indigenous language and culture. Up until this point the only widely available work translated into a Kanak language had been the Bible; and yet culture as we know it is never static, always dynamic acting and interacting with the range of contexts and issues, people and politics. The move from an oral tradition to a written one has sometimes been regarded as freezing the storytelling aspect of culture at a particular point. However, examples of tropes from other cultural myths run through the Nani story. For instance, the practice of giving up the first born child is not unknown in contemporary Kanak culture — usually in response to a request from the tribal chief. Chowning notes that in Melanesia 'the souls of babies are particularly vulnerable to attack or capture by other spirits' (5832). To some degree the practice echoes the Christian idea of the supreme sacrifice of the Son which itself echoed the Old Testament story of Isaac. From this standpoint the reader is able to discern elements of Kanak culture not as frozen on the page but rather as a culture that lives and transmogrifies as its stories resonate with ideas from other cultures, other stories and combine in new ways to reiterate important cultural truths. For the child readers already versed in some of the foundational myths there would be a ready recognition of familiar storylines while for others there would undoubtedly be aspects which translate readily into attitudes and understandings with which there is some sense of familiarity. For those of us outside Kanak culture there are easily made connections with old stories and biblical allusions.

Perhaps the key educational achievement of this story lies in its capacity to make readers and listeners aware of the constructions that they bring to it, serving to reinforce the cultural connections of those who are insiders while for the non-Indigenous there are connections to older societies and to questions of conscience, the moral order and spirituality.

CONCLUSION

In this brief analysis of one children's picture book we have shown how the Kanak women, author and illustrator, have combined to share their knowledge through this production and in so doing make this knowledge available to their readers. They are consciously political actors in this book production thereby taking their place within a clear tradition of the Indigenous struggle for cultural renewal. The analysis we have offered comes together as a dialogue between four women writers/authors from multi-disciplinary and situational perspectives guided by reader-response theory. To some degree our different voices can be heard in our conjoint efforts to acknowledge the original purpose of this writing — to share deep cultural knowledge and to present it in ways that acknowledge the importance of language in cultural heritage. We find it significant that the women have responded to the challenge to write their stories as their response

underscores the traditional role of women as nurturing and caring for the young along with the dynamic political motivation that urges cultural revival. Thus they operate in ways consistent with the totemic beliefs of Kanak culture about the importance and centrality of women — that life comes from the mother's blood and this communal blood identity is the life that comes from my mother's totem, from the maternal clan. Significantly in New Caledonia it has been Kanak women who have maintained language privately within families and communities and campaigned publicly for institutionalised language education. This practice is also reminiscent of the roles played by women in many Australian Aboriginal and other Indigenous societies (Gale 1997; Knott 1998; Leonard 1997). It would appear that Indigenous mothers are seen as having a vital role to play in language and cultural transmission: 'if as a mother I do not speak my own language with my child, who is going to?' (Mwà Véeé 24).

NOTES

- ¹ In April 2005, Dominique Jouve interviewed Tyla Ayrault about her work as an author of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre's 'Grain de Sable' youth project.

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