

## **Self-determination referendum, mining and ‘interdependence’: Reading the current political conjuncture in New Caledonia**

*Marta Gentilucci*

*PhD student, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy*

[ma.gentilucci@gmail.com](mailto:ma.gentilucci@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** A self-determination referendum was held in New Caledonia on 4 November 2018 and, to the great astonishment of the anti-independence parties, the separatists secured 43% of the vote. A few months before this so-called “appointment with destiny”, French President Emmanuel Macron visited New Caledonia, where he underlined how the presence of France, the second maritime power in the world, was fundamental to contrast the expanding hegemony of China in the Pacific. Of course, control over natural resources, and nickel in particular, is also significant. Building on ten months of fieldwork in the northern region of New Caledonia, this article looks at the role of mining in political arrangements for New Caledonia’s future. It explores (1) the stakes of an independence referendum; (2) the relations between ‘islandness’ and natural resource management; and (3) the desire of indigenous people to be present and acknowledged within the global system.

**Keywords:** decolonisation, Indo-Pacific axis, islandness, Kanaky, New Caledonia, nickel, referendum, resource management

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### **Introduction**

In some independent states and in territories on the road to decolonisation, the colonial past is not an abstract memory but rather “unfinished business”, given the stark socio-economic inequalities that persist between indigenous and settler populations (Johnson, 2018, p. 2; Mbembe, 2018). If we look at the latest census (2014) of New Caledonia, we notice 23,000 inhabitants more than the previous one (2009), among which 8,000 immigrants. Only 75% of local population growth is domestic; of the rest, 16% were born in France or in another French department, 2.7% in Wallis and Futuna, 1.5% in Polynesia and 4.8% in another country. This increase in population is much higher than that of France (+0.5%), French Polynesia (+0.6%) or Wallis and Futuna (-1.9%) (Broustet & Rivoilan, 2015). Not without reason, immigration is still at the core of the debate around the list of voters in New Caledonia. Decades of immigration from France and other French overseas territories have rendered the indigenous Kanak population a demographical minority in its own land. This means that the Kanak independence movement is unable to obtain dominate local politics and win an independence

The Accords of Matignon-Oudinot (1988) and of Nouméa (1998) did set up the foundations for an irreversible decolonisation process; and New Caledonia is included in the UN list of jurisdictions yet to be decolonised. However, decolonisation is not a simple issue of institutional status change – from an overseas territory to a sovereign state – as defined in international law. It is a deeper transformation. The French State still holds five sovereign powers (defence, most aspects of foreign relations, finance and currency, justice and public order) over New Caledonia. It participates in the decolonisation process through some specific funding measures: these are ways of redeeming itself from its colonial legacy, while assuring its presence and influence in the Pacific. France directly financed some military and civic investment like for example bought of ships and aircrafts or maintenance of cultural heritage

(in 2016 total expenditure was nearly US\$52m; public expenditure was around US\$356,000 and funding for public entities, such as “Institution of Research for Development” and the “French Agency for the Biodiversity”, around US\$37m). This to give an idea of the fiscal transfers from France to New Caledonia (IEOM, 2017). These transfers are repeatedly criticised by separatist parties because they do not encourage self-reliance or an internal economic dynamic, most of are eventually returned to the state coffers (via taxes, etc.) and thwart the Kanak people from exercising control over fiscal prudence, public administration and funding, which lie at the basis of political power on the island territory. In addition, the French state is the major shareholder of ERAMET, the parent-company of *Société Le Nickel*, SLN, which holds a 53% share in New Caledonia’s nickel deposits at the Doniambo site (SLN, 2019). For this reason, France is often accused by separatists of having lingering colonial and imperialist interests in the territory.

From the other side, the Kanaks have been engaged since the 1980s, in a process of decolonisation that seeks to break with the centre-periphery models of France/New-Caledonia and South Province/North Province, and have come to focus instead on the “interdependencies” (Tjibaou, 1996, p. 179). The *Société Minière du Sud Pacifique* (SMSP), a local mining company whose major shareholder is the Northern Province under the control of Kanak separatist parties, now owns 51% of the single on-shore nickel project in New Caledonia called “Koniambo” and two more offshore in South Korea and China. Looking beyond a post-colonial approach concerning the ways in which rich countries exploit poor ones, this paper explores how a significant proportion of Indigenous people has the desire to be present and acknowledged within the global system. Nickel conveys the desire of Being-there-in-the-world, the *Dasein* of Martin Heidegger. How else to escape from the colonial system in which Kanak found themselves immersed? Being-there, existing, means to relate with other things present in the world in order to realise one’s own project. Market forces and mining become instruments and ways of openness, voice and visibility, and no longer of suppression (Horowitz, 2004).

Based on ten months of fieldwork in the northern region of New Caledonia and inspired by the historic event marked by the referendum, the aim of this paper – which is more ethnographic than theoretical – is to analyse the role of mining in the political arrangements being considered for New Caledonia’s future. In particular, this paper examines: 1) the stakes of an independence referendum; 2) the relations between islandness and the management of natural resources; and 3) the desire of Indigenous people to be present and acknowledged within the global system. The current political conjuncture of stalemate (the next two referendums are scheduled for 2020 and 2022 respectively), the geographical position of this archipelago and the geo-strategic aspirations of the French State, together with the separatists’ determination to secure independence, cast a light on future mining policies and practices in that territory.

### **“France would not be the same without New Caledonia”**

Before going into the subject of this article, let me briefly evoke an important moment in the history of the process of decolonisation of New Caledonia, in order to understand the way in which France looks at and relates to New Caledonia.

Built on an imperialistic project of settlement, New Caledonia was an unprecedented experience in French history. It was the product of a social experiment that wanted to build a new society, blending condemned and ‘honest’ migrants (Merle, 1993). New Caledonia, conceived as a privileged container for the most dangerous criminal classes of France, was subjected to its own brand of settlement politics. This was immediately successful. At the end of penal colony (1897), immigrants comprised more than 20% of the entire local population

and *Grand Terre* (the large island of New Caledonia) already had the aspect of a “little Austral France”, an overseas symbol of national power. The discovery of nickel (1863) by French engineer Jules Garnier consolidated the French presence in the Pacific Ocean. Nickel was and remains a strategic mineral for France (Ward, 2017).

“France would not be the same without New Caledonia.” If the subtle purpose of French President Emmanuel Macron visiting New Caledonia just a few months before the referendum for independence was to push the local citizenry to remain French, my interlocutors perceived this sentence in a colonial way: “France is beautiful, thanks to our mineral richness”, as they usually said to me angrily but with some pride as well. In relation to other Pacific islands, New Caledonia was left untouched much longer by European explorers. It was in 1774 that British captain James Cook landed on Balade, on the north-east coast of *Grande Terre*. Its inhabitants – not yet called ‘Kanak’ – lived in groups, mainly in the valleys and near the sea. Only in 1853 did France officially take possession of the territory, guided by Admiral Febvrier-Despointes. On April 2018, I was on site doing fieldwork when French President announced his forthcoming overseas visit and the restitution of the original colonisation deeds, previously conserved in the archives of Aix-en-Provence, in continental France. The first was signed in Balade on 24 September 1853; and the other five days later on the Isle of Pines. Reactions within the population were mixed: for some, it was a symbol of confirmed reconciliation; for others, simply a publicity stunt; and for some separatist leaders, a “missed opportunity” – as Daniel Goa, spokesperson of the separatist party “Union Calédonienne”, confessed to me. No act of forgiveness in a “traditional way” took place; nor was there a public recognition of colonisation as a “crime against humanity”, as Macron stated when visiting the former French colony of Algeria in 2017 (RFI, 2017).

For the second time, the international media spotlight has been turned onto the island of Ouvéa. In the 1980s, tensions between the indigenous Kanak communities and the Europeans erupted into violence and culminated on 5 May 1988 with the assault of the cave of Ouvéa: nineteen separatists were killed by French army. Exactly thirty years later, and for the first time since that bloody event remembered as the “Drama of Ouvéa”, this island has hosted a French president during its commemoration day. At the same time, the “Comité Gossanah” – a group of people constituted mainly by the relatives of dead Kanaks which did not want the presence of Macron - was prevented by the police from participating in the commemoration for the first time, as a security measure (Petési and Goapana, 2018). Nevertheless, local media defined Macron as a “ferryman”, an interlocutor whose role was to recognise the past and transform it into a bridge for the future. In one of Macron’s speech overseas, he deploys a linear and cumulative sense of history,

New Caledonia is an addition of stories, often tragic, others happy, all of them characterised by bravery and the desire to be successful. There are Kanaks, Caldoches, Z’oreilles, Wallisians, Futunians, Polynesians, Javanese, Japanese, and others who have built what is New Caledonia today. What we have done this morning in Iaai (Ouvéa) is to also reconcile our stories. ... We are in this alliance of memories and this is an irreversible movement (Elysée, 2018).

The act of reconciliation was symbolised that day by Macron planting a coconut tree, which represents fertility in the Kanak culture. Assuming that the past could be disconnected from the present is a well-rooted idea in the western notion of history. “Past” defines “modern”, by opposition (Hirsch & Stewart, 2005, p. 265). On the contrary, in the Kanak culture, past is physically inscribed on landscape, in genealogy, on bodies, and it is constantly performed in quotidian discourse. The “customary paths” (*chemins coutumiers*) are an expression of the relational frame of Kanak society. This notion comes from the rough physical tracks that men

followed to go to the territory of another clan. These itineraries became part of the landscape and they were the natural network of the exchange of foods, to get access for fishing or hunting, and to ask for a woman in marriage. Although these *chemins coutumiers* are virtual because Kanaks can now use other and faster roads, they still structure relationships between individuals, families and clans. These paths have been inaugurated in the past and sometimes mythical times and, if respected, they are seen to guarantee a society's future. Following this spatial and temporal logic, Macron should have to pursue a specific path, giving back the original deed: he would need to make a traditional act of contrition in Balade, where the original deed was signed, and then he should have deposited it in the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, delivering it to the customary authorities of the specific customary area "Djubéa-Kaponé". Macron was supposed to 'renew' history, there is a customary path that has to be respected, giving the deed back to customary authorities means that it is recognised that it is the Kanak people who have been colonised (personal interview). In the eyes of the Kanak, Macron reduced this act to a simple geographical transfer without any deep appreciation for its historical significance.

### **What it is at stake in the Self-determination Referendum**

The increasing power of separatist parties has repeatedly challenged the French government. The last provincial elections, held on 22 May 2019, have confirmed this power and nourished the ethnical and geographical gap between the Kanak and non-Kanak, as well as between the (more Indigenous) north and the (more European) south of *Grande Terre*. Recent elections have also introduced a new political force: the moderate loyalist party *Calédonie Ensemble* has been replaced by a more radical *Avenir en Confiance*.

However, the major victory for separatist groups remains the result of the 4 November 2018 referendum. Against all statistical projections and polls, 43.33% of electors voted for independence, with an unusually low turn-out at just 81.01% (Haut Commissariat, 2018), the most remarkable one in the history of independence referendum in New Caledonia. According to data collected by Denise Fisher (2019b), in local provincial elections from 1999, turn-out has varied from 69.95% to 76.42%, in French parliamentary elections it has been around 40%, and in European elections only 27.5% in 2014. The result of this last referendum is fundamental for maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the United Nations: if it had been low, there would have been the risk of deletion from its list of territories to be decolonised.

I was in the field when, on 1 May 2018, FLNKS launched its campaign for independence. Although separatist leaders had already started their propaganda with the presentation of the "Projet de Société", that day they officially announced the forthcoming informational tour among the tribes, finalised to convince and help registering Kanak people in the "special electoral list for the referendum" (LESC). The main issue was to physically search for those who had no identification card. Living with the secretary of the separatist mayor of Koné, I have had also the opportunity to follow closely the informational tour organised by FLNKS in the houses of Caldoches, descendants of the first *colons* and convicts and traditionally pro-France. A few months after the launch of the FLNKS campaign, the Labour Party and the syndicalist party USTKE - who had broken with the FLNKS - voted to boycott the referendum because they claimed it was illegitimate: for them, in a true self-determination referendum, only the colonised people should have the right to choose whether to remain French or become independent. In the last Signatory Committee of the Nouméa Agreement met in Paris on 2 November 2017, pro-independence parties obtained to have Kanak registered automatically, in return of the opening of LESC to all people born in New Caledonia with only three years of permanent residence (Gouvernement France, 2017).

FLNKS is the only separatist entity which, from the start of the decolonisation process, officially presented a project for an independent society, a set of fundamental principles for a new independent state. According to this document, the political institutions of the territory would be organised as follow: electors would vote for municipalities and provinces; the national assembly would be composed of members of provinces; the President of the Republic would be elected by a Committee composed of members of the national assembly, the Chamber of Representatives and municipalities. Only the President would be able to dissolve the national assembly and propose a government, which in turn can be approved or not by the national assembly. One of the main changes is the insertion of the Chamber of Representatives that would replace the current Customary Senate. This would be made up of representatives of all communities present in New Caledonia. The Customary Senate does not agree with the FLNKS project, not simply because of the potential reduction of their institutional authority; but also because they do not share the same nickel-management policy. Although the Labour Party has boycotted the referendum, and the separatist movement is much more fragmented, the referendum has demonstrated that separatists are unified in the same objective: independence from France.

During the next three years of stalemate, the challenge for France will be to remain neutral. Away from being just a bad memory, *Les Evènements* (the Events) are still an open chapter of New Caledonia's history. In order to assure regional and internal stability, this process will be supervised by neighbouring states, the Pacific Islands Forum and the United Nations, which have monitored the decolonisation process. The future of New Caledonia and Bougainville takes on greater regional importance, as the Pacific Islands Forum and Melanesian Spearhead Group debate the issue of West Papua (MacLellan, 2018; Fisher, 2019a). Moreover, given the growing network of shared solidarity between secessionist and pro-independence movements in the Pacific (Asia Pacific Report, 2018a, 2018b; Francinfo 2018a, 2018b), we can assume that instabilities in New Caledonia could influence the forthcoming self-determination referendum in Bougainville, as well as the separatist parties in Western Papua and in French Polynesia, creating a domino effect and provoking instabilities in other islands of the Pacific. In a personal interview with the journalist Nic MacLellan (2019), Oscar Temaru, leader of the Maohi independence movement, said that they are sure that the accession of New Caledonia to independence and sovereignty will also mean self-determination for their country Maohi Nui.

However, France is obviously committed to being present in the Pacific. The French overseas presence in the Pacific Ocean is a huge weight for conserving France' status as a world power. Its huge Exclusive Economic Zones make it the second world maritime nation after United States, as Macron has repeatedly highlighted in his stay in New Caledonia. Following Fisher (2019a), France is still interested in exploring the large hydrocarbon and natural gas reserves off-shore that seem to have been discovered by French and Australian scientists between the economic exclusive zones of New Caledonia and Australia (Nouze et al., 2009; Valley et al., 2003). IFREMER published a study on new mineral exploration opportunities offshore. The introduction to the document holds the motivation for the project,

Taking into account the risks of Europe's shortage of strategic metals supplies for many industries ... With a vast oceanic territory, technological means and skills long recognised in the study of large sea beds, France must remain a major player in this exploration, at a time when the conditions for industrial development are being designed (IFREMER, 2011, p. 3).

Nodules rich in cobalt and platinum have been found off the western coast of French Polynesia and iron, manganese, cobalt and some gold and silver off New Caledonia (Fisher, 2019a; Sénat 2012; Sénat 2013). After Brexit, France will be the only European Union state in the Pacific Ocean (considering that the United Kingdom's presence is restricted to the Pitcairn Islands); but "one of many more players in the region" (Fisher, 2015, p. 3),

As a sovereign resident power, France has a privileged position at regional tables such as Quadrilateral Defence Meetings with the United States, Australia and New Zealand, with the Pacific arguably overtaking the Atlantic in geostrategic importance, and other players seeking to engage in the region. New Caledonia has replaced French Polynesia as France's Pacific strategic priority (Fisher, 2019, p.16).

Meanwhile, Australia's perception of an Indo-Pacific axis – a geopolitical partnership between the Indo-Pacific Ocean states – differs from the French one. For Emmanuel Macron, it is a strategy to contrast China's expansion and secure France's presence in the Pacific. Australia, however, is more keen on assuring the geographical area's stability by maintaining good international relations with other "occupying states" of the area (Fisher, 2019).

### **Islandness and Resource Management**

According to Allen (2017), 'islandness' can be an important variable in analyzing social and political economic processes (Baldacchino, 2004, 2005; Mountz, 2013). In New Caledonia, the sense of territorial identity finds its highest expression in the Kanak notion of "land". The words of Paul Néaoutyine, Northern Province President, are emblematic in this regard,

We are Oceanians. Land, which is scarce on our islands, has since time immemorial been the foundation of our social organisation and our life. We have a very close relationship with the land and the sea ... From our perspective, land is either out the water or under the water. Dry land is on an island and submerged land is the river or sea bed (Néaoutyine, 1994, p.109).

Land is at the core of both colonisation processes and separatist claims. By pushing on the particular link with the land as socio-political marker of, and by affirming the right to self-determination in the name of 'Indigeneity', in the 1970s and 1980s first separatist parties made the land issue the symbol of their struggle for independence.

Since the onset of colonisation, the Kanak population was gradually confined in more and more limited spaces, deprived of land and of the possibility of moving freely. It was after 1864 – when a penitentiary centre was created and cattle raising became extensive – that the tendency to expropriate and sell large plots of land really took off. This process had at least three consequences: it encouraged speculative accumulation of land, it over-exploited pastures; and it escalated ethnical conflict. Following the examples of the Indios and Aboriginal Australians, the French government delimited lands recognised as necessary for Indigenous needs through the reserve system. If for European *colons* land represented capital, a marker of prestige and their visible presence in the territory, for Kanaks it was and is (ontologically) important because it hosted ancestral beings. This place-making of Melanesian space, ultimately leads to the notion of 'tribe' and 'collective propriety' (Merle, 1995). That phenomenon, along with massive waves of immigration and the politics of economic marginalisation, reduced Kanak vital space. Allen (2017, p. 85) suggests that "island-wide identities and sociopolitical movements are, in the first instance, the product of experience and struggle associated with the introduction of capitalist social relations under colonialism". In this regard, what follows is part of a long interview granted to me by Paul Néaoutyine,

Islandness is not a problem. We did not know to be an island and that there were bigger countries. We are the native people, we were born here and we have all references here. The starting point is that: we come from here and we are not foreigners (*on est d'ici et pas d'ailleurs*). The fact to be a small island between others in a big archipelago is not a problem. Our identity problem is that we were in our home and another people came to expropriate our lands. They put us in reserves and imposed things for us to do. Therefore, firstly, we took consciousness to be in our home, to exist as a people, then we become aware of nickel. ... We knew about agriculture, environment, that we could built houses, use water, plant yam; but, in our experience, in our custom and in the words we use, there is no word for nickel, for what lies under the ground or for what is on the seabed. But we knew that there are fish in the rivers, trees grow and that we could cultivate crops. It is our environment and we lived off this. The insularity issue in relation to the management of natural resources is something that was imposed on us when they reduced our vital space. First thing to do is find it again. It is our identity claim. (Personal interview, Koné, 2018).

In Néaoutyine's opinion, a reduction of vital space brings out the physical limits of islandness. This geographical condition is not perceived as restrictive: indeed, in a mythical past, Indigenous peoples did not necessarily know to be living on an island, nor that there were bigger and populous countries beyond their shores. Islandness was rendered visible when they lost their daily geographical references (*"We knew about agriculture ..."*) and identity as well. From this time on, the first thing to do for Kanaks became to rediscover their vital space. The "spatial logic of identity" (Bensa, 1992) is a reaction to the French settlement policy that permanently accompanies the Kanak independence movement. This logic played an important role in nationalist movements, not only in New Caledonia but also in nearby Vanuatu (Wittersheim, 2003), Bougainville and the Solomon Islands. In the words of Eloi Poigoune, ex-leader of one of the first Kanak groups which claimed a total return of expropriated lands,

There is a deep link that we have shared generation after generation, between us and the land. I think that it is this notion which pushed me during the struggle for independence. We wanted our deep identity, which was ignored over the years, to be acknowledged (personal interview, Nouméa, 2018).

Land claims were based on the principle that land was a fundamental part of social identity, independently of its economic value. Land expropriation has never cancelled the memory of the places occupied before colonisation, and whose names are still assigned to families and clans.

That nickel is an economic resource is quite obvious; but, in focusing only on its materiality, we risk de-historicising and de-politicising it. Nickel was the instrument used by the colonial system to marginalise the Kanak people. In the 1980s, Jean-Marie Tjibaou began to talk about nickel as an ancestral heritage to be used and exploited in a sustainable way (Tjibaou, 1996). Tjibaou contributed to the geostrategic reorientation of New Caledonia's relationship toward its neighbouring states. He argued,

sovereignty means the right to choose one's partner. For a small country like ours, independence means working out interdependency (Tjibaou, 2005, p. 179).

Although Tjibaou was influenced by the values of the Pacific Way (Crocombe, 1976), Kanak society has been faced with a double challenge: how to emancipate itself from colonial dependence and at the same time become part of a global world. Actually, in New Caledonia,

the Pacific Way has never had the same resonance as in other Pacific islands. If Tjibaou's cultural policies were close to the wave of Indigenous solidarity of the 1970s, his road map remains unique and original. Interdependency was for him an imperative due to the "life in network" of small island societies, a pre-condition of their autonomy and political independence. As Clifford (2013) affirmed, Tjibaou can be viewed as closer to Epeli Hau'ofa because both projected an indigenous-cosmopolitan vision, rejecting instead exclusively ethnic or national policies (Hau'ofa, 1993). If islandness can be a container of violent conflicts (Allen, 2017), at the same time it seems that this geographical condition can become a fundamental variable that nourishes policies of expansion and openness (Favole & Giordana, 2017).

### **Making space for yourself**

"Nickel contains the land and the blood of all the elders who lived there"; "it contains the fight for the independence"; "it is a part of us that travels to share"; "it's our contribution to the construction of the modern world" (personal interviews). These examples of local narratives are very similar to those reported by Katerina Teaiwa on the subject of phosphate, the mineral that for more than a century has consumed Banaba island.

[I]f Banabans think of blood and land as one and the same, it follows then than losing their land, they lost their blood. In losing their phosphate to agriculture, they have spilled their blood in different lands. Their essential roots on Ocean Island are now essentially routes to other places. Places like New Zealand, Australia and Fiji (Teaiwa, 2015, p. 158).

Kanaks want to exit from the colonial economic system by defusing its mechanisms from the inside. It is not a matter of Indigenisation or a re-appropriation of an exogenous world; but of being present and acknowledged within the global system, with the same opportunities as other (sovereign) states. It is an issue of "making space for yourself". From the very first years of colonisation, the Kanaks saw their possibility of movement seriously reduced: first, with the establishment of reserves from 1880; and then the *Code de l'Indigenat*. However, if between the 1970s and 1980s the separatist movement claimed to be recognised as acting on behalf of the Kanak people, fighting for the restitution of expropriated lands, since the end of the 1980s the main axis of the struggle for independence became the economy. The new slogans of FLNKS were: to be self-sufficient; to produce for commerce; to build; and to take control of those economic sectors historically managed by France. This was called the "economy of struggle": an extension of political power into the economic sector. In the words of Jean-Marie Tjibaou,

We – Melanesians on the fringes of the economy – are taking the risk of trying to be involved, of using the economic machinery as a weapon in the fight to win leadership positions and to gain independence. It is an extraordinary gamble because our people have always seen the economy as one of the means of alienation used by the administration, the judicial system, in the arsenal of state apparatus that marginalises and alienates us (Tjibaou, 2005, p. 263).

The 'socialism' that constitutes FLNKS' economic policy must not mislead. Initially, the notion of Kanak socialism referred to micro development projects, in the form of small cooperative enterprises that came into being in the tribes (Demmer, 2016). This allowed to integrate tribes into market logic preserving at the same time a form of social and political organisation based on the relations between the clans, gathered around a chief (*chefferie*). In



the last version of FLNKS' booklet outlining new institutions for an independent state ("Projet de Société") the notion of "socialism" is not well explained; it is only said that it is a "socialism in action" anchored in the real world; while, in public policy meetings, it is often presented as a form of 'solidarity'.

Historically within the FLNKS, the two major parties *Union Calédonienne* and *Palika* does not share the same vision of socialism: one prefers to put forward cultural values (e.g. attachment to the clan and affiliations) and the other - inspired by historical materialism - to social values, fighting against individual interests, social class divisions and politico-economic inequalities.

In general, we can say that "socialism" does not refer to socialist practice as experienced in Western Europe. Rather than an ideology, it is a revolutionary spirit which blends populism and nationalism but also ancient Kanak references with religious ones. It is constituted by the will of breaking with the dominant-dominated relationship, and encouraging power sharing instead.

### **Regional Geopolitics of Nickel**

"In this region of the world, China is building its hegemony, step by step. It is not about fear-mongering, but about looking at reality," President Macron said, addressing Caledonians in 2018. His argument is based on the size of New Caledonia: should it be left unto itself, without the 'protection' of France, the island is too small to prevent being taken over by China. Nevertheless, the French President supports the "Indo-Pacific axis" in order to contrast the geopolitical ambitions of China in the Pacific Ocean; and the local mining society *Société minière du Sud Pacifique* (SMSP), together with the FLNKS, look strategically at being the top producer and exporter of nickel in the world as a partner that may increase its global competitiveness. In the new SMSP trading asset, the territory is compared to a ship that carries nickel ore, as defined by Pascal Goffinet, member of *Union Calédonienne* party, sailing with its bow towards South-East Asia.

According to the USGS (United States Geological Survey), global nickel reserves are estimated at some 95 billion tons in 2018. New Caledonia lies in fifth position (with 7%), preceded by Russia (8%), Brazil (12%), Australia (20%) and Indonesia (22%) (IEOM, 2018). The 1998 Nouméa agreement is important, not only for having recognized the "colonial fact" and the existence of a "Kanak people" for the first time (a unique event among French overseas territories); but also because it completely modified mining policy, transferring ownership of the subsoil from the French State to New Caledonia (art. 57 of "*loi organique*"). Today, the Congress is charged with legislation on mining issues concerning nickel, chrome, cobalt and hydrocarbons. In contrast, each province has the competence to decide who has the right to explore and exploit minerals. Therefore, in the last 30 years, the mining industry in New Caledonia has shifted from being mono-productive to multi-productive: to the historical industry of Doniambo, owned by SLN, whose major shareholder is the French state, has been added the current Brazilian hydro-metallurgic industry owned by "Vale Nouvelle-Calédonie" (VNC) and the pyro-metallurgic one owned by "Koniambo Nickel Sas" (KNS), a joint-venture 51% owned by SMSP and 49% by Glencore-Xstrata (KNS, 2019; VALE, 2019). The structure of capital 51%-49% is not an indication that the subaltern class have obtained control over the means of production, as is often said by the Kanak population. As Paul Néaoutyine told me,

what is Marxist is not the structure of capital but the analysis of political forces. The power of the colonial system can exploit our natural resources to increase the profit of France without any return in New Caledonia" (personal interview, Koné, 2018).

As in Papua New Guinea (PNG), mineral exports account for much of the value of New Caledonia's export total; but, unlike PNG, relatively few people live in poverty in New Caledonia, which has the second highest GDP of all France's overseas regions. There are two mining regulations relating to mineral exports in New Caledonia the "*Schéma de mise en valeur des richesses minières de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*" and the "*Doctrine Nickel*", a mining and industrial strategy adopted by FLNKS in 2015. The second was created in order to encompass a big void left by the first: mining companies are completely free to follow their own trading policy. This means that SLN is free to sell huge amounts of nickel ore without assuring added value to the New Caledonia economy. In giving a new lease of life to some mines that would otherwise have been shut down, and selling the ore only to those off-shore industries owned at 51% (by China and South Korea), the strategy of FLNKS and SMSP is designed to derive maximum value from the mineral resource, ensuring the life of nickel. The agreement with the Korean POSCO and Chinese Yangzhou Yichuan provides for an annual supply of, respectively: 1,800,000 tons of low-grade ore (1.8%-2.1%) for a total amount of 30 years; and 600,000 tons of more low-grade ore (under 2.1%) for 25 years. Against the land-grabbing phenomenon, where natural capital has usually expropriated and exploited local populations in return for royalties or compensations, SMSP has protected its natural capital which remains in Northern Province. Recently, the New Caledonia government has authorised SLN to export 4 million tons of nickel annually to China and Japan for a period of ten years, without the agreement of separatist leaders. Paul Néaoutyine has condemned the industrial policy of SLN as "scorched earth" (Le Figaro, 2019).

## Conclusion

Mining is imbued within the spirit of cultural production (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2017). The spirit of capitalism is the ideology that justifies people's commitment to capitalism and which renders this commitment attractive. In order to motivate the engagement of subjects, capitalism needs to naturalise itself, grounding its legitimation outside, beyond itself, in the cultural productions of its time. Therefore, the resilience of capitalism rests on its capacity to legitimate itself in something that already exists and is widely accepted. Following this logic, the spirit of mining needs to enter into dialogue with Kanak culture in order to secure the moral foundations that it lacks. The deep unity with the land has always been the distinguishing mark of the Kanak independence movement; the engagement with this mining project has challenged this spiritual human-environment relationship. How far can the human intervention push? What are the customary authorities' responsibilities? Being-in-the-world through engagement with the mining sector entails an ontological crisis and a negotiation with the ancestral beings who live in the mined lands. It is not only an issue of how to spread mining benefits among the landowners because, since the beginning of the project, the FLNKS imposed its collectivistic policy. Actually, the major concerns were around the reactions of ancestral beings and the potential dangers for whoever worked on the massif. Land is classically constituted of four spaces: geological, geographical, cultural and juridical. For this reason, "it is important where you put your feet", according to a local expression. There are also some privileged places considered sacred and taboo because they are a theatre of mythic generative experiences between humans and deities. These places, which can be water sources or stones, are the symbolic centre of a clan territory. In the Koniambo massif, these have been catalogued and industrial access there has been banned.

It is too early to say if Kanak engagement in mining and metallurgy will become a neo-colonial trick in the long period, due to its dependence on global capitalism and world market fluctuations in demand, supply and price. Sometimes, FLNKS policy is perceived by other separatist parties as too much oriented to consider France as a partner rather than a rapacious and colonial state. While the FLNKS promotes a discourse of national liberation of New

Caledonia from France's yoke and thinks about nickel as a communal good belonging to all the country (nationalistic vision), the Labour Party (along with the Customary Senate) instead lead a discourse of "Indigeneity", looking at nickel as a good belonging to the Indigenous people (ethnic vision). Among Kanaks themselves, the opinion about mining is not unanimous: if for someone it can be the starting-point for local and sustainable economic development, for others, there is a high risk to become dependent on the global market and its corporations. This fragmentation within the separatist movement makes Philippe Gomes, leader of the loyalist party *Calédonie Ensemble*, argues,

[i]t is necessary for separatists to abandon their claims for independence as they have advanced them in the 1970s, following the great wave of decolonisation (2018, p. 21).

However, far from abandonment, young Kanak people have adopted the counter-globalisation discourse. My ethnography suggests that they are becoming more radicalised, returning to a climate of violence, fighting outside the institutions.

However, what we can say is that this Kanak engagement has challenged the structure of dependence from France and the SLN's monopoly over local nickel: both mechanisms have produced exclusion and inequality for more than a century. Recent SMSP partnerships with China and South Korea suggest that separatists are following a regional dynamic that makes New Caledonia an "island in connection" or an 'island connectivity in motion' (e.g. Schnepel & Alpers, 2017). As Samuel Goromido, former president of the Customary Senate said to me, in order to decolonise our gaze we need to reconsider the power of separatist parties,

When they look at us from there, from the *métropole*, Europeans often they think that France is the power. But it is us who have pushed France to evolve in this decolonisation process. If you start to think following this logic, you decolonise your thinking (personal interview, Koné, 2018).

As separatist leaders love to repeat when they are invited to TV talk shows: if New Caledonia today has secured a certain degree of autonomy – from which the loyalists are benefiting handsomely – then, this is all thanks to them.

The French government knows that mining will continue to be the big issue for the future, especially at this particular political conjuncture. In 1998, access to the natural resource was the preliminary condition of separatists to resume any negotiation with France. If at the end of the third and last referendum by 2022, New Caledonia choses to stay with France, then mining will again be at the centre of any negotiations.

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